

**“AT THE INTERSECTION OF ISOLATION AND OTHERNESS”**

**Experiences and Identity of American Muslim Converts and the Effects of  
Media Framing after 9/11**

**Professional Project by Showkat Nanda**

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## **Chapter 1**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

I was born in Kashmir where majority of the population is Muslim. When I was eight years old, a popular uprising started against Indian rule and within a few months turned into a full-blown armed conflict between Indian soldiers and Kashmiri militants backed by Pakistan. Growing up amid a bloody conflict greatly shaped my life and my career choice. The unique experiences I had during my childhood, my fascination for photography and an urge to tell the story of my people turned me to photojournalism. At the same time, when I was preparing to jump into the world of serious news photography, I happened to chat with people of different faiths and cultures especially Christians in Yahoo religious chat rooms. It always fascinated me to ‘meet’ people who wanted to learn about different cultures and religions. It always gave me a great pleasure to learn that Muslims and Christians have so much in common. I also came across those people who had changed their faith and become Muslim. It would make me curious why these people converted to Islam when there is so much bias and so many misconceptions about this faith and its followers in their country.

My interest in Muslim converts was moderate until I watched the movie *Unthinkable* three years ago. It shows a former American marine who, a few years after his conversion to Islam, plans terrorist attacks on American soil as an answer to what he calls “American occupation of Muslim lands”. Until then, I hadn’t met a Muslim convert. But when my passion for photojournalism brought me to United States, I had a chance to meet some of them. In fact, a Muslim convert took me around the campus of the University of Missouri and showed me the J-School a day before our classes were to

begin in the fall of 2012. It was strange to see them more dedicated than most of the [born] Muslims”. The small number of converts that I met in Columbia since I came here gave me a preliminary idea about their social behavior. Some of them would talk about religion all the time and some would almost always discuss what was happening in the Muslim world.

Personally, I became interested in exploring the true identity of Muslim converts in America after I searched for literature about them and didn't find any significant work. Given the fact that they are becoming an important part of American society and so much has been written about other Muslims living in America, especially Arab and South Asian immigrants and African American Muslims, I couldn't find many books or journals on this topic. I wanted to know if conversion to Islam really changes a person's mindset and creates a new (hybrid) identity and what are the challenges associated with it.

## **1.1 OVERVIEW**

As a photographer, it has always been my strong belief that stories that are told visually tend to be more compelling. The topic I chose for this professional project was a suitable subject for photo documentation. I chose to visually document the lives of American Muslim converts and show how they balance their newly defined social and cultural relationships. This includes their family, friends, colleagues and other people in both environments.

The professional component of my project is a visual documentation of my subjects. I believe this project could act as a stepping-stone toward achieving my goal of being a conflict photographer. There are many reasons.

For an international student like me, working on a photographic project in the United States is difficult because of the differences in culture and lifestyle. I come from a conservative society that has different norms of behavior and culture. This project would demand a long-term relationship and interaction with my subjects I know nothing about. The fact that their culture, lifestyle and norms of social interaction are different from mine will be the biggest challenge for me. I am sure that I would eventually be facing similar challenges in different parts of the world where I would work as a conflict photographer. So this project would not only help me producing an important piece of work but act as a crash course for achieving my short-term goal. This project, I believe, will help me in adjusting in a socially, culturally and politically different environment, which is a pre-requisite for working as a conflict photographer in an unfamiliar place.

Finally, I hope to make this project as a part of the book that I am planning to get published. This would include different themes related to conflict, society and culture. The book would be a contribution to my academic endeavors that, I hope, would eventually help me in becoming a successful photography teacher.

This is the main reason why both my Professional and Analysis components are focused on a similar theme. For the professional part, I chose three subjects. Because my analysis component pertains to the same topic, it will help me to correlate the experiences of documenting them visually and an interview-based qualitative research.

## **Chapter 2**

### **2. SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES**

During my fourteen weeks of fieldwork from January 2014 through April 2014, I spent most of my time in Columbia and occasionally traveled to St. Louis and Jefferson City conducting interviews and observations where I gathered an extensive set of qualitative data from a sample of young American Muslim converts. Islamic Center of Central Missouri (ICCM) was my main focus of activity during this time. I met most of my respondents for the first time at ICCM itself.

The first meeting with the respondents was utilized to establish the initial rapport and describing the purpose of this study to them. The first line of communication that helped me convince them to be a part of this project was my own affiliation to the Islamic faith. Once I greeted and introduced myself in a usual way as Muslims do, such as the Islamic greetings, they could immediately understand that I was a Muslim too and felt relatively comfortable. I think it helped me to a great extent in getting access.

During the course of this project I chose seven (7) people, including six males and one female most of them in their twenties and interviewed them at least two to three times.

#### **2.1 FIELD NOTES/ WEEKLY REOPORTS**

##### **Week 1 (January 13- January 19)**

Today is Wednesday, January 15. I was supposed to start my work on Monday but since last month I have not been feeling well. ‘Unofficially’, I started working on my project almost two weeks ago but the progress has not been too good owing to my bad

health. In the last two weeks, I talked to several people at the Islamic Center of central Missouri (ICCM). Since I have been going there almost every day, I had a chance to speak to several people including Dr. Rashid Nizaam, the Chairman of the Mosque Committee and Mohammad Rashaad, the Property Manager. They gave me some contacts through which I hope to find some potential subjects for my project.

I have already collected some names and addresses whom I plan to contact in one or two days.

Today it is Friday, January 17. Friday is one of the most important days in terms of this project because on Fridays Muslims from many parts of Columbia and adjoining areas come to pray the special afternoon prayers. But I couldn't find any today. The rush was so huge that it become difficult for me to find specific people in such a large group especially when you do not know them.

Today, I also contacted Khalil Phillip Klopfenstein, a student who converted in 2009. I remember having met him in Columbia in August 2012. It was the same month I joined University of Missouri as a master's student.

After calling him on phone he agreed to meet me as he is coming to Columbia this Sunday.

Today is Sunday and I met Khalil, though for a brief period of time. I had an informal meeting with him and told him about my project and its requirements. Because he said he was travelling a lot in the next one or two months it might be difficult for me to meet him too often but he said we could remain in touch via Skype apart from occasional meetings.

After finding all the six or seven subjects for this study, I will then decide which three to choose for the photo-documentary segment and which three for the analysis part.

## **Week 2 (January 20 – January 26)**

Yesterday on Tuesday, January 14, I went to Jefferson City meet Abdullah Zubyr, an African American convert from Jefferson City. His inclusion is significant for this project because African Americans comprise a large percentage of American Muslim converts. I had earlier met Zubair a few months ago at the mosque when he came with one of our mutual friends. Zubyr is in search of a job. He converted in 2011 at the age 17.

Today on Thursday, January 23, one of the office managers from the Islamic Center called me and asked me to come to the Islamic Center where I met a convert Joshua (name changed) from Iowa. He did not want to be recognized by his original name for personal reasons.

Joshua works in Columbia as a computer programmer and meets me almost everyday whenever he comes to the mosque for the prayers. I used to see him occasionally but I didn't talk to him before. I did not know that he was a convert. I am planning to interview him the next one or two weeks. He has had an interesting experience with his previous jobs in a an entirely "American" environment where he has been a victim of what he calls 'indifferent attitude' of colleagues due to which he recently left his job.

Today I also contacted Michael Dillon, who is a young convert from Jefferson City. I have met him before. During last semester I was supposed to do a class project on him but due to some domestic issues, he could not make himself available for me. This time I hope to include him in this study. In November last year, he spent almost a month

in Columbia living at various friends' apartments. He was looking for job, which he couldn't get and then moved back to Jefferson City where he lives with his mother now.

### **Week 3 (January 27-February 2)**

I have been going to the Islamic Center more and more since last few weeks. But today I spent more time there. Actually a group of Muslim missionaries called the *Tableegh Jamaa't* has come to the Islamic Center from St. Louis. The *Tableegh Jamaat* gives emphasis on travelling to different parts of the world and preaching Islam. When they go to a different place they stay in the mosque of the area. So far I have been able to create a good rapport with two of the members who offered help to find me subjects.

Today on January 29, I spent at least three hours with the group. I had lunch with them too. Though Adam who is one of the members from that group is a convert, he was travelling overseas in a few weeks. I am hoping that the meetings with them will possibly help me to find relevant subjects because they have a mosque in St. Louis where many converts visit. I am planning to travel to St. Louis again in the next one or two weeks.

This time I am trying to convince more and more converts to be included in my study so that even if some of them back out later, I will still have enough people to work with.

I already met Professor Rees this week to discuss my progress.

Yesterday on Thursday, January 30, I met some friends from the Muslim Students Organization (MSO) on the campus and conveyed them to 'keep an eye' on converts. I also talked to a friend who has been a former MSO president.

Today is January 31 and I met a convert by chance. After I finished my Friday prayers, I went out of the mosque and waited at the door. I greeted this guy who ‘looked’ like a white American. I had heard about this guy before but I wasn’t sure it was him. I had not met him before but I recognized him by the features earlier described by one of my friends. His name is Dustin. He looks like he is Turkish or Syrian. When I told him this, he laughed and said that people often ask him the same question. He was very friendly and said that I could visit his house in next one or two weeks. The good news for me is that his wife is also a convert. That means I have almost six subjects for my project. But I will be looking for more subjects because I do not want to take any risks in case one or two subjects just decline at a crucial moment. I have had such experience before.

#### **Week 4 (February 3- February 9)**

I have been planning to go to St. Louis again to meet the missionary group but an activity that paid off again this week was to stay outside the door of the Islamic Center on Friday afternoons. Friday is a time of special prayers when most Muslims make sure that they offer the special prayers even if that means to travel long distances. At first I didn’t know if this exercise could help but it actually worked. Last Friday, I waited outside the Islamic Center’s main door looking at people who ‘looked’ like Americans. And there was this person called Dustin Hurst. After greeting him I asked him if he was a convert. To my surprise he was. We had a preliminary conversation through which I came to know that his wife is also a convert. He has invited me to his house for a dinner next week. I hope to include both of them in the study. If his wife agrees, then it would be my first female subject.

Meanwhile I had my first interview with Joshua He is one of those people who have taken religion seriously after conversion. After converting in early 2001, Joshua travelled to Mecca to make the Hajj pilgrimage. He then went to Yemen to study Arabic and learn the Quran. He is also helping me in finding some possible contacts. Today he mentioned one of his friends Hans who was with him in Yemen too. I hope to get in touch with Hans.

I couldn't meet Professor Rees this week as I meet him on Tuesdays and the campus was closed because of the heavy snowfall on Tuesday and Wednesday.

#### **Week 5 (February 10 – February 16)**

So far I already had a meeting with two new converts, Justin and Gabriel. Justin and Gabriel work at MU. I met both of them yesterday on Friday, February 14 at the Islamic Center at different times of the day. Justin already fixed a meeting for early next week. Her wife is a Bosnian and they have three daughters. Justin converted almost ten years ago.

Gabriel converted earlier last year. His wife also converted after a few days. I had a detailed informal chat with him today (Friday) in the mosque. He had come to listen to a lecture after the sunset prayers. His story seems interesting in the context of his girlfriend's father's background. Her father has worked in Iraq and Afghanistan as a military contractor and had vehemently opposed both Gabriel and his wife, Elena's decision of becoming Muslim. According to Gabriel, Elena's father is happy with their conversion now.

Meanwhile, the problems and hindrances during all these weeks have been constantly there. Joshua, with whom I had a preliminary interview, asked me not to include him in the study due to some ‘personal’ reasons. But he assured me that he would extend any kind of help I will need in locating new subjects and possible appointments. He has a friend Hans Siedderman, who lives in St. Louis. Hans was with Joshua in Yemen too where they studied together in an Islamic seminary. I am planning to visit him next week.

I met Prof. Rees on Thursday and discussed the progress.

#### **Week 6 (February 17-February 23)**

My meeting with Dustin Hurst and his family was postponed because his wife Katie was out of town. They had planned to invite me on dinner. I am still not sure if I could include both of them in my study but so far the response has been good. Meanwhile, I already had one ‘official’ interview with Justin McNutt and I am planning to meet him again next week.

I met Justin at the time of morning prayers on Wednesday, February 19. He usually takes time off from office on Wednesdays. It was extremely cold and we went to Kaldis in Columbia downtown to have some coffee. As I recorded about ten minutes of Justin’s interview, I felt that the noise there ruined the whole interview. We then decided to go to his ‘office No. 2’ which is on 7<sup>th</sup> Street. I spent nearly two hours interviewing him. He looks like a normal American with no beard. I have planned to include him to be a part of my professional project that would be an individual photo story.

Right now the number of subjects I have already chosen is enough. However, their schedule is somewhat scattered, so I need to make sure when to meet whom. I seem to be facing some problems with time management. But the main concern for me is to start photographing my subjects. I hope to spend the first two or three weeks of March photographing them. Though the subjects I already met are friendly but I still am having some trouble convincing them to be my photography subjects.

Yesterday I called Hans Seidderman (now Abdul Baatin) who lives in St. Louis. Hans has experience living overseas especially the Middle East. He speaks Arabic and has also performed Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. I am meeting him next week. This subject particularly looks interesting because of his deep understanding of both the American Culture and the Muslim world. I am going to St. Louis next week as his guest for three days. I will be spending this time with him to understand his life and culture. I am planning to have some important interviews too.

I met Prof. Rees today on Friday, February 21. I received some important guidance on how to start photographing.

### **Week 7 (February 24-March 2)**

Today on February 28, I had an interview with Michael Dillon. Michael converted in 2011 after meeting a girl online from London. He said he became interested in Islam because she was a Muslim and used to talk about it.

So far this week I had a comprehensive interview with Hans Siedderman (Abdul Batin). I went to St. Louis on March 1st, Saturday to meet him. This has been the most time consuming interview for me. Hans Siedderman's story is interesting because he has

lived in Yemen and is extremely familiar with both American and Arab cultures. Hans's understanding of the issues facing converts was deep. It made me more interested in this project. Some of the points he made were extremely indispensable for this project. While I was interviewing him, two of his other friends came in, both of whom were converts. They were his best friends. I spent two nights at his house. After these two days, I was so overwhelmed with information he gave me that I asked him if he could allow me to do the photo story on him. Because he was in Middle East for years where he learnt Quran and Arabic and also taught English to school kids, he did not 'want to land in trouble'. This wasn't clear to me until during the interview he said that he was put on the watch list some years ago.

He however doesn't want to be photographed because of some other personal reasons too.

This week I have also been spending time transcribing the interviews. I am not writing everything; only the points that are relevant to the project.

### **Week 8 (March 3- March 9)**

March 12: Today I met Zubyr, the only African American among my subjects, for the interview. Zubyr originally comes from New Jersey where his family lives. Zubyr's story seemed a little different which gave an insight into how his family looks at him now. His conversion was triggered by a car accident three years ago that killed all the people except him. He was in coma for three days. He also happens to be the youngest son in the family. Since his conversion, his family has almost abandoned him but at the

same time he feels that average Americans respect him. Zubyr lives in Jefferson City and comes to Columbia to meet his friends at a car workshop.

I had an interview with him in the Columbia Mosque today for about two hours. It was his choice.

Furthermore, I am having another session with him next week. I am keen to photograph Zubyr for the professional part. This, in my opinion will give the project a variety. However the problem is that while he agreed to be photographed when I first met him, he didn't seem to be interested in getting his pictures taken.

March 13: This morning Zubyr called me saying, "When do you want to interview me again? But I think I am not comfortable with pictures, brother". Yesterday he seemed too enthusiastic about the pictures but today his changed attitude surprised me. I am still planning to include him in the visual part of my project. I will try to convince him when we meet next time.

Next week I am also meeting Michael Dillon for the photo story.

### **Week 9 (March 10- March 16)**

This week I met Dr. Greenwood and Professor Reed to discuss my progress as well as my future action plan regarding interviewing and visual documentation of my subjects.

I also started photographing my first 'visual subject', Michael Dillon. Michael has been shifting between Jeff city and Columbia. In November last year he got a job in Best Buy but then shifted to Jeff city to live with his mother. His short-term goal is to raise three thousand dollars and go to Indonesia to get married.

While following Dillon, I saw that he has minimal interaction with other people except with his family and the Muslim friends at the mosque in Columbia. He wears a Muslim skullcap that makes him easily identifiable as a Muslim. While I was following him, I could see some people strangely staring at him. I am planning to spend a few more days with him and possibly visit his family in Jefferson City.

I got some good pictures of Michael today on Saturday, March 15. He spends most his time in his friend's apartment at the Islamic Center's property. They call it the Muslim House. Today he went out with a friend, Abdul Muniem. I followed them through downtown Columbia when both of them were going to have a coffee. Some other pictures were made in the Islamic Center. Tomorrow, I will continue following him around and taking his pictures. One of the pictures I have in mind is when he sleeps on the couch in the living room of his friend's house. In my opinion that would be symbolic of the kind of life he is living in Columbia.

### **Week 10 (March 17 – March 23)**

This week, I have been spending most of my time transcribing interviews. I still haven't got any information from Justin on when he will be ready for the photo story.

I spent another day with Michael. Today I followed him to the MKT Trail where he goes for a walk. He used to run before but because of some problem in his thigh, he is not able to run longer distances. During the time I followed Michael I was also observing how people look at him, apart from taking his pictures, of course.

In the night, I spent some time taking Michael's pictures at his friend's apartment by the mosque. I have found that Michael has a very heavy sleep. The moment he rested

on the couch, he was in a different world. That made it easier for me to take his pictures without him getting disturbed or waking up. I even manipulated the light a little that was falling on him.

Meanwhile I had two follow up interviews with Zubyr and Gabriel yesterday on Thursday, March 20. While I am transcribing, these interviews seem to have provided me with rich additional information. Today I called both Justin and Gabriel to ask them when can I get in touch with them for more pictures for the photo story. I am most probably going to his house next week.

### **Week 11(March 24-March 30)**

This week I have been interviewing and photographing Gabriel and his wife, Elena. Last night (Sunday) they asked me to come over for dinner. When I reached there they both were cooking together. This was a nice opportunity for me to take pictures showing them in their normal daily activity. After the dinner, we sat for almost two hours during which I had an elaborate interview with Elena. I had a long interaction with them especially with Elena whom I had never met before. This interaction helped develop a rapport and made shooting easier for me.

Elena is the lone female subject. While I was there, the time for the sunset prayers arrived. Gabriel spread two velvety prayer rugs. One for two of us and one for Elena. Gabriel insisted that I lead the prayer, which I did. During the prayer I realized that how advantageous my religious identity have been for this entire project. After finishing the prayer, I immediately started taking pictures while both of them are on the prayer rug praying. That was an important moment, which, apart from their daily routine,

showed them in a more spiritual state. Elena's experience with conversion seems too interesting to me. She cried when she spoke about her parents' reaction when she had told them that she wanted to be a Muslim. During that interview, she opened up and told the whole story about her conversion and the problems she faced during that period. It was the same period when Gabriel had already converted and they both were planning to get married. I am going to Elena's school tomorrow to shoot some pictures there.

I had another interview session with Elena after that she cried while recalling her father's reaction when she had converted to Islam.

### **Week 12(March 31-April 6)**

This week has been one of the busiest weeks. On Thursday, I went to the MU College of Veterinary Medicine where Elena studies. I have been shooting Elena at various places. She informed me that she had an exam at 3:15p.m, so I could come at 3:30 to take the pictures. But the moment I left my house, it started raining too heavily. But once I got there, Elena was waiting for me at the front door. Then she took me around the college. I asked her to go just forget that I was there and do her normal activity. The main purpose for shooting at the school was to see her interaction with others and her normal routine.

As she was walking to the library, I saw huge pictures in the hallway of students carrying pets. One of the pictures was that of Gabriel and Elena with their cat. It was an interesting shot that I thought could be a nice addition to the already taken pictures.

Meanwhile, next week both Elena and Gabriel are going to attend a Conference organized by the Muslim Students Organization. I think it would a nice opportunity for

me to show Elena interacting other members of the Muslim community. By far this will be the only chance for me to take her pictures during a Muslim event.

This Friday, I followed Justin for the photo story too. I went to his office in the IT building on University Avenue that coincidentally is a few meters away from Elena's school. I was trying to document his interactions with others the way he had described it in his interview. In his office, Justin talked me and made me understand his work and how the IT department at MU works and what his responsibilities are. This information was useful for me to accurately represent Justin in his work environment.

### **Week 13 (April 7- April 13)**

Tuesday, April 08: I went to Justin's house today. This session is the last part of Justin's photo story. Justin picked me up from the Islamic Center around 5:30 and next 15 minutes we were outside his house. The moment I entered, his three little daughters, Maryam, Ammara and Safiya greeted me. His Bosnian wife, Jasmina was working in the kitchen wearing an abaya and hijab. Because I wanted to document them while they were interacting naturally, I immediately started taking pictures. At first the girls seemed to be conscious of me but after sometimes they were relaxed and felt very comfortable.

Today is Friday, April 11. I documented Elena at the Conference at MU's Water Auditorium. Elena's interaction with the girls was the main focus of my documentation. Because Elena wore a hijab, it was an important part of her personality that I thought was important to capture in the story. Normally she does not wear a headscarf. Initially the other girls felt uncomfortable in front of my camera. I even overheard someone saying, "Why is he taking so many pictures". It was only after Elena told her that I was working

on my project, after which they felt relaxed. It is hard to take pictures during such events where Muslim girls are present, for religious.

Meanwhile I have been editing my picture stories for the last few days. The three stories that I have shot are to be placed in order and proper arrangement.

#### **Week 14 (April 13-April-20)**

I have spent this week putting the project together. From editing photographs to writing and rewriting, this whole week has been too busy for me. I am still planning to shoot one particular picture with Gabriel and Elena on Friday April 18, that will a 'cover' for this project if I plan to turn it into a book later. So far I have edited two photo stories on Michael and Justin. I wasn't too happy with the stories at first but after editing, I think I have been able to produce what I had in my mind.

I have also been calling each and every subject for some kind of follow up information wherever I found necessary. I had a follow up Skype interview with Khalil Philip who is currently in Minnesota.

## 2.2 PHOTO STORIES

This project includes three photo stories on three converts. I decided to include two male subjects and one female subject. Besides giving diversity to the stories, I thought it was a good idea to create photo stories that looked different. The main purpose of this visual documentation was to show these converts in their natural environments and how they interact with other people.

One of the most important considerations when documenting these stories was that I did not want to produce professional-looking sophisticated visual stories but pictures that looked more like snapshots. The main reason behind this thought was that the pictures where a professional photographer is involved makes the images look cinematic and dreamy. I believe that people tend to see simple snapshot-like pictures as more real. The topic I have chosen is the Muslim converts, who are often seen as ‘others’ in the popular culture. I think my purpose for this photo documentation of their lives was to make these people look real and common by deliberately shooting in a snapshot style.

## **ELENA DIANA ESPARZA**

Elena was born on October 26, 1990 in San Pedro, California. Her parents Teofilo Lugo and Alicia Nochez Lugo raised her in Los Angeles and Fontana, CA. She has two brothers and an older sister. She received a B.S. in Animal Sciences and is currently attending the Veterinary Medicine School at the University of Missouri. She converted a year ago and married her boyfriend Gabriel Esparza on July 30, 2013. They moved to Columbia, MO in the beginning of August 2013.

Elena became interested in Islam after she had discussions about it with Gabriel who had already converted. For several months she struggled with to make a decision for her parents vehemently opposed her closeness to Islam. According to Elena, Islam has given her life a direction and purpose, which she never found before.



**Elena interacts with her friends at the MU College of Veterinary Medicine. “Being a Muslim has not been a problem at the school because only a few of my friends know I am Muslim. Those who know treat me with respect.”**



**Regular prayers have become a part of Elena's life. "As a Muslim, you are required to pray five times a day. When I am at home, it's not a problem but at school, it's not easy. I make up for the missed prayers when I get back home in the evening."**



**Elena and her husband, Gabriel Esparza cook dinner at their house in Columbia, Missouri. “ After becoming Muslim, we kind of changed our food habits. If it’s meat, it has to be *Halal*. Gabriel is an awesome cook. He likes to cook and I like to eat. But sometimes I do help him.” Elena said.**



**Elena and Gabriel look at their wedding photo album. For her it wasn't easy to get married because when she told her parents, Gabriel was already a Muslim. "My parents, especially my dad was so furious. I don't remember what he said, but it wasn't good at all. He also asked in anger if I wanted to get beaten by my husband. It was so frustrating because he wouldn't listen. They didn't attend my wedding."**



**Elena walks to her school where she is doing her Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. In school she doesn't wear a headscarf (*Hijab*). "I understand that I need to do so many things. *Hijab* is one of them. I hope to take it seriously after sometime. For now I wear it only when I am praying or when I go to the *Masjid*".**



**Elena looks at her photograph with Gabriel and their cat at her school. “Gabriel is both a husband and a friend. When my parents were angry with me and wouldn’t call for months, it was Gabriel who stood by my side.”**



**Elena interacts with her friends at the Muslim Students Organization (MSO) Conference held in April 2014. She makes sure that she attends all the programs organized by MSO. “I don’t miss any MSO event because it helps me interact with sisters and learn so many things”**



Elena and Gabriel walk to offer the late evening prayers to the Islamic Center in Columbia. Visiting the mosque on certain days of the week has become a routine for Elena and Gabriel. “Because we are busy with school, it’s not easy to go to the *Masjid* everyday. On Friday evenings, I go regularly to attend the ‘*Halaqah*’ (a gathering to learn about religion), with other sisters. It has helped me to learn so much about Islam. It also has led to more interactions and friendships.

## JUSTIN McNUTT

Justin McNutt grew up in St. Louis and lives in North Columbia. He was born in 1975 in St. Louis. He lived there until he graduated High School.

“We celebrated Christian holidays and I attended a Catholic grade school, but I went to a public high school and there wasn't a strong religious presence in our house. Ethics and morals were definitely important, but not really in a religious context.”

After high school, Justin came to Mizzou for college and met Jasmina in one of his classes - his very last class, in fact. They quickly became very close. While they grew closer, she introduced him to Islam and made it clear that she wasn't going to be serious about anyone who wasn't a Muslim. So through her and through other people that he met at the mosque, he looked into Islam with an open mind, though mainly through the eyes of someone who had grown up with Catholicism. That is, he was receptive to something else, but Catholicism is what was already familiar.

Over the next two years, he learned about, then formally accepted Islam, married Jasmina, and continued to work toward better practice of Islam along with her. “It took us some time, for example, to get free of all interest-bearing commitments that I had from before I became a Muslim.”

“Since then, she and I have had three beautiful daughters Maryam, Amara and Safiya (that's a totally objective opinion, of course). We have participated from time to time at the ICCM and the ISCM, and try to keep in touch with the community, despite the rigors of raising children.”



**Justin inspects wires in the Fiber Node Room at MU's IT building where he works as an engineer. His responsibility is to make sure the fiber optic cables are working which is important for the smooth functioning of the internet on campus.**

**"It's nice to be in my office where I can just deal with my work stuff, which is not a cakewalk. My work has become more of a utility, and a serious responsibility. The best days are when there is nothing broken in the office and I can go to Masjid and it can just be a Masjid, not the Islamic Center."**



**Justin works at his office at MU's IT building. He has had a very good relationship with his colleagues at work. " All my colleagues know that I am a Muslim and that never affected my relationship with them.**



**Justin speaks to a colleague at his work. “I divide my time between office and home in a way that none suffers. It’s important for me to both to pay all attention to my work when I am at the office and take care of my family when I am at home”**



**Justin’s daughters Amara, right and Safiya paint flowers while he and his wife Jasmina work in the Kitchen. Justin said that he has been homeschooling his three daughters. “People call Safiya as Sophia. Amara didn’t have a name until she was two years old. We argued, argued, argued and argued. Well, they all were to be Muslim names but the only thing I thought about was it had to be an easy name for Americans.”**



**Justin and his wife, Jasmina look on as their kids play and watch TV. Jasmina, a Bosnian married Justin after he became Muslim 12 years ago. “In many ways, her growing up is same as mine. Bosnian Muslims are mostly Muslim by culture, not practice. She essentially had to become a practicing Muslim after I met her. When she met me, she had an intuitive feel of what’s important.**



**Justin is having a playful time with daughters, Maryam, right, Safiya, middle and Amara. After work Justin spends most of his time with his family. “Before I had kids, I used to give a lot of time to the *Masjid*. I was the Property Manager but after I had kids, I didn’t have much time to spend at the *Masjid*. It’s so tiring to work and take care of the kids after your job.”**



**Justin drives to the mosque as a wooden sign reading “Allah” hangs in front of his car. You don’t need to wear a particular dress to be Islamic. Any dress that is modest is an Islamic dress. In public places, I don’t have any problem with my identity because nobody knows that I am a Muslim.”**



**Justin shakes hands with Amar, the *Muezzin* (one who gives a call for prayer) outside the Islamic Center. “Though I am not the property Manager anymore, I am still on board of the School Committee. Sometimes I have to take time to attend the meetings related to the school.”**

## **MICHAEL DILLON**

Michael Dillon is a 22-year-old convert from Jefferson City. Having lived a life influenced by 'bad company' and mental stress, he ended up leaving his house and started staying with a friend. In 2011, he met a friend from London. Herself a Muslim, she asked Michael if he knew anything about Islam. This was for the first time he thought of learning about it. Finally he converted in the same year. Michael came to Columbia in November 2013 in search of a job. He needed to raise 3000 dollars so that he could go to Indonesia to marry a girl whom he met online. He has been living in Columbia for a few months now. He lives in a friend's apartment near the Islamic Center in Columbia. Michael plans to go to school next year.



**Michael Dillon reads at the Islamic Center of Missouri (ICCM) in Columbia. ICCM has been the center of activity since Michael shifted to Columbia November 2013. “The people at the *Masjid* have been immensely helpful and accommodating. In fact, I live at the house next to the *Masjid* with other Muslim friends without paying any monthly rent because I am still looking for a job”**



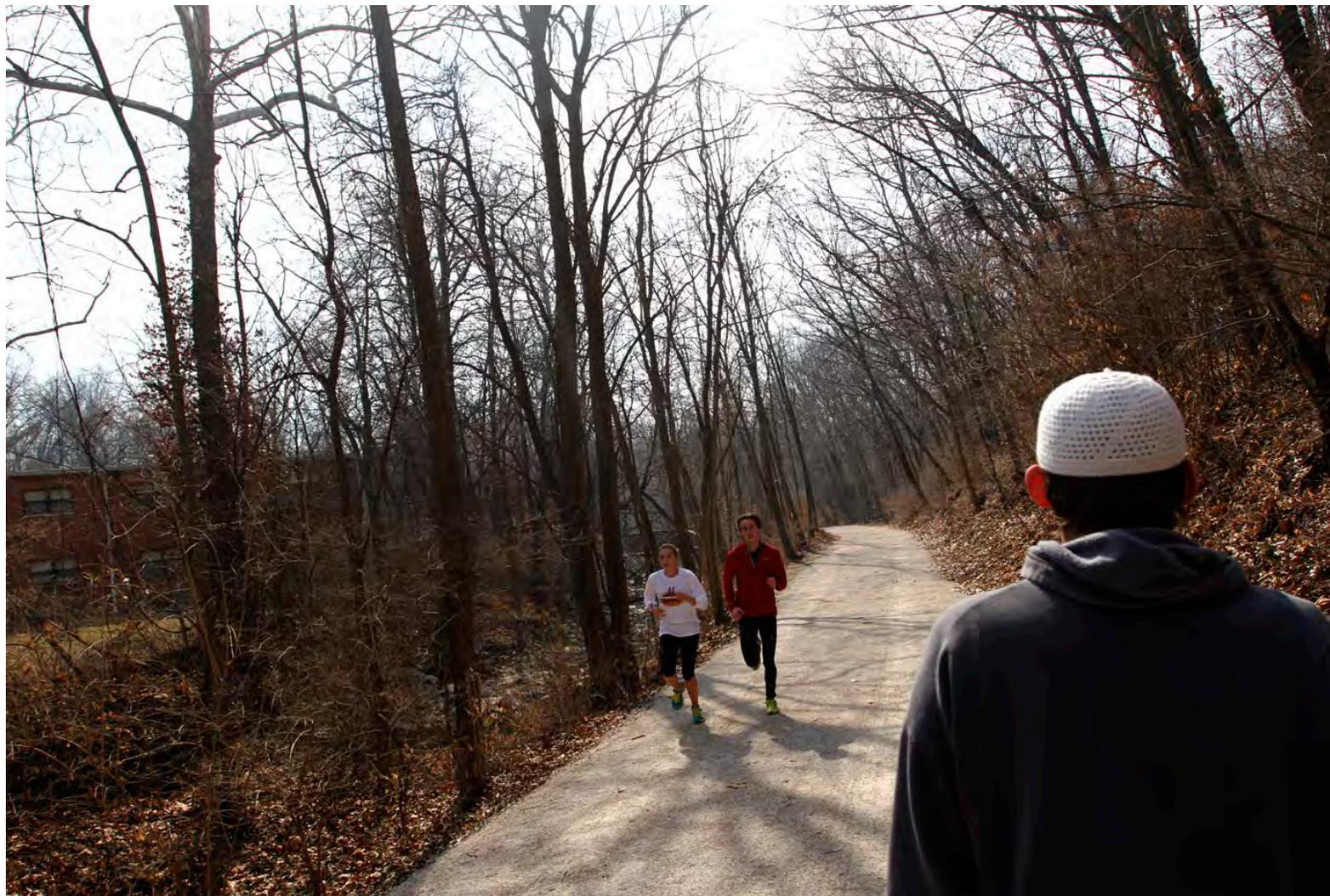
**Michael walks past the Missouri United Methodist Church with his friend, Abdul Muncim in Downtown Columbia. “Hanging out with friends is what I like the most when I am not at the *Masjid*. Most of my friends in Columbia study at MU and are busy with their studies. But on weekends, it becomes easy for them to spend time with me.”**



**Michael talks with his mother and brother outside the Islamic Center. Michael moved to Columbia to look for a job, he moved to Columbia. “I want to with her all the time but I don’t think it’s easy for me to get a job in Jeff City.” Michael’s mother, who is a devout Christian, is happy with his conversion saying he’s changed completely. “He is becomes more caring and responsible. That’s all I need,” she said.**



**Michael prays the late afternoon prayers (*Asr*) at the Islamic Center. “Praying five times a day has made me more committed towards Islam. Aside from the spiritual aspect, coming to the *Masjid* has other advantages. Here you meet so many wonderful brothers who are always there to support you.”**



**Michael takes a walk on MKT Trail everyday after the late afternoon prayers. Wearing an Islamic skullcap (*Kufi*) often receives attention by the passers by. “Wherever I go I feel that people look at me in a strange way. It’s not always negative. Sometimes it’s just interesting them.”**



**Michael checks a bag of groceries in front of the house where he lives with his friend. “After becoming Muslim, my eating habits have changed considerably. I have begun to cherish the Middle Eastern and South Asian cuisines because that’s what most of my friends eat. I can’t describe the taste. It’s amazing.**



**Michael reads the Quran inside the Islamic Center just before the sunset prayers. “I read the English translation because I am still learning to read Arabic. It’s important to learn the language of the Quran because in translation, so much is missed. In order to understand it, the knowledge of the language is important.”**



**Michael speaks to his girlfriend who lives in Indonesia via Skype. They met online a year ago and decided to get married. “I need to raise 3,000 dollars to Indonesia and get married. That’s why I am so desperately looking for a job. Once I get it, I would save money and get settled in Indonesia for at least some years.”**



**In the absence of an available room, Michael sleeps on the couch in his friend’s apartment in Columbia. “My friends have been generous enough to let me stay at their house near the *Masjid*. It becomes easy for me to pray at the mosque five times a day. And I don’t have to pay the rent.”**

## Chapter 3

### 3. EVALUATION

Working on this project on American Muslim converts made me realize how easily, as journalists, we come to hasty conclusions after one or two interactions with people we are reporting about. During the course of this project I learned many things both in the capacity of a photographer and a common person trying to know about the life stories and personal experiences of people. During an interview for this project I asked a young convert, what does he expect from me when I write this project. He told me with a piercing innocence, “When you this write this project, just be honest to yourself.” I think he reminded me of the integrity with which we must work.

Professionally, it made me realize and appreciate the importance of deadlines. Sometimes deadlines make us do what we normally never would. Meeting deadlines forced me to curb my shyness to a great extent. It made me more courageous in terms of stopping people and interacting with them. This approach that I would always otherwise fret about, later turned out to be an easy way convince people for the stories I wanted to make.

The most important thing that I learned however was how deeply knowledgeable we have to be about our subjects to become good journalists and photographers. Earlier, I used to think that a project on Muslim converts is an easy job because in the wake of my limited knowledge, I had preconceived notions about them. I felt that there were a few well-known issues that confront these people. However, after interacting with them, and literally living with some of them for days together, I came to know that they live in an entirely different world amid hundreds of problems and issues.

I developed a strong relationship with my subjects making me more concerned about the honest representation of their lives through this project. At one point, I realized that I was not working on this project just to complete my degree but to truthfully contribute to the national discourse regarding both Muslim and American identity.

After these deep and insightful interactions, I felt challenged not only professionally but personally too – the way it forced me to see my own identity differently.

Also, as a journalist and photographer, the issues they are facing did not only impact their lives but my efforts to visually document them. It limited my horizon of my photography in terms of their social and cultural space, which has immensely shrunk after their change of faith.

Regarding this project, I won't say that I have been extremely successful in producing what I had anticipated but I feel satisfied that at least I was able to produce a piece of work that has some originality. In terms of my photographic stories, I deliberately tried, in most circumstances, to make my pictures look like snapshots instead of professionally made sophisticated photo stories just to make these pictures look more real and closer to the notion of what common American means.

I see this project as an advanced extension of all the assignments I have done for my classes or for the Missourian during my two years of study at the Missouri school of Journalism.

## Chapter 4

### 4. ANALYSIS COMPONENT

#### 4.1 Statement of Topic and Research Question

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States. Muslims across the United States come from a variety of ethnic, cultural, and geographic backgrounds. No other country in the world shows such diversity in the Muslim community. In this diverse community, converts have become a statistically significant segment of the American society to an extent that seriously impacts their practice of Islam and their identity.

The study will explore the effects of a post-9/11 climate, and how American Muslim converts define themselves amid a constant bombardment of unfavorable media messages about their faith and experiences related to their conversion to Islam and their sense of Americanism. Additionally, this study will provide insight into the forces that influence these converts' self-identification before and after their conversion to Islam within the larger U.S. community as well as within the American Muslim community.

I believe that this study will be able to offer some insightful ideas for journalists to understand what effect media has in shaping people's identities. It will help them play a positive role in the society and prevent their fellow citizens from becoming victims of identity crisis.

This research would also be valuable to anyone who currently works with or hopes to work with Muslims within an American context. It would be indispensable for those who may want to look deeply into Muslim-American relationship in various aspects ranging from War on Terror to Middle East Policy. It could help journalists to report on such issues with a more objective way of looking at this relationship without seeing the

names ‘American’ and ‘Muslim’ as two innately conflicting terms. Finally and most importantly, this study could form a basis for further research on the “Radicalization and the development of anti-national tendencies among young American Muslim converts and the factors associated with it”, which seems to have extreme political and social significance.

In the context of above information, I propose the following research question:

***RQ 1: What role has American media’s representation of Islam played in the identity formation of American Muslim Converts?***

To answer this question, the present study will provide qualitative data that will illustrate the processes, decisions, and social factors involved in developing a highly distinct identity among Muslim converts in America.

To find the answers to these questions, this study will try to focus on finding the answers to following smaller questions and gather extensive information to have a deep understanding of the identity problem of Muslim converts:

1. What are the issues and problems facing converts to Islam in the context of their distinct identity?
2. What kind of relationship do Muslim converts have with other Muslims and non-Muslims?
3. What roles do Muslim converts play with the Muslim community and within the wider American society.
4. Despite being Americans, does their Muslim identity pose a threat to their communities?
5. How Muslim converts take American media’s portrayal of Islam?
6. At a time when there is a deep identity crisis in Americans who are born Muslims, how difficult it is for converts to find an identity within such a community.

## **4.2 Theoretical Framework**

### **4.2.1 Introduction**

Since 9/11, the number of Muslims in America has increased up to 67%. The data released from 2010 U.S. Religion Census shows Islam was the fastest growing religion in America in the first decade of the 21st century. According to a 2011 Pew Research, 20% of the Muslims in America are converts.

New Muslims face a variety of issues in adapting to the new religion involving both practice and percepts - dress, changing food habits, dealing with daily family life and adapting to the new environment are some of the challenges they face. People who convert to Islam in America acquire an identity that puts them in the fold of minority within a minority. But media's negative coverage and the subsequent prejudice against Muslims after 9/11 seems to be one of the most significant challenges and to explore how these challenges create a wedge between their American and Muslim identities is my primary reason for my interest in undertaking this study. There is a great paucity of important works on Muslim converts and their identity problems and challenges.

The media is an extremely important social agent with the power to influence perceptions. Its influence can seriously impact on minority groups implying that they hold 'alien' characteristics, which do not correspond with the values and ethos of mainstream America. The following question provides a framework for this research study.

**How media's representation of Islam influences identity formation in American Muslim converts.**

Through this research, I seek to explore the experience of American Muslim converts on how the majority culture and popular media have affected these converts' self-perceptions and influenced their cultural, social and political identity. Does the popular representation of Islam in the media and the way news about Muslims is framed create a confrontation between their Islamic values and American identity; and how they perceive it from the viewpoint of being new to the Islamic faith. Finally where does a Muslim convert find him/herself in the context of “us” and “them”.

The purpose of this study is to document and analyze the experiences of a group of young Muslim Americans who converted to Islam after September 11, 2001. This study will try to explore the process of identity transformation in response to the news coverage about Muslims in America.

#### **4.2.2 The Theory of Framing**

There is a strong relationship between news coverage and the media agenda, and a theory that comes into place is framing. Framing is the way in which information is presented to its audiences. Framing involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue. Goffman (1974, p.21) first developed the concept of framing as a form of communication and defined it as a “schemata of interpretation” that allows individuals to “locate, perceive, identify and label” occurrences or life experiences.

Entman (1993) modernized this commonly quoted definition by stating that “to frame a communicating text or message is to promote certain facets of a ‘perceived reality’ and make them more salient in such a way that endorses a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or a treatment recommendation”

(p. 51). A frame, according to him, is “determined in large part by its outcome or effect”  
(p.52)

Today, media effects can be characterized as “social constructionism” (Scheufele, 1999, p. 103). Mass media constructs social reality by “framing images of reality in a predictable and patterned way” (Mc- Quail, 1994, p. 331). According to Gamson and Modigliani (1989), “Media discourse is part of a process by which individuals construct meaning, and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists develop and crystallize meaning in public discourse”.

Tankard & Severin (2001) define a frame as an idea arrangement for news contents that provide context and suggestion of the issues that need to be given extra attention through selection, pressure, no involvement and elaboration. Theoretical foundation of framing theory asserts that the media tell people both what is important and how to think about it (Brown, 2002). Framing is built on the assumption that how an issue is depicted in news reports can have an influence over how it is taken by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Reese (2001) says that framing deals with the way the media portrays news. He explains that issues are organized in such a way that they guide policy and opinion (D’Angelo, 2010, p.19). This creates potential problems for many religious and ethnic groups and the way they are perceived.

The role of media is to shape opinions and present a particular version as reality. Media are also believed and expected to portray a fair picture on any issues occurring both at local and international level. However, in portraying Islam especially after the September 11 attacks, a number of researchers found that American media tend to negatively depict Islam by associating it with terrorism (Winegar, 2008; Gerges, 2003).

Barker and Galasinski (2001 p.7) argue, “Texts are unable to police the meanings to be constructed from them.” The representation emphasized stereotypes and cast Muslims and Islam in an unfavorable light. Among the most commonly used frames in the media, when reporting about Muslims, we can talk of the emancipation frame, which is used to show the backward nature of Muslim culture and beliefs, and the victimization frame, especially for Muslim women (Vliegthart & Roggeband 2007). Another broad frame used to show Islam as a violent religion is the depiction of “Islam being a threat”, and the problems its Muslims create in the West by taking part in terrorist activities, (Manning 2004, p. 45)

Framing is quite significant in this research, as it will help understand how media is perceived by converts and how does it impact their life before and after their conversion. Framing therefore will be useful to see how the particular representation of Muslims affects converts’ identification with Islamic faith and culture which in turn gives birth to a person’s social identity which according to Tajfel (1978, p. 63) is “that part of an individual’s self concept which derives from his/her] knowledge of membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership”. Societies are patterned into numerous groups and these groups produce complex intersections of racial, ethnic, religious, national, gender-based and class-based belonging (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Membership is often associated with a lifestyle, values and expectations of ways of living, cooking, dressing, talking, relating etc. Identity is created through and against the views of others, and so a minority’s identity construction is always a response to how they have been stereotyped by the majority. (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Herriot, 2007).

### **4.3 Literature Review**

#### **4.3.1 Media and Muslims before and after 9/11**

The consequences of 9/11 on Muslims in the United States have been dramatic. It was perhaps the single most important turning point in the experience of American Muslims. Apart from its negative consequences on their daily lives, the media's coverage of Islam reached an unprecedented intensity. (Yenigun, 2004, p. 40)

The history of negative representation of Muslims in American media goes much beyond 9/11. Said (1981) while writing about Iranian hostage crisis of 1979 points out that the American media has not be able to explain clearly the Arab and Muslim world to the American people. He argues that “Muslims and Arabs are essentially covered, discussed, apprehended either as suppliers of oil or as potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab- Muslim life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Islamic world (p, 26).”

The negative image of Muslims has been reinforced for decades through movies and television. Shaheen (2009) while examining over 100 Hollywood movies sees a consistent pattern of hateful stereotypes. He writes that Hollywood has produced about 1,000 movies in which Muslim Arabs have been excessively stereotyped and vilified “that exceeded negative images of Blacks, Native Americans, Asians, Hispanics and Jews” (p.12).

Depictions of Muslims in both the entertainment and news media have emphasized their hostile intentions (Karim 2003; Said 1997; Shaheen 2009). Sheikh, Price, and Oshagan (1995) studied that news stories about Muslims repeatedly involved

crises, war, and conflict frequently using the terms included terms such as “fundamentalist”, “terrorist”, “radical,” or “extremist.”

Armstrong (2000) goes much earlier in time to find the roots of negative imagery about Muslims, which, according to her, lie far deeper. She notes that ever since the Crusades, the western world developed a stereotypical and distorted image of Islam, which they regarded as the enemy of civilization. (p. 179)

After 9/11 which proved to be a decisive moment in both American history and the way Muslims began to be perceived, media not only reflected similar limitations and weaknesses as Said argues, but went too further in portraying Islam in a negative light. (Amiri, 2013, p. 3)

According to Orbe & Harris (2008), after the September 11 attacks, terrorists have been associated with Islam and named as Muslim fundamentalists or ‘Islamists’ which has increased some prejudices, discriminations against and attacks on Muslims. Lewis (2005, p 24) mentions that at the simplest level, the September 11 attacks produced a dramatic increase in the media coverage of Islam and Muslims, most of which was negative.

Severin and Tankar (1997) argue that repeated coverage of Muslims as terrorists in the media leads to the belief that they are actually terrorists. Thus, hatred and discrimination derives from that source against all Muslims. The term Islamophobia became popular in media circles and was constantly used to describe increased isolation of Muslims living in America. This term, which many regard as highly politicized, began to denote the systematic discrimination against both Muslims and Islam. According to

Sajid (2005, p 9), Islamophobia is concerned with culturalism and identity politics and has recently broadened in reference to ostracism suffered by the Muslims globally.

Here again media is usually blamed for the creation of a particular image of Muslims. Awass (1996) argued that news coverage on Islam was offensive and associated it with fundamentalism and terrorism. He also concluded that Islam was repeatedly presented as a threat to American security. Jackson (2010) while looking at negative stereotypical portrayals of Islam and Muslims in the U.S. media points out that the most common representation of Muslims since 9/11 has been of a “scary, shady character: an unlikable, intolerable enemy of society” (p.9).

#### **4.3.2 Muslim Identity in Crisis**

Yenigun (2004) examines that one of the less studied effects of media is the impact on the identities and well being of Muslims living in America. Before September 11, 2001, Muslims were stereotyped in relation to being Arabs or anyone who could mistakenly be associated with Middle Easterners, such as Pakistanis and South Asians. Now this new wave of representation does not simply follow the decades-old pattern. It also includes new actors in the American public sphere - American Muslims. (p. 39, 40)

Sirin and Fine (2007) also note that the events of 9/11 have had a decidedly negative effect on American Muslims who apart from being themselves under threat were also considered as a threat to the dominant culture. They write that not only did Muslim Americans - like all Americans - fear for their lives; but they were also forced to deal with being perceived as a threat by other Americans. “Since 9/11 ‘they’ – Muslim Americans – have been watched, detained, deported, and invaded in order to protect and save ‘us’”(p, 151).

Given the importance of media as a socializing agent, it is important to understand how media might influence the perceptions of Muslims and non-Muslims on several important dimensions. Ahmad (2006, p 981) writes that media discourses can fuel hostility and marginalization amongst Muslims. “The power of stereotypes coming from the media, and the impact they have upon those who feel directly targeted, should not be underestimated. Given the media's impact on the views and attitudes of the public, we should not underestimate the power that this anti-Muslim media bias has on both Muslims and non-Muslims.”(p, 981)

Media portrayals of Muslims as the “terrorists” are likely to reduce the acceptance and inclusion of Muslim-Americans within the American national identity by Non-Muslims. It can create various intergroup problems (like in terms of “us” versus “them”) between Muslim and non-Muslim Westerners (Nacos & Torres- Reyna, 2007).

Sirin and Fine (2007) argue that the impact of living in this kind of limited space, which creates the double bind of being threatened and being perceived as threatening, is grave. According to them, cracks appear in the fragile lives of young people when social and cultural identities are questioned by the dominant discourse. “These young Muslims live at the ‘hyphen’ (p, 156) “and draw pictures of binaried identities and loss. “ (p, 157)”.

Maira (2008) notes that after 9/11, questions of citizenship, racialization, and religious and national identities have taken on new, urgent meanings for Muslims living in the United States” ( p. 15). According to Brinson (2010), many barriers exist to a healthy balance of acculturation and identity for Muslim Americans in post 9/11 environment. They may perceive a need to either further assimilate into the United States

culture and shed their culture or religious identity out of fear, or in contrast to this, further distance themselves from the majority group in order to show pride of differentiation and group solidarity.

This is likely to influence, as Cainkar (2004) argues, Muslim-Americans' perceptions of the compatibility or conflict between their two identities. For Muslim youth living in the US, negotiating their identities across different cultural territories became decidedly more challenging after the events of 9/11 and their subsequent media portrayal.

The nature of dual identities has contributed to the desire of Muslims to connect with immigrants who share a Muslim background. Sirin, Bikmen, Mir, Fine, Zaal, and Katsiaficas (2008) suggest the emergence of a community of Muslim-identified American residents and citizens stemming from post-9/11 events: namely the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Membership in this Muslim-identified community predominantly comprises those from Muslim-majority countries. Being Muslim is their common identity. The signature term "Muslim-American" is used in the dominant discourse to view a number of discreet populations as possessing a single monolithic identity. Typically in U.S. society we do not hyphenate populations according to religion, yet using Muslim-American is a convenient way to group individuals into an imagined community. The authors insist that the study of a "Muslim-American" identity, therefore, is not necessarily a study of religiosity or ethnicity, but rather is a study of an emerging collective identity, which is influenced not only by religious background, but also by a specifiable historic (i.e., attacks of 9/11) and political (i.e., war on terror, USA Patriot Act) contexts. (Sirin et al., 2008, p. 262). According to Sirin et al. forging identities as

parallel, integrated, or conflicted is a developmental task of hyphenated, Muslim-American youth.

Despite there being seven million Muslims within the United States, there is a perception of Muslim-Americans not being “quite American” (Haddad, 2004). Khan (2001) seems to justify this perception by stating, “‘It boils down to the difference in which the new generation of Muslims is constructing their Islamic identity,’” he says, “as opposed to the manner in which their parents have constructed their Islamic identity. And the significant difference is that the newer generation is struggling to accommodate their American-ness (saying): ‘I am a Muslim. I am also an American.’”(p. 13)

Because of the intense backlash U.S. Muslim youth struggle to embody the multiple identities associated with religion, culture, nation of origin, and gender (Sarroub, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2007). Such identifications at times co-mingle and at other times clash. Negotiating multiple identities creates tensions reflecting the inner turmoil associated with questions about who one is and where one “comes from.”

American Muslims are grappling with these issues. Some believe the answer is isolation from all non- Muslims. Others either shroud their identity or abandon the religion altogether. However, as Smith (1999, p 178) observes: “Neither isolation nor absorption is generally seen as a goal in the conversations among Muslims who are searching for guidelines and principles that can speak to the majority of the members of the complex body that is American Islam . . . A major task for Muslims, many believe, is to clarify what matters are flexible and may be reinterpreted in the Western context and what issues are so clearly part of God’s design for human life and response that they can’t be renegotiated.

### 4.3.3 American Muslim Converts

One of the most significant part of all American Muslims is converts. A review of the literature revealed that there is a limited amount of research work done on converts and the challenges they face in the wake of significant happenings in America during the last decade.

People who convert to Islam in America acquire an identity that puts them in the fold of minority within a minority. In the context of media's representation of Islam and the similar patterns of reaction to it as other American Muslims, some sort of identity problems is bound to creep in. How American converts compromise between being loyal Americans and devout Muslims at the same time? Do they see themselves as a distinct part of the American society or as a small fragment of the larger Muslim society which Wadud (2003, p. 270) calls 'Muslim-Americans' rather than American Muslims.

There may be various factors that put these converts on either side of the divide. Some tend to become Muslims and Americans while others identify more with Islam than their American identity. Afridi (2001) argues that Issues of identity and ethnically bound political agendas also hinder American Muslim converts as they seek to move forward on a common set of ideas and issues that would strengthen the community at large. Khan (2000) states that American Muslims converts are allowing the identity politics of the Muslim world to fragment them into various groups (91).

Conversion to Islam requires just a single statement of faith, but the newly faithful must then choose among a universe of competing interpretations of Islam, many overtly political and easily available on the Internet. Conversion is not only a momentary

experience but also an ongoing process of religious, social and cultural transformation. (Van 2006, p 3.)

New Muslims face a variety of issues in adapting the new religion involving both practice and percepts. Dress, changing food habits like not drinking alcohol or eating pork, dealing with daily family life and adapting to the new environment are some of the basic practical problems faced by converts. (Haddad, 1986 p. 8)

New Muslims face a variety of issues in adapting the new religion involving both practice and percepts. Dress, changing food habits like not drinking alcohol or eating pork, dealing with daily family life and adapting to the new environment are some of the basic practical problems faced by converts. (Haddad, 1986 p. 8)

#### **4.4 Methodology**

The study of the impact of media on American Muslim converts and its subsequent influence on their identity formation can be best understood by looking at the social and cultural issues they face.

Many scholars say that American Muslim converts are marginalized in a double way; they have achieved a minority status within a minority, because they are Muslims living in a dominant Christian society and are also a distinct group within the Muslim community. Some others believe that in an environment where Muslims are seen with suspicion and the way media portrays them, Muslim converts struggle to stick to a particular identity. Do these converts actually identify with these standpoints? These assumptions confirm the importance of a methodological approach, where they are not

just studied as statistics but rather as a phenomenon that needs to be explored and understood (Soskolne and Gibson, 2003, p. 4)

This cannot be done fruitfully without listening to their stories in which they express their own voice. That is why the methodology that I will be using in this research is qualitative interviews. More specifically, I have chosen open-ended unstructured qualitative interviews because they provide a greater depth than other types of interviewing (Frey and Fontana, 1994, p. 361).

An open ended qualitative approach can be a helpful tool when trying to grasp the social realities of individuals. Zhang and Wildemuth (2006) state that unstructured interview technique was in fact developed in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology as a method to elicit people's social realities. In literature, the term is used interchangeably with the terms like informal conversational interview (p.1).

Punch (1998) described unstructured interviews as a way to understand the complex behavior of people without invading their space, which might limit the field of inquiry.

Unstructured interview is defined in different ways. Minichiello (1990) defines unstructured interviews as interviews in which "neither the question nor the answer categories are predetermined. They rely on social interaction between the researcher and informant to extract information."

Based on these lines, I followed the respondents' narration and generated questions spontaneously based on their responses and proceed like a friendly, non-threatening conversation. This is what Patton (2002) calls "relying entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction." It, however,

doesn't imply that interviewing your subjects without a prior preparation or knowledge is recommended. I approached all my subjects with a set of specific questions, which provided a guideline for me. Just because unstructured interviews don't use predefined questions doesn't mean that they are random and non-directive. It is accepted that the structure of the interview can be loosely guided by a list of questions, which Minichiello et al (1990) call agenda.

Unstructured interviews cannot be started without detailed knowledge and preparation, if the researcher is planning to achieve deep insights into people's lives (Patton, 2002). They tend to be more informal, open ended, flexible and free flowing. Questions are not pre-set, although there are usually certain topics that the researchers wish to cover. This gives the interview some structure and direction. The researcher has to keep in mind the study's purpose and the general scope of the issues that he or she would like to discuss in the interview (Fife, 2005).

However, it is extremely important to be cautious in directing the interview too much toward researcher's own bias. The researcher's control over the conversation is intended to be minimal, but nevertheless the researcher will try to encourage the interviewees to relate experiences and perspectives that are relevant to the problems of interest to the researcher (Burgess, 1982).

Unstructured interviews are an extremely useful method for "developing an understanding of an as-of-yet not fully understood or appreciated culture, experience, or setting." (Fontana and Frey, 1994)

While doing her master's theses at NLA – School of Religion, Education and Intercultural Studies, Elisabeth Harnes (2009) used this type of interview, researching on

the conversion stories of African-American Muslim converts. Since the topic of my research is similar and keeping in view the narratives I am expected to get vis-à-vis social, cultural and political experiences of American Muslim converts, this kind of methodology has a great significance for this project. She found this method useful to understand the placement of individual within an ongoing and developing social structure.

My interview subjects were all Americans between 18 and 40 years of age who converted to Islam after 9/11. These included six male and one female respondent. During the course of this project, it was difficult for me to find many Female Muslim converts. All the subjects were found in Columbia, Jefferson City and St. Louis.

Because all the subjects I interviewed were different people with distinct personalities and had different reasons to convert, it was more useful not to restrict myself to preconceived questions. So I had framed the following questions to elicit the important information from the subjects.

1. The reasons for conversion
2. Opposing forces (social, cultural, even psychological) that seemed to prevent their conversion.
3. The impact of already stereotyped image of Islam by media and Muslims on their conversion
4. Future apprehensions just before their conversion (of being shunned from the community or hated for belonging to the same religion as terrorists)

5. How did they receive media messages about Muslims before and after conversion?
6. What is their identity and has it changed since they converted.
7. Any internal conflicts they experience as Muslim and American at the same time

#### **4.4.1 INTERVIEWS**

For this study, I chose seven interview subjects, which included six males and one female. As proposed, all of them are in the age group of 18 to 40.

**1. Michael Dillon, 22**

Hometown: Jefferson City

**2. Abdullah Zubyr, 21**

Hometown: New Jersey,

Living in: Jefferson City

**3. Hans Siedderman,34**

Hometown Ohio

Living in: St. Louis

**4. Gabriel Esparza,24**

**Hometown:** Fullerton, California

Living in: Columbia

**5. Elena Diana Esparza, 23**

Hometown San Pedro, California

Living in: Columbia

**6. Justin McNutt, 38**

Hometown: Columbia

**7. Khalil Philip Klopfenstein, 24**

Hometown: St. Louis

Living in: Minnesota

Most of the interaction and interviews conducted at the respondent's homes. However the first interaction happened in the Islamic Center of Central Missouri, which was the main center of activity for me during this whole project.

Since I was conducting unstructured interviews with open-ended questions and informal discussions, which sometimes may stretch into unexpected directions. I did not take any notes. This approach would have resulted in poor notes and also distracted me from the developing a rapport with my subjects. Development of rapport and dialogue is essential in unstructured interviews. (Fontana and Frey, 1994)

So I recorded the interviews with a digital audio recorder and later transcribed them. This allowed me to focus on my interaction with the participants and concentrate on what they are saying. It also helped me in stretching the discussion in different directions without making the respondents feel that I wasn't paying the attention.

## **4.5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study was designed to get information on the basis of personal accounts and experiences of the respondents without any pre-conceived hypothesis. After transcribing the interviews, I studied them trying to find distinct themes, concepts and patterns and their interrelationships.

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 while spending a substantial amount of time with respondents. These additional interviews and observations, besides allowing me to witness the everyday experiences of the participants, helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the issues they face. Spending time with the participants mostly at the Islamic Center gave me an opportunity to establish a relationship with them and also observe their interactions with members of the Muslim community in Columbia. A common theme in the respondents' 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'. In this case, all the respondents were 'converts by conviction' and all of them practicing Muslims.

### **4.5.1 Initial Reactions: Bracing up for Isolation**

The respondents had experienced diverse and varied reactions from their families on their conversion to Islam. Some faced extreme rejection while others had to struggle to convince their families about their conversion. Most respondents initially faced

negative reactions from some or all of their family members. Some members of their families severed all communications for some period of time.

ABDULLAH ZUBYR: Everybody that I knew, they all turned against me – Mom, brother sister, friend, cousin. They would say ‘he’s just turned Muslim, he’s weak minded’ My family used to give me a hard time and put a lot of pressure on me and make fun of me.... I have been Muslim for four years now. I don’t live with them anymore.

This was also true for the lone female respondent, Elena. In her case, however, the negative attitude became less pronounced over time and a sense of acceptance increased.

ELENA DIANA ESPARZA: Before I actually converted I mentioned it to my mom, she got really mad. I remember I just mentioned Islam and she just got angry. I never brought up that again with my mom because of her reaction. Then I thought of mentioning it to my dad...then I told them that I converted after a month I converted. I don’t know how I did it but I mentioned it. He was so furious. I was like, ‘can you listen’ but he was so angry. He said he knew everything about Muslims because he was a military contractor in Afghanistan. He would not listen, I remember that.

I cried a lot and did not bring it up for a long time. I just felt like my whole family was against me (crying). Only my twin brother supported me.

Elena’s husband, Gabriel’s experience was different from hers. His conversion was neither vehemently opposed nor endorsed. However, once his parents saw a change in him, they fully supported him. This was primarily due to the fact that the family felt that their son had become a ‘better and more responsible ’ human being.

GABRIEL ESPARZA: I was really scared how my parents were going to react. But I did bluntly tell them. They were very curious and extremely supportive because immediately they saw a change in me. I hadn’t told them for a few weeks after converting that I had become a Muslim, so they had seen a change. The one thing that the *Sheikh* (Cleric) who helped me take my *Shahadah* (Testimony of Faith) said to me was ‘respect your parents’ and I took that to heart. Our relationship since I converted has been so amazing. Smoking had always been a big issue between us and once that was gone, everything else was a bonus.

Michael's experience was similar. His conversion was not seen as problematic and even was welcomed for the positive effects it induced in him. Michael, who had previously experienced a lot of adverse life events, did not have to face such problems from his immediate family members. His mother upon his conversion had remarked, "This (Michael's conversion) is one of the best things that has ever happened to me."

MICHEAL DILLON: "My mother was extremely happy. She is Christian and a strong believer in God. She didn't care if I was Muslim or anything. Her only concern was that I believed in God, no matter what religion I follow. She is happy to see a huge change in me."

HANS SIEDDERMAN: When I called my mother the morning before I took *Shahdah*, she cried out of happiness because that would mean I was going to be leaving smoking, drinking, girlfriends and changing my life forever. I just explained to her that how God was guiding me and she was so happy. My father and stepfather both violently rejected my decision. That was difficult but it didn't deter me. My stepfather disowned me. I couldn't visit my mother and siblings for six years until after he died."

Some participants stated that among other possible factors, one of the main reasons for this hostility was the image of Muslims being fed to the American public after 9/11. The participants expressed that most of the negativity they faced was because they apparently shared the same religion as 'terrorists' and 'extremists'.

One of the participants argued that conversion before September 11 would not be taken as seriously as it is taken now. It was as simple and 'uninteresting' as converting to Buddhism or Hinduism, which are seen as 'spiritual religions'.

GABRIEL: Had 9/11 not happened then telling my parents of my conversion would have been like me telling them like I am Buddhist. I think it is directly related to how Muslims were portrayed in media in the last ten or twelve years.

Another respondent said that though his parents didn't show any negative reaction, they were concerned.

JUSTIN McNUTT: My mother was really worried. She is big on a lot of traditions like Christmas and Easter and so on. She thought it was going to be a bigger change and it really wasn't. She was worried that it was going to be a big overnight transformation. I was just going to abandon basically everything that I came from. My father didn't really care that much. You know how easy it is for converts to be zealots. That was probably his only real concern and he knew that wasn't going to happen. I think it's just because he wanted to make sure that his son hasn't bought into something really crazy. And every time I had to tell him, no, no, you have been listening to the American television again; stop doing that, you'll be fine.

Many of the participants said that after their conversion, their social life changed completely and a gulf was created between them and their friends. Some friendships ended forever. In most cases this was not due to the negative attitude of friends but because of the change in lifestyle of the converts.

GABRIEL: I think the main social problem for me and my wife has been that so many events are focused around alcohol. People invite us and we turn them down. We have been invited to only two non-drinking events and there was still alcohol in those, although that wasn't the focus. It's hard to find people in our field or class who have the same morals that we do. Socially that's been a big thing.

JUSTIN: What I anticipated was going to happen to certain extent, which did happen, were things that my friends like to do for fun and I couldn't do anymore and that creates a distance. That's the one thing that breaks up friendships. But the part that affected them was how I am going to choose to spend this time. Just take the easiest example, I am not going with them, spending time away from them, which means we become less familiar, which means I don't know them anymore

For many respondents, being Muslim jeopardized their working life and employment prospects. One participant said he faced discrimination at work once his colleagues found out that he was a Muslim.

HANS SIEDDERMAN: I was basically pushed out of two workplaces. After my colleagues learned that I was a Muslim people started looking at me strangely and didn't really accept me in the same way. When people find out you are Muslim, it's against protocol to discuss religion in the office, so you can't

defend yourself against all those negative assumptions they have. So it kind of creates a hostile work environment.

KHALIL PHILLIP KLOPFENSTEIN: I have encountered many issues related to how people perceive me differently after my conversion. For example, while most of my employers have been very accommodating, I was nearly excluded from one job search process when one of the hiring committee members found out that I was a Muslim. Had it not been for an advocate in the company, this gut reaction could have prevented me from getting the job.

GABRIEL: In the mid-West, it's really hard, especially with my job working full time in agriculture because you deal with a lot of very conservative people who have not openly negative views of Islam but it's definitely suggested . . . That's definitely been a personal problem finding good people to interact with, who accept it with an open mind.

ZUBYR: I don't understand why I have not been able to get a job. I have been going to many places to find a job but nothing happened. Maybe the Kufi (Islamic hat) I am wearing scares people who could employ me.

For Justin, his colleagues knew from the beginning he was a Muslim and he never faced any problem at work.

#### **4.5.2 Embracing a New Identity**

In response to the questions about adopting the new faith and identifying themselves as Muslims, the respondents noted having taken several steps in changing their religious identity. The first step for some of the respondents was to adopt a new name. Two of the seven respondents had changed their names just after conversion. This included, Khalil (Phillip Klopfenstein) and Abdullah Zubyr (Richard Bell). Two others, Michael Dhillon (Abdullah Ibn Adam) and Hans Sieddermann (Abdul Batin) just adopted an alternative name. For all practical purposes, they used their original name. The remaining three did not adopt a new.

JUSTIN: I didn't change my name because I didn't need to. My name means justice. It didn't have any root in any kind of pagan belief or polytheism.

HANS: I didn't change my name but to make other Muslims comfortable I gave them Abdul Batin as a kind of nickname so that they wouldn't see me as being more foreign than I already am. Hans is a very European name. But I still identify with my birth name.

In relation to having an identity as a Muslim, all respondents except one noted that after their conversion they tried to 'look Muslim' by changing their appearance. Generally, most respondents stated that they had a strong sense of Islam being a part of their identity and it was important for others to be aware of this identity.

All the male respondents except Justin had grown a beard and wore at least one symbol of Islamic clothing. For him, not looking like a Muslim is seen as an advantage.

JUSTIN: I didn't have any idea of something like dressing like Arabs. That wasn't the case. I am very lucky that I can blend with both sides. I stand out more at the *Masjid* (Mosque). There are many people who know me personally. It's always an advantage to look like common people.

HANS: When I first accepted Islam, I felt like I had to change the way I dressed and make it very obvious that I was Muslim. Then after some time and study, I realized how diverse the different cultures that Islam exists in are and how there was nothing wrong with dressing the way I always did. Most Muslim men I have known wear Western style clothes anyway.

Elena, the only female respondent wore a headscarf or hijab only during prayers or when she would visit the mosque or any Islamic gathering. She mentioned that eventually she was planning to wear a hijab fulltime.

ELENA: Meeting the Muslim sisters was the sweetest thing after my conversion. I saw them wearing the hijab. After some days, I wouldn't even notice the hijab. I would say they are just like us, like normal people living their lives, great personalities. My stereotype was just going away. It made me a little more open to things. At first, I was like oh no, I don't want to wear hijab. As I learn and understand more, I am getting used to some of the requirements. Now I

wear hijab only when I have to go to the mosque or when I am praying. But In Shaa' Allah (If God Wills), I will take it more seriously later.

While responding to the questions examining social costs of adopting a Muslim identity, some respondents said that clothing was the most visible way to present themselves as Muslims, which in some cases was the reason for negative reactions. They talked about their friends and family telling them they looked “Arab”.

ZUBYR: Of course, I would wear the *Izar* (a long cloth worn like a skirt from waist to toe by men), lot of people would look at me as if I had killed the whole world. They would talk to me with a condescending tone. Family was coming at me. They were saying derogatory things about me. They were thinking negative things about me. They would make fun of me when I would wear *Izar* or *Kufi* on my head.

MICHAEL: This guy at the gas station! He would just...I could see his eyes hitting the side of my head. This is just uncomfortable. He didn't have a very happy look on his face. This sometimes happens at the stores too.

Some respondents including Khalil and Gabriel did not, however, face strong reactions because of their beards and dress, although they wore it occasionally in public.

#### **4.5.3 Mixing in the Muslim community**

While in some respondents, the changed lifestyle brought about a huge transformation in their relationships with their old friends, they developed new friendships within the Muslim community. Participation in social and religious activities deepened their relationship with the Muslim community and reinforced their sense of identity as Muslims.

GABRIEL: Personally, I was struggling with just how do I be a good Muslim in a very non-Muslim world. In California, it was easy being a Muslim because I had really been accepted into the local community of Muslims there.

Once I became Muslim, I got very active on my campus in California in the Muslim association we have there.

HANS: I was serious about it all. I wanted to learn Arabic to have a better understanding of the Quran. So I got in contact with some brothers at a mosque in Washington, DC. A few years later, I went to Yemen where I taught English and attended a 'Markaz' (a center or seminary). These were some of the best years of my life.

They argued that the most common way to establish relationships and friendships with other Muslims was to visit the mosque. In the case of students on campus, getting involved with a Muslim students' organizations was the most common way of getting to know the new community.

MICHAEL: In both Jeff city and Columbia, I regularly meet other Muslims in the mosques and they have been so helpful. Today I have just two or three good friends and all of them are Muslim. I feel more comfortable in the community because you can relate to those people. You can talk about Quran. They will not be like 'oh, that's weird'.

GABRIEL: When I first converted, I was in the college campus setting where there was a Muslim Association group that I delved into. Since I moved here, being married, working full time, juggling this new part of life has been harder. But I do feel like I am becoming more integrated in the Masjid and the community around. I see it growing every day; it's becoming easier to associate with new people. Everyone I have talked to, it felt like very comfortable. I don't think I have ever met a Muslim I haven't felt comfortable with.

However, converts who have been Muslim for more than five years have different views because of their longer experience with both Islam and Muslim culture. Hans Siedderman argues that oftentimes, Muslim converts in the beginning of their conversion experience preferential treatment but later they are treated differently. Most converts are left on their own making it difficult for them to find a suitable place within the community. Having spent two years in Yemen and travelled to the Middle East, Hans Siedderman's experience with Muslim culture is vast. Strangely enough, his experience

of alienation was more profound in American Islamic communities than in the Middle East.

HANS: Some people see Islam as like an heirloom or something that belongs to them and their family or people. They don't recognize that the Creator's religion is for everyone. You realize that, in the eyes of the less Islamically educated members of the community, being an American convert means you have more to prove... you end up being seen by some as a kind of second class citizen.

JUSTIN: The *Masjid* (mosque) is only complicated not because it's a *Masjid* but because it is the Islamic Center. I watch things happen that have nothing to do with Islam. That is one of the reasons why I am not the property manager anymore. Those things bother me.

This is where the relationship of converts with other Muslims becomes complicated. Difficulties integrating in the new community start to surface. Isolation becomes more pronounced. Detailing some of the issues that lead to a wedge between converts and 'born Muslims', some respondents elaborated on the complexities of the situation. The difference between Islamic ideals, Muslim cultural practices and individual behavior becomes overwhelmingly clear.

JUSTIN: I always have known the difference between belief system and the culture. So I followed Islam and not any culture. When you do that, it becomes easier for you to understand who you are.

The attitude of some Muslims in the mosques or Islamic Community Centers towards converts becomes a complex issue when the Muslim-Convert relationship is seen in the backdrop of various socio-cultural factors.

A few respondents mentioned they often feel neglected in the community because other Muslims see their culture as being in direct contradiction with Islam. Such Muslims also think that their own culture is superior and completely Islamic.

MICHAEL: I had a friend who belonged to a Pakistani/Moroccan family. They just thought they were the most superior people on the planet. They would think that Islam and their culture are one. You can't do that. You have to separate Islam from culture.

#### **4.5.4 American or Muslim: A Crisis of Identity?**

One of the most important questions posed to all the seven respondents was whether they thought of themselves as either Muslim or American. The majority of the respondents stated that being American is a cultural state, which is still there, but that Islam is a way of life. Though they think that they are Muslim first and then American, they thought that conversion to Islam had, interestingly enough, made them more American than they were before.

Almost all the respondents were of the opinion that accepting Islam has made them more aware of American values, which they say are compatible with the teachings of their new religion. For most of them, they felt using the term dual identity was a misnomer.

GABRIEL: I think it has, in a way that I feel it has made me more American, made me more proud to be an American, if that makes sense, especially with the teachings in Islam like respecting the law of the land and to be a better Muslim by being a better person in the society you live in. It gave me more responsibility towards my nation without making me a nationalist. I really think America is what allowed me to be a Muslim by being like a place where there legally is religious freedom, whether or not it's socially accepted anywhere. I am more proud to be an American Muslim than I was to be an American. It's maybe the contradiction with the thought that American is right wing, Christian, red white and blue and now it's more like America for me is what it can be rather than what it is right now. I think Islam really has helped me become an American.

GABRIEL: I feel sad in some ways, I feel like maybe I should move to a place that's more accepting of my religion. Perhaps you are not exactly wanted. The struggle for me was more like if I can tell what a person's views of this religion is and what their views of Muslims are and even though if I know it's not true and I do all that my religion teaches, that's not going to change their opinion.

They are still going to have this inner hatred or distrust for me, that makes me struggle with if I should just leave and not try to even interact with them. I don't like to be kept from interacting with people, that's very uncomfortable for me.

MICHAEL: I was born here, so I am an American by birth. Islam is a way of life that I chose for myself.

JUSTIN: There are a lot of Muslims who believe that democracy is incompatible with Islam. And one of the first things I had to come to terms with was whether that's true or not. And I don't think it is. For any group of people, you need to pick an Imam. There is nothing that says how. You really should pick the best one, and that's done democratically. There are enough Muslims who believe that's not true, creating problems for me. It certainly puts me to look at where my loyalties lie. And it didn't change anything other than that if you live or die in a country, you probably won't question it at all. For example, you're Russian your whole life, it never occurs to you that you'd be anything else. All that this situation forced me to do is choosing. I am still very much Missourian, I am still very much American. When you are forced to deal with these issues, you go back and actually look at the law, look at the principles of the country you belong to. You are actually asked these questions, where are your loyalties and fortunately, I didn't have to choose, it was much like choosing between Islam and Catholicism. I just chose the better one.

KHALIL: On another note though, I do feel that America provides a lot of freedoms in terms of being able to practice one's religion, and that it is up to us to exercise those freedoms to practice our religion. We are able to fulfill many parts of our personal practice in this country, so long as we are willing to endure certain social stigmas for doing so. I do not think there needs to be a conflict of identity here. Being American is my citizenship, which I was given automatically, and being a Muslim is my way of life, which I have chosen. So long as America remains a place that guarantees many freedoms for "all" of its citizens, then I can practice whatever religion I want here, even if I have problems with some governmental policies. In fact, it is very American to have problems with certain governmental policies. But if criticism and dissent is criminalized, then this is a problem.

Most respondents said that they have not faced a crisis in identity within themselves. They do not think that there is a conflict between their Muslim and American identity when considering American values. They identify with American values, such as honesty, trustworthiness, moral integrity, duty to family and community, etc. and say that

these are also central to Islam. One respondent mentioned that it is the American public that perceives converts as having an identity crisis because they have been fed false information about Islam as being incompatible with democracy and American values.

Some respondents gave an emphasis on not mistaking popular American culture with American values. For example Elena expressed her anguish over some ‘negative’ cultural practices like consuming alcohol and emphasized that these should not be viewed as a part of American value system.

ELENA: Alcoholism and drugs, it’s sad that they are part of our social life. But that’s the truth, unfortunately. There is no party without drinks. I have myself been a part of tis culture but that’s unfortunate. That’s not hat being American means.

For some respondents like Hans Siedderman, the main reason for conversion was that Islam seemed to be a manifestation of his own strongly held American values.

HANS: Being an American does not mean that I have to love everything that America does or has done. The same thing with being a Muslim: just because you are Muslim does not mean you have to love everything about Muslims. These are just simple facts. Before I converted I didn’t see myself as merely American. I saw myself as human and all human beings are equal. My identity as a human transcended my nationality. It’s the same thing with Islam. I saw Islam as the way of life for whole humanity not for just race or a nation. These identity problems a convert faces in either American society or the Muslim community is too trivial relative to relationship with his God.

#### **4.5.5 Converts’ Perception of Media**

When respondents were asked how they would describe the representation of Islam and Muslims in the mainstream media, the majority of them identified it as negative. Most respondents said that it all boils down to the media’s portrayal of Muslims. The problem is that all the bad things Muslims do are generalized and attributed to Islam.

ZUBYR: I don't that say that Muslims don't do bad things but how can you relate these bad things with Islam, which is a wonderful religion. Millions of people who follow cannot be bad.

MICHAEL: There are basically two problems with the way that Islam and Muslims are portrayed in the media. First, the worst actions of Muslims are presented as if they are normal for Muslims as a whole. The worst, unIslamic parts of Muslim cultures, like honor killings, genital mutilation, suicide bombing, all things that have nothing to do with the religion, are presented as one, being normal for Muslims and two, being actually a part of the religion, which they are not. So that's a problem.

One of the respondents argued that what the American media says is not completely wrong but partly accurate. The problem arises from two overgeneralizations. The first is that the wrong actions of a minority of Muslims are represented as the common actions of all Muslims. The other is that those wrong actions are then portrayed as being inspired by Islam, which, the respondents said, is not the case.

HANS SIEDDERMAN: I don't have any problem when media highlights some bad actions of some people who happen to be Muslims. The problem is when it is attributed to Islam and all the Muslims of the world.

Almost all the respondents were of the opinion that they never believed what the mainstream media said about Islam and Muslims. They said they were concerned about others believing the 'distorted version of Islam.' Most of the participants argued that media couldn't impose a view that could create an identity crisis in them because they never believed what media said about Islam. However, all the respondents blamed the media's role after 9/11 for their isolation and alienation. The negative response of their families, friends and the public was attributed largely to media among other factors.

KHALIL: The first reaction of the family when you tell them that you have converted is natural especially if you have been brought up in a particular belief other than Islam. It means you are leaving the religion of your parents.

However, their negative attitude is reinforced by how Muslims began to be seen after 9/11.

GABRIEL: I think that's all it is. When I was Catholic, I never went to a Catholic service and heard them preaching against Islam. So it's not like one religion is preaching against another religion. I don't feel it's anything that's super direct. In some media cases, it's very direct, they worship the devil but I feel it is generally more subtle. Who's the terrorist in the movie program? It's always a Muslim, not the main character but very subtle. It's very disturbing.

JUSTIN: I tried fairly hard not to get any information about Islam from the media because it's always wrong, particularly here. It's been documented over and over about how American media presents different things to America than in the country itself. On the other hand, growing up, I was always told you couldn't just believe what you see on TV.

People like Michael and Justin think that media's doesn't affect every person in a negative way.

MICHAEL: I think most Americans are so open they kind of laugh at the news when they hear something. They are sensible enough to understand what is right and what the media says.

JUSTIN: I don't feel whatever I see in media influences me directly. I know too much about what information sources I can trust, but it mainly affects me indirectly. Sometimes it affects in a good way because I have family members who don't have any other contact. They know almost zero people who are Muslim. I think they have got a similar kind of a feel that most of the things that are shown or written in media are sensationalist and time-to-time, one of them would ask me 'is there any truth in this'.

Respondents discussed how media frames Muslims in general, and Muslim converts in particular. Most of them argued that the negative media coverage hasn't brought about any change in their perception or in their identity but it has impacted the way their identity is perceived by others. Though today people know more about Islam, most of the things they know about it is distorted. One of the respondents said that if 9/11

had not taken place people wouldn't know much about Islam but at least they wouldn't know the wrong version.

GABRIEL: Had 9/11 not happened, I think people would probably know even less about Islam, but they wouldn't know the wrong version? People believed about Islam when they actually know the complete opposite. They don't actually know, but they believe that they know something that's completely wrong. But to them, it's like the only possible way. It's really damaging to relationships, it's damaging to dealing with people. Things that wouldn't normally be an issue, like going to pray on Fridays, is now like 'why'. Without 9/11 and without the media portraying images or the viewpoints like that, there won't be those images in people's heads.

HANS: Media portrayal along with bigoted tendencies among their non-Muslim family members leave converts being disowned and estranged from the families. It can also make working situations difficult as converts are seen differently by non-Muslims. Fellow American non-Muslims look on converts and traitors who betrayed them. Those born into Muslim families were, in their eyes, "born that way".

All the respondents expressed their concern over specific terms used by the media to represent Islam and Muslims. They strongly felt that these terms are not only misused to represent Muslims in a bad light but also in a manner where their original meaning is completely distorted.

ELENA: One of my professors would tell us the story of a cat and dog. The dog was named Jihad because he used to scare the cat. This was so sick. They even don't know what jihad means. They think it's something related to cruelty and terror.

The other most common terms that most respondents felt were misused by the media were Jihad, Islamic Violence, Terrorism, Extremism, Islamist and Shariah. They argued that these terms have been wrongly fed into people's minds.

JUSTIN: The words "Jihad", "Shahadah", "Islamic" have almost never been used correctly and are used by people who have no idea what they are talking about. You can't have an Islamic people; you have Muslims. That grates

on someone's nerves when somebody in the media is talking about this stuff and who is so poorly versed in what they are talking about that they use it incorrectly. Especially the word Jihad, even the Muslims don't understand this word. So for non-Muslims to be throwing around that word like they know what they are talking about is ridiculous.

MICHEAL: "Terrorist." That's always going to be the worst one. Apparently, not 1.7 billion Muslim are terrorists. "Jihad"...that's so wrongly used..."There are others like fundamentalists that go along with the word jihad...Sharia, because it's the law of Quran. A scary image of Sharia is always presented...they often say it's barbaric.

KHALIL: I am most bothered by the term 'Islamist', but I think that the fact that although there are many people speaking about Islam and Muslims in the current political climate, hardly ever do these speakers have the appropriate credentials or knowledge necessary.

HANS: It comes down to how you define different terms. For example, what is presented as a "moderate" Muslim in the corporate media may actually be someone who has totally abandoned the faith from an Islamic perspective.

Also, things like "*Shariah*", the term is so demonized, there are all these people protesting against applying sharia and they have no idea what it means. Like, if you study sharia, for example financial guidelines and restrictions are so detailed and logical, if we had been following just the financial guidelines of sharia in America the entire financial collapse of 2008 would have been avoided. Every single type of transaction that led to that disaster is forbidden, expressly, in Islam. It's really amazing. If we had more Islamic alternatives for investment and finance we could really turn the situation around here. The problem is that most of the lobbyists and people in power or people with money would be against it because they would lose so much money even though it would benefit the society as a whole.

The respondents said that most of the times the media also focuses on the appearance of the converts, showing them wearing long Arab dresses and skullcaps. In case of women, headscarf or hijab is almost always present. Some respondents said that there are so many converts who don't have a beard or wear skullcaps and style of dress is just like normal Americans but they are never shown in the media. Media, in their reports, try to show converts who look visibly Muslim, making the viewers feel that these people belong to the 'other' culture.

MICHAEL: They would never show how an average American Muslim convert looks like. Media always shows converts as obscure people with long 'Arab shirts' and big beards. They never show a convert having an ice cream with his family and kids.

Respondents argued that from initial rejection to alienation to isolation, media has played a damaging role in representing Islam and Muslims. One respondent argued that by creating this notion of clash of civilizations, the American public is made to believe that Islam is an alien religion and cannot co-exist with American values. Or, in other words, Muslims do not belong to this country.

ZUBYR: It's funny because before becoming Muslim I didn't know anything about Islam but after I became an Muslim I noticed when I would watch TV commercials, they downplayed Muslims. Muslims is a bunch of bad people. But truly Muslims are the most righteous people. I think all those people who believe in what media says about Islam are weak-minded.

Strangely enough, it was found during the interviews that the respondents think that media doesn't only change the attitudes of non-Muslims but born Muslims, too. It is not only Americans who have been negatively affected by media but also immigrant Muslims who also see converts as 'others'. Some converts have felt that one of the reasons why some Muslims become indifferent to new Muslims is a response to how the American media and public treat them. They, in this scenario, have become confrontational. Sometimes their own sense of identity crisis and how American media and people have been treating them becomes a pretext for the mistreatment of converts because they are American. Then these converts feel that they exist at what one of the respondents termed as the "intersection of mutually exclusive states of 'otherness' ". They become isolated.

HANS: It can be difficult as a convert because you are seen to exist at the intersection of two mutually exclusive states of "otherness": to Americans, you

have become the other; by accepting the religion of the people they see as their enemy. To Muslims, you are seen as still being essentially different from them, still "other" and not fully Muslim, since being American is, in their minds (based on the media treatment of Americans and American foreign policy) the opposite of being Muslim: America symbolizes for them all that is wrong with the world.

#### **4.6 CONCLUSION**

There are as many opinions as there are converts. The ones I interviewed had many diverse experiences. However, there are some common themes that were highlighted during these interviews discussed in this analysis. These contribute to the understanding of the ways in which religious identity of American Muslim converts is developed. It also demonstrates how personal identities are transformed by social and cultural factors. This analysis tries to look into how external social pressures can contribute to the alienation and marginalization of Muslim converts.

The moment a convert decides to accept Islam, problems start appearing. The first issue that is common among converts is some kind of negative reaction from family members. Though the negativity may become less noticeable with the passage of time, there is a strong sense of isolation and loneliness. In the absence of an accepting and welcoming Muslim community, converts may find themselves largely estranged from the society. The change in lifestyle further deepens this alienation, especially from friends. Some converts immediately announce their conversion to their family members where others wait, fearing a strong reaction. Depending on the convert's psychological state and/or social behavior before accepting Islam, others may see it as a positive step rather than a problematic one.

The reactions depend upon family members' personality, too. In some cases, the converts face a lack of respect and are ridiculed. However, in some circumstances they

are respected more, not only for becoming Muslim but also for apparently becoming more responsible and disciplined as a result of their new religious practice.

Conversions can induce very abrupt, hostile responses within the family at the outset but with time the tendency for accommodation grows markedly. The changes in lifestyle and dress can jeopardize or even completely end friendships and besides affecting work life. The converts' initial experience of 'feeling like a Muslim' reflected either through appearance or dress often invited negative reaction and has a heavy social cost.

Some issues, which apparently look subtle, are deeply disturbing for converts.

For example, converts may find themselves very comfortable among other Muslims, which could be very helpful to deal with isolation; however, there is also a tendency to feel alienated there, too. In many cases converts are not accepted fully into the Muslim community for diverse reasons. These include cultural difference or belonging to a country that is seen as anti-Islam.

Because they share the same faith, they face the same problems that all Muslims face in America. In addition to these problems, family members may often disown them, leaving them estranged, looking upon them as traitors. On the other hand, born Muslims might see them as a symbol of all the bad things that they associate with America.

The qualitative research shows that the media's framing of Muslims also applies to converts. For example, the disturbing terms used to describe Muslims are, of course, detrimental to converts as well. However, earlier research about the representation of Muslims and Islam in American media seems to oversimplify their identity problems by creating a false dichotomy where one can be only either American or Muslim, not both.

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## APPENDIX

### ORIGINAL PROPOSAL

#### INTRODUCTION

I was born in Kashmir where about 95 percent of the population is Muslim. When I was eight years old, a popular uprising started against Indian rule and within a few months turned into a full-blown armed conflict between Indian soldiers and Kashmiri militants backed by Pakistan. Growing up amid a bloody conflict greatly shaped my life and my career choice. The unique experiences I had during my childhood, my fascination for photography and an urge to tell the story of my people turned me to photojournalism. At the same time when I was preparing to jump into the world of serious news photography, I happened to chat with Christians in Yahoo religious chat rooms. It always fascinated me to 'meet' people who wanted to learn about different cultures and religions. It always gave me a great pleasure to learn that Muslims and Christians have so much in common. I also came across those Christians who had changed their faith and become Muslim. It would always make me curious why did these people convert to Islam when there's so much bias and so many misconceptions about this faith and its followers in their country.

My interest in Muslim converts was moderate until I watched the movie *Unthinkable* three years ago. It shows a former American marine who, a few years after his conversion to Islam, plans terrorist attacks on American soil as an answer to what he calls American occupation of Muslim lands. Till then, I hadn't met a Muslim convert. But when my passion for photojournalism brought me to United States, I had a chance to meet some of them. In fact, the person who took me around the campus at University of

Missouri and showed me the J-School a day before our classes were to begin in the fall of 2012 was a convert. It was strange to see them “more Muslim than the [born] Muslims”. The extremely small number of converts that I met in Columbia ever since I came here gave me a preliminary idea about their social behavior. Some of them would talk about religion all the time and some would almost always discuss what was happening in the Arab world.

Personally, I became interested in exploring the true identity of Muslim converts in America after I searched for literature about them and didn't find any significant work done on them. Given the fact that they are becoming an important part of the American society and so much has been written about other Muslims living in America especially Arab immigrants and African American Muslims, I couldn't find many books or journals on this topic. I wanted to know if conversion to Islam really changes a person's mindset and creates a new (hybrid) identity and what are the challenges associated with it. Another equally important reason was my own interest to learn what makes converts like John Walker Lindh (the ‘American Taliban’ captured in Afghanistan in 2001) and Ismail Royer (a member of the Virginia Jihad Network who is still in prison) turn to extremism. This was both strange and shocking for me to learn that Virginia Jihad Network's primary aim was to recruit people for fighting in Muslim lands especially Kashmir. This came as a surprise because Kashmir is more a domestic political issue than a global religious one.

## **PROFESSIONAL COMPONENT**

I am basically a photographer who wants to tell most of his stories through pictures. In this case also, I chose to visually document the lives of American Muslim converts and show how they create a balance between their past as well as present- social and cultural relationship with the members of the community they once belonged to and the one they have embraced. This includes their family, friends, colleagues and other people in both environments. I wonder how easy or difficult it is for a convert to live among his/her previous family and still adhere to his own distinct new religious and social identity.

The professional component of my project would not be just a visual documentation of my subjects. I believe this project could act as a stepping-stone toward achieving my goal of being a conflict photographer. There are many reasons.

For an international student like me, working on a photographic project in US is difficult because of the differences in culture and lifestyle. I come from a conservative society that has different norms of behavior and culture. This project would demand a long-term relationship and interaction with my subjects I know nothing about. The fact that their culture, lifestyle and norms of social interaction are different from mine will be the biggest challenge for me. I am sure that I would eventually be facing similar challenges in different parts of the world where I would work as a conflict photographer. So this project would not only help me producing an important piece of work but act as a crash course for achieving my short-term goal. This project, I believe, will help me in adjusting in a socially, culturally and politically different environment, which is a pre-requisite for working as a conflict photographer in an unfamiliar place.

Finally, I hope to make this project as a part of the book that I am planning to get published. This would include different themes related to conflict, society and culture. The book would be a contribution to my academic endeavors that, I hope, would eventually help me in becoming a successful photography teacher.

This is the main reason why both my Professional and Analysis components are focused on a similar theme but different subjects. This will help me differentiate between my professional skills component and analysis component. Both my Analysis component and professional skills component will have three subjects each. This will help me to correlate the results obtained during professional skills documentation and data obtained through interviews in the analysis component of my research.

I will be working in and around Columbia. In case there is any difficulty finding enough subjects in Columbia, I would travel to Joplin, St. Louis and Kansas City. In case of access issues etc., I may also go to Chicago or Detroit.

### **Weekly Field Reports**

I will prepare weekly reports to keep my committee members updated about my progress. This could be done by sending them emails or starting a password-protected blog. I would prefer a blog and an email reminder every week immediately after I update it. I will be submitting my weekly reports to my committee members- Professor David Rees (Committee Chair), Professor Rita Reed and Dr. Keith Greenwood. I also plan to meet my committee members in person once a month for more interactive guidance and suggestions. I am planning to start working before the second week of January 2014.

## **Identification of subjects**

The subjects will be chosen according to the following parameters.

- Converted after 9/11.
- Converted from Christianity.
- Age: Between 18 and 40.
- Two males and one female

I have not identified my subjects yet, however, I am in close contact with two Muslim converts who have agreed to offer help in identifying appropriate subjects for this project. I have been in contact with Abdur Rehman, a convert who has been living in Columbia for nearly a year. He has several contacts through which I hope to find some of my subjects. Another person is Michael Dillon, who converted in June this year. Aside from being a subject himself, he has a few contacts of other new Muslims. Moreover, I plan to use contacts from the Columbia mosque to identify subjects. After the subjects have been identified, I will have an informal conversation with them making them understand the various aspects of this project.

## **Timeline**

Though I will start working on this project in January, I plan to spend the second half of December collecting information and contacts of my possible subjects.

Start Date: 13 January 2014

End Date: 21 April 2014

January

- Identify subjects and get their contacts
- Fix meetings – face-to-face and/ or online to assess which of them are appropriate for this project.
- Begin photographing the first round of pictures

- Write filed notes

February

- Continue documenting visual stories following the subjects to their home, work place etc.
- Preparing for a rough edit after every shoot
- Start interviewing subjects
- Meet with Committee Chair and other members.
- Continue writing filed notes

March

- Continue shooting
- Begin working on edits
- Make work in progress prints to show to the Committee Chair and other members

April

- Final round of photographing
- Making Final Edits
- Complete the Professional Analysis component writing part and put it together with Professional skills component in an appropriate and appealing manner.
- 

### **Project Presentation**

I plan to present the professional skills component in still image photo story format with background information on each story. This completed professional skills component will have at least three (3) individual photo stories each containing not less than seven photographs with captions.

## **ANALYSIS COMPONENT**

### **1. Statement of Topic and Research Question**

Islam is the fastest growing religion in United States. Muslims across the United States come from a variety of ethnic, cultural, and geographic backgrounds. No other country in the world shows such diversity in the Muslim community. In this diverse community, converts have become a statistically significant segment of the American society to an extent that seriously impacts their practice of Islam and their identity.

The study will explore the effects of a post-9/11 climate, and how American Muslim define themselves amid a constant bombardment of unfavorable media messages about their faith and experiences related to their conversion to Islam and their sense of Americanism. Additionally, this study will provide insight into the forces that influence these converts' self-identification before and after their conversion to Islam within the larger U.S. community as well as within the American Muslim community.

I believe that this study will be able to offer some insightful ideas for journalists to understand what effect media has in shaping people's identities. It will help them play a positive role in the society and prevent their fellow citizens from becoming victims of identity crisis.

This research would also be valuable to anyone who currently works with or hopes to work with Muslims within an American context. It would be indispensable for those who may want to look deeply into Muslim-American relationship in various aspects ranging from War on Terror to Middle East Policy. It could help journalists to report on such issues with a more objective way of looking at this relationship without seeing the names 'American' and 'Muslim' as two innately conflicting terms. Finally and most importantly, this study could form a basis for further research on the "Radicalization and the development of anti-national tendencies among young American Muslim converts

and the factors associated with it”, which seems to have extreme political and social significance.

In the context of above information, I propose the following research question:

***RQ 1: What role has American media’s representation of Islam played in the identity formation of American Muslim Converts?***

To answer this question, the present study will provide qualitative data that will illustrate the processes, decisions, and social factors involved in developing a highly distinct identity among Muslim converts in America.

To find the answers to these questions, this study will try to focus on finding the answers to following smaller questions and gather extensive information to have a deep understanding of the identity problem of Muslim converts:

1. What are the issues and problems facing converts to Islam in the context of their distinct identity?
2. What kind of relationship do Muslim converts have with other Muslims and non-Muslims?
3. What roles do Muslim converts play with the Muslim community and within the wider American society.
4. Despite being Americans, does their Muslim identity pose a threat to their communities?
5. How Muslim converts take American media’s portrayal of Islam?
6. At a time when there is a deep identity crisis in Americans who are born Muslims, how difficult it is for converts to find an identity within such a community.

## **2.Theoretical Framework**

### **Introduction**

Since 9/11, the number of Muslims in America has increased up to 67%. The data released from 2010 U.S. Religion Census shows Islam was the fastest growing religion in America in the first decade of the 21st century. According to a 2011 Pew Research, 20% of the Muslims in America are converts.

New Muslims face a variety of issues in adapting to the new religion involving both practice and percepts - dress, changing food habits, dealing with daily family life and adapting to the new environment are some of the challenges they face. People who convert to Islam in America acquire an identity that puts them in the fold of minority within a minority. But media's negative coverage and the subsequent prejudice against Muslims after 9/11 seems to be one of the most significant challenges and to explore how these challenges create a wedge between their American and Muslim identities is my primary reason for my interest in undertaking this study. There is a great paucity of important works on Muslim converts and their identity problems and challenges.

The media is an extremely important social agent with the power to influence perceptions. Its influence can seriously impact on minority groups implying that they hold 'alien' characteristics, which do not correspond with the values and ethos of mainstream America. The following question provides a framework for this research study.

**How media's representation of Islam influences identity formation in American Muslim converts.**

Through this research, I seek to explore the experience of American Muslim converts on how the majority culture and popular media have affected these converts' self-perceptions and influenced their cultural, social and political identity. Does the popular representation of Islam in the media and the way news about Muslims is framed create a confrontation between their Islamic values and American identity; and how they perceive it from the viewpoint of being new to the Islamic faith. Finally where does a Muslim convert find him/herself in the context of “us” and “them”.

The purpose of this study is to document and analyze the experiences of a group of young Muslim Americans who converted to Islam after September 11, 2001. This study will try to explore the process of identity transformation in response to the news coverage about Muslims in America.

### **The Theory of Framing**

There is a strong relationship between news coverage and the media agenda, and a theory that comes into place is framing. Framing is the way in which information is presented to its audiences. Framing involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue. Goffman (1974, p.21) first developed the concept of framing as a form of communication and defined it as a “schemata of interpretation” that allows individuals to “locate, perceive, identify and label” occurrences or life experiences.

Entman(1993) modernized this commonly quoted definition by stating that “to frame a communicating text or message is to promote certain facets of a ‘perceived reality’ and make them more salient in such a way that endorses a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or a treatment recommendation”

(p. 51). A frame, according to him, is “determined in large part by its outcome or effect”  
(p.52)

Today, media effects can be characterized as “social constructionism” (Scheufele, 1999, p. 103). Mass media constructs social reality by “framing images of reality in a predictable and patterned way” (Mc- Quail, 1994, p. 331). According to Gamson and Modigliani (1989), “Media discourse is part of a process by which individuals construct meaning, and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists develop and crystallize meaning in public discourse”.

Tankard & Severin (2001) define a frame as an idea arrangement for news contents that provide context and suggestion of the issues that need to be given extra attention through selection, pressure, no involvement and elaboration. Theoretical foundation of framing theory asserts that the media tell people both what is important and how to think about it (Brown, 2002). Framing is built on the assumption that how an issue is depicted in news reports can have an influence over how it is taken by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Reese (2001) says that framing deals with the way the media portrays news. He explains that issues are organized in such a way that they guide policy and opinion (D’Angelo, 2010, p.19). This creates potential problems for many religious and ethnic groups and the way they are perceived.

The role of media is to shape opinions and present a particular version as reality. Media are also believed and expected to portray a fair picture on any issues occurring both at local and international level. However, in portraying Islam especially after the September 11 attacks, a number of researchers found that American media tend to negatively depict Islam by associating it with terrorism (Winegar, 2008; Gerges, 2003).

Barker and Galasinski (2001 p.7) argue, “Texts are unable to police the meanings to be constructed from them.” The representation emphasized stereotypes and cast Muslims and Islam in an unfavorable light. Among the most commonly used frames in the media, when reporting about Muslims, we can talk of the emancipation frame, which is used to show the backward nature of Muslim culture and beliefs, and the victimization frame, especially for Muslim women (Vliegthart & Roggeband 2007). Another broad frame used to show Islam as a violent religion is the depiction of “Islam being a threat”, and the problems its Muslims create in the West by taking part in terrorist activities, (Manning 2004, p. 45)

Framing is quite significant in this research, as it will help understand how media is perceived by converts and how does it impact their life before and after their conversion. Framing therefore will be useful to see how the particular representation of Muslims affects converts’ identification with Islamic faith and culture which in turn gives birth to a person’s social identity which according to Tajfel (1978, p. 63) is “that part of an individual’s self concept which derives from his/her] knowledge of membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership”. Societies are patterned into numerous groups and these groups produce complex intersections of racial, ethnic, religious, national, gender-based and class-based belonging (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Membership is often associated with a lifestyle, values and expectations of ways of living, cooking, dressing, talking, relating etc. Identity is created through and against the views of others, and so a minority’s identity construction is always a response to how they have been stereotyped by the majority. (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Herriot, 2007).

### **3.Literature Review**

#### **Media and Muslims before and after 9/11**

The consequences of 9/11 on Muslims in the United States have been dramatic. It was perhaps the single most important turning point in the experience of American Muslims. Apart from its negative consequences on their daily lives, the media's coverage of Islam reached an unprecedented intensity. (Yenigun, 2004, p. 40)

The history of negative representation of Muslims in American media goes much beyond 9/11. Said (1981) while writing about Iranian hostage crisis of 1979 points out that the American media has not be able to explain clearly the Arab and Muslim world to the American people. He argues that “Muslims and Arabs are essentially covered, discussed, apprehended either as suppliers of oil or as potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab- Muslim life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Islamic world (p, 26).”

The negative image of Muslims has been reinforced for decades through movies and television. Shaheen (2009) while examining over 100 Hollywood movies sees a consistent pattern of hateful stereotypes. He writes that Hollywood has produced about 1,000 movies in which Muslim Arabs have been excessively stereotyped and vilified “that exceeded negative images of Blacks, Native Americans, Asians, Hispanics and Jews” (p.12).

Depictions of Muslims in both the entertainment and news media have emphasized their hostile intentions (Karim 2003; Said 1997; Shaheen 2009). Sheikh, Price, and Oshagan (1995) studied that news stories about Muslims repeatedly involved

crises, war, and conflict frequently using the terms included terms such as “fundamentalist”, “terrorist”, “radical,” or “extremist.”

Armstrong (2000) goes much earlier in time to find the roots of negative imagery about Muslims, which, according to her, lie far deeper. She notes that ever since the Crusades, the western world developed a stereotypical and distorted image of Islam, which they regarded as the enemy of civilization. (p. 179)

After 9/11 which proved to be a decisive moment in both American history and the way Muslims began to be perceived, media not only reflected similar limitations and weaknesses as Said argues, but went too further in portraying Islam in a negative light. (Amiri, 2013, p. 3)

According to Orbe & Harris (2008), after the September 11 attacks, terrorists have been associated with Islam and named as Muslim fundamentalists or ‘Islamists’ which has increased some prejudices, discriminations against and attacks on Muslims. Lewis (2005, p 24) mentions that at the simplest level, the September 11 attacks produced a dramatic increase in the media coverage of Islam and Muslims, most of which was negative.

Severin and Tankar (1997) argue that repeated coverage of Muslims as terrorists in the media leads to the belief that they are actually terrorists. Thus, hatred and discrimination derives from that source against all Muslims. The term Islamophobia became popular in media circles and was constantly used to describe increased isolation of Muslims living in America. This term, which many regard as highly politicized, began to denote the systematic discrimination against both Muslims and Islam. According to

Sajid (2005, p 9), Islamophobia is concerned with culturalism and identity politics and has recently broadened in reference to ostracism suffered by the Muslims globally.

Here again media is usually blamed for the creation of a particular image of Muslims. Awass (1996) argued that news coverage on Islam was offensive and associated it with fundamentalism and terrorism. He also concluded that Islam was repeatedly presented as a threat to American security. Jackson (2010) while looking at negative stereotypical portrayals of Islam and Muslims in the U.S. media points out that the most common representation of Muslims since 9/11 has been of a “scary, shady character: an unlikable, intolerable enemy of society” (p.9).

### **Muslim Identity in Crisis**

Yenigun (2004) examines that one of the less studied effects of media is the impact on the identities and well being of Muslims living in America. Before September 11, 2001, Muslims were stereotyped in relation to being Arabs or anyone who could mistakenly be associated with Middle Easterners, such as Pakistanis and South Asians. Now this new wave of representation does not simply follow the decades-old pattern. It also includes new actors in the American public sphere - American Muslims. (p. 39, 40)

Sirin and Fine (2007) also note that the events of 9/11 have had a decidedly negative effect on American Muslims who apart from being themselves under threat were also considered as a threat to the dominant culture. They write that not only did Muslim Americans - like all Americans - fear for their lives; but they were also forced to deal with being perceived as a threat by other Americans. “Since 9/11 ‘they’ – Muslim

Americans – have been watched, detained, deported, and invaded in order to protect and save ‘us’”(p, 151).

Given the importance of media as a socializing agent, it is important to understand how media might influence the perceptions of Muslims and non-Muslims on several important dimensions. Ahmad (2006, p 981) writes that media discourses can fuel hostility and marginalization amongst Muslims. “The power of stereotypes coming from the media, and the impact they have upon those who feel directly targeted, should not be underestimated. Given the media's impact on the views and attitudes of the public, we should not underestimate the power that this anti-Muslim media bias has on both Muslims and non-Muslims.”(p, 981)

Media portrayals of Muslims as the “terrorists” are likely to reduce the acceptance and inclusion of Muslim-Americans within the American national identity by Non-Muslims. It can create various intergroup problems (like in terms of “us” versus “them”) between Muslim and non-Muslim Westerners (Nacos & Torres- Reyna, 2007).

Sirin and Fine (2007) argue that the impact of living in this kind of limited space, which creates the double bind of being threatened and being perceived as threatening, is grave. According to them, cracks appear in the fragile lives of young people when social and cultural identities are questioned by the dominant discourse. “These young Muslims live at the ‘hyphen’ (p, 156) “and draw pictures of binaried identities and loss. “ (p, 157)”.

Maira (2008) notes that after 9/11, questions of citizenship, racialization, and religious and national identities have taken on new, urgent meanings for Muslims living in the United States” ( p. 15). According to Brinson (2010), many barriers exist to a

healthy balance of acculturation and identity for Muslim Americans in post 9/11 environment. They may perceive a need to either further assimilate into the United States culture and shed their culture or religious identity out of fear, or in contrast to this, further distance themselves from the majority group in order to show pride of differentiation and group solidarity.

This is likely to influence, as Cainkar (2004) argues, Muslim-Americans' perceptions of the compatibility or conflict between their two identities. For Muslim youth living in the US, negotiating their identities across different cultural territories became decidedly more challenging after the events of 9/11 and their subsequent media portrayal.

The nature of dual identities has contributed to the desire of Muslims to connect with immigrants who share a Muslim background. Sirin, Bikmen, Mir, Fine, Zaal, and Katsiaficas (2008) suggest the emergence of a community of Muslim-identified American residents and citizens stemming from post-9/11 events: namely the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Membership in this Muslim-identified community predominantly comprises those from Muslim-majority countries. Being Muslim is their common identity. The signature term "Muslim-American" is used in the dominant discourse to view a number of discreet populations as possessing a single monolithic identity. Typically in U.S. society we do not hyphenate populations according to religion, yet using Muslim-American is a convenient way to group individuals into an imagined community. The authors insist that the study of a "Muslim-American" identity, therefore, is not necessarily a study of religiosity or ethnicity, but rather is a study of an emerging collective identity, which is influenced not only by religious background, but also by a

specifiable historic (i.e., attacks of 9/11) and political (i.e., war on terror, USA Patriot Act) contexts. (Sirin et al., 2008, p. 262). According to Sirin et al. forging identities as parallel, integrated, or conflicted is a developmental task of hyphenated, Muslim-American youth.

Despite there being seven million Muslims within the United States, there is a perception of Muslim-Americans not being “quite American” (Haddad, 2004). Khan (2001) seems to justify this perception by stating, “‘It boils down to the difference in which the new generation of Muslims is constructing their Islamic identity,’ he says, ‘as opposed to the manner in which their parents have constructed their Islamic identity. And the significant difference is that the newer generation is struggling to accommodate their American-ness (saying): ‘I am a Muslim. I am also an American.’”(p. 13)

Because of the intense backlash U.S. Muslim youth struggle to embody the multiple identities associated with religion, culture, nation of origin, and gender (Sarroub, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2007). Such identifications at times co-mingle and at other times clash. Negotiating multiple identities creates tensions reflecting the inner turmoil associated with questions about who one is and where one “comes from.”

American Muslims are grappling with these issues. Some believe the answer is isolation from all non- Muslims. Others either shroud their identity or abandon the religion altogether. However, as Smith (1999, p 178) observes: “Neither isolation nor absorption is generally seen as a goal in the conversations among Muslims who are searching for guidelines and principles that can speak to the majority of the members of the complex body that is American Islam . . . A major task for Muslims, many believe, is to clarify what matters are flexible and may be reinterpreted in the Western context and

what issues are so clearly part of God's design for human life and response that they can't be renegotiated.

### **American Muslim Converts**

One of the most significant parts of all American Muslims are converts. A review of the literature revealed that there is a limited amount of research work done on converts and the challenges they face in the wake of significant happenings in America during the last decade.

People who convert to Islam in America acquire an identity that puts them in the fold of minority within a minority. In the context of media's representation of Islam and the similar patterns of reaction to it as other American Muslims, some sort of identity problems is bound to creep in. How American converts compromise between being loyal Americans and devout Muslims at the same time? Do they see themselves as a distinct part of the American society or as a small fragment of the larger Muslim society which Wadud (2003, p. 270) calls 'Muslim-Americans' rather than American Muslims.

There may be various factors that put these converts on either side of the divide. Some tend to become Muslims and Americans while others identify more with Islam than their American identity. Afridi (2001) argues that Issues of identity and ethnically bound political agendas also hinder American Muslim converts as they seek to move forward on a common set of ideas and issues that would strengthen the community at large. Khan (2000) states that American Muslims converts are allowing the identity politics of the Muslim world to fragment them into various groups (91).

Conversion to Islam requires just a single statement of faith, but the newly faithful must then choose among a universe of competing interpretations of Islam, many overtly

political and easily available on the Internet. Conversion is not only a momentary experience but also an ongoing process of religious, social and cultural transformation. (Van 2006, p 3.)

New Muslims face a variety of issues in adapting the new religion involving both practice and percepts. Dress, changing food habits like not drinking alcohol or eating pork, dealing with daily family life and adapting to the new environment are some of the basic practical problems faced by converts. (Haddad, 1986 p. 8)

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#### **4. Methodology**

The study of the impact of media on American Muslim converts and its subsequent influence on their identity formation can be best understood by looking at the social and cultural issues they face.

Many scholars say that American Muslim converts are marginalized in a double way; they have achieved a minority status within a minority, because they are Muslims living in a dominant Christian society and are also a distinct group within the Muslim community. Some others believe that in an environment where Muslims are seen with suspicion and the way media portrays them, Muslim converts struggle to stick to a particular identity. Do these converts actually identify with these standpoints? These assumptions confirm the importance of a methodological approach, where they are not

just studied as statistics but rather as a phenomenon that needs to be explored and understood (Soskolne and Gibson, 2003, p. 4)

This cannot be done fruitfully without listening to their stories in which they express their own voice. That is why the methodology that I will be using in this research is qualitative interviews. More specifically, I have chosen open-ended unstructured qualitative interviews because they provide a greater depth than other types of interviewing (Frey and Fontana, 1994, p. 361).

An open ended qualitative approach can be a helpful tool when trying to grasp the social realities of individuals. Zhang and Wildemuth (2006) state that unstructured interview technique was in fact developed in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology as a method to elicit people's social realities. In literature, the term is used interchangeably with the terms like informal conversational interview (p.1).

Punch (1998) described unstructured interviews as a way to understand the complex behavior of people without invading their space, which might limit the field of inquiry.

Unstructured interview is defined in different ways. Minichiello (1990) defines unstructured interviews as interviews in which "neither the question nor the answer categories are predetermined. They rely on social interaction between the researcher and informant to extract information."

Based on these lines, I want to follow the interviewees' narration and generate questions spontaneously based on their responses and proceed like a friendly, non-threatening conversation. This is what Patton (2002) calls "relying entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction." It, however,

doesn't imply that interviewing your subjects without a prior preparation or knowledge is recommended. Just because unstructured interviews don't use predefined questions doesn't mean that they are random and non-directive. It is accepted that the structure of the interview can be loosely guided by a list of questions, which Minichiello et al (1990) call agenda.

Unstructured interviews cannot be started without detailed knowledge and preparation, if the researcher is planning to achieve deep insights into people's lives (Patton, 2002). They tend to be more informal, open ended, flexible and free flowing. Questions are not pre-set, although there are usually certain topics that the researchers wish to cover. This gives the interview some structure and direction. The researcher has to keep in mind the study's purpose and the general scope of the issues that he or she would like to discuss in the interview (Fife, 2005).

However, it is extremely important to be cautious in directing the interview too much toward researcher's own bias. The researcher's control over the conversation is intended to be minimal, but nevertheless the researcher will try to encourage the interviewees to relate experiences and perspectives that are relevant to the problems of interest to the researcher (Burgess, 1982).

Unstructured interviews are an extremely useful method for "developing an understanding of an as-of-yet not fully understood or appreciated culture, experience, or setting." (Fontana and Frey, 1994)

While doing her master's theses at NLA – School of Religion, Education and Intercultural Studies, Elisabeth Harnes (2009) used this type of interview, researching on the conversion stories of African-American Muslim converts. Since the topic of my

research is similar and keeping in view the narratives I am expected to get vis-à-vis social, cultural and political experiences of American Muslim converts, this kind of methodology has a great significance for this project . She found this method useful to understand the placement of individual within an ongoing and developing social structure.

My interview subjects would be Americans between 18 and 40 years of age who converted to Islam after 9/11. These will include both male and female with more males than females. This is because of the access issues arising due to religious constraints. Though I am myself a Muslim and will have a certain advantage in terms of connections and access, most Muslim females tend not to talk to strangers. The total number of people chosen for this study would not be more than ten and less than six. Ideally the subjects would be located in and around Columbia. There is a possibility that it might be difficult to find a good number of converts for my research in Columbia. In that case, I plan to identify subjects for my research in Joplin, St. Louis and Kansas City.

Because all the subjects I would be interviewing are different people with distinct personalities and most likely have had entirely different reasons to convert, it is more useful not to restrict myself to preconceived questions. So there would not be specific questions to ask. However, the interview will focus on the following random points.

8. The reasons for conversion
9. Opposing forces (social, cultural, even psychological) that seemed to prevent their conversion.
10. The impact of already stereotyped image of Islam by media and Muslims on their conversion

11. Future apprehensions just before their conversion (of being ostracized from the community or hated for belonging to the same religion as terrorists)
12. How did they receive media messages about Muslims before and after conversion?
13. What is their identity and has it changed since they converted.
14. Do they identify with the Muslims around the world living at places that are in active or passive conflict with the Western powers?
15. Any internal conflicts they experience as Muslim and American at the same time
16. And finally, do they feel any tendency for being radicalized due to their religious beliefs at some point of time in future.

Most of the interaction and interviews are expected to take place at the respective homes of my subjects. Another important place is the mosque. I also hope to spend time with these converts and interview at the Islamic Center in Columbia.

Since I will be conducting unstructured interviews, I am well aware of the challenges that may arise during the course of my research. Unstructured interviews often contain open-ended questions and informal discussions, which sometimes may stretch into unexpected directions. While it is possible take notes to document subjects' answers, it is difficult to focus on conducting an interview while noting down details. This approach will result in poor notes and also detract from the development of rapport between interviewer and interviewee. Development of rapport and dialogue is essential in unstructured interviews. (Fontana and Frey, 1994)

So it would be best to tape-record and later transcribe them for analysis. This will allow me to focus on interaction with the participants and concentrate on what they are saying.

### **Project Timeframe**

The analysis part of the project has similar time frame as that of the professional skills component. It will begin on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2014 and end in April, 2014.

### **IRB Approval**

This project is a professional analysis as opposed to classic research. In that case the approval of the International Review Board (IRB) is not needed.

### **Prospective Publications**

For my professional skills component, my target publications are

1. British Journal of Photography.
2. News Photographer Magazine.
3. New York Times Lens blog, India.

For the analysis component, *Columbia Journalism Review* is a possible option.

AFP and two US based magazines namely *Islamica* and *The Islamic Monthly* seem interested to publish it as a series.