

Discourses We Live By

Narratives of Educational
and Social Endeavour

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19. Uncovering Habitus in Life Stories of Muslim Converts

Simone R. Rasmussen

Simone R. Rasmussen discusses the stories of two young Danish women who decided to become Muslims, attracted to the ethos of care for all that was apparent in a non-radicalized community. She shows how their narratives reflect but contrast with established work that claims that those accustomed to strong doctrines within Catholicism and Protestantism find it easy to convert to Islam but choose stricter branches of the faith.

Conversion accounts have always been the key source to understand the processes of conversion. The main question asked by conversion researchers has therefore been: how best to approach the accounts to be able to understand the convert's motives and individual experiences, rather than gaining a fixed story that reflects how the senior followers of a particular religion wish it to appear (Beckford, 1978; Hindmarsh, 2014; Snow & Machalek, 1984; Taylor, 1976; Warburg, 2007). I believe that by taking a narrative approach to these accounts we gain a fuller picture of the conversion and a better understanding of the individual's motives, rather than focusing on the conversion itself.

Through a narrative approach (Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Kim, 2016) and an analysis that draws on Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), it is my aim in this chapter to examine the life stories of two Danish converts to Islam who, previously, were non-religious. I am interested to see if these converts draw on forms of habitus similar to those of previously religious converts, who were the focus of other earlier studies (Shanneik, 2011; Roy, 2004).

In 2011, Yafa Shanneik wrote an article based on her findings from the narratives of twenty-one female converts from Catholicism to an orthodox branch of Islam. Her research examined how Catholicism was present in the converts' lives before their conversion to Islam. She found that the converts who participated in her study had what could be described as a Catholic habitus (Inglis, 1988). According to Shanneik it was this Catholic habitus that drew the converts towards the religious strand of Salafi Islam, a strand that is known to be particularly strict and dogmatic in relation to adherence to scriptures (Shanneik, 2011; Wiktorowicz, 2006). Shanneik argues that Salafi Islam was particularly appealing for the previously Catholic converts because it draws on the same structures and dispositions as the Catholic habitus.

In her article, Shanneik refers to Olivier Roy, who has drawn similar conclusions about converts from radical Protestantism. Olivier Roy's research showed how radical Protestants also seem to be drawn to Salafi Islam when they choose to convert to Islam. He states that the radicalization, which is often linked to Salafi Islam, should not be seen as a sudden shift in the convert's worldview, but as a continuation of the convert's previous religious habitus (Roy, 2004).

Through their research, Roy and Shanneik seem to have identified a connection between having previously had a strict dogmatic religious habitus, whether Protestant or Catholic, and being drawn towards Salafi Islam. I will follow their analytical path but in a slightly different way, namely by examining previously non-religious individuals who convert, to study their perception of Islam and to see whether a similar continuation of habitus can be established. Before introducing the stories, I briefly explain the Bourdieusian approach to habitus as a sense of rationality, being a result of the internalization of external structures that make us who we are (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992); our individual worldviews, practices and understandings. Bourdieu claimed that, from their habitus, individuals develop dispositions that shape how they exist in the world. Habitus tend to reproduce itself even if the contexts change (Bourdieu, 1977). Therefore, in this chapter I will pay attention to the structures glimpsed in the converts' narratives, to ask: are the converts' dispositions, moulded throughout their lives, reproduced in the religious life they live in today? In other words: has the habitus found a habitat (Bourdieu, 2000)?

A word is also needed about the history of conversion research, as this topic is significant to the final discussion on discourses. Historically, the discipline of conversion research was started by the American Psychologist Society in the early eighteenth century. The psychological angle to the subject was widely researched and conversion was viewed from a range of different psychological theories and perspectives. Most psychological conversion research viewed religious conversion to be a result of an existentialist or traumatic crisis that the individual had experienced earlier on in life, and therefore conversion was understood as a break with an unsatisfactory past (Damsager & Mogensen, 2007b). The American psychologist Lewis R. Rambo (1993) presented one of the best-known theories of conversion. He argued that we should view conversion as having seven stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences (Rambo, 1993, s.17). Later a broader spectrum of academics, in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, began researching the subject and one can argue that the most important shift in the research of conversion is to be found in how the convert is viewed. Damsager and Mogensen (2007b) show how the research of conversion changes from viewing the convert as a passive victim who is searching to escape the past, to viewing the converts as co-players who actively turn towards the new religious environments and who also seem to contribute to those environments.

I interviewed two Danish converts who did not describe themselves as religious before their conversion. In the following section you can read their stories.

Aisha's Story — An Aspiration to Find Inner Peace

Aisha is a twenty-seven-year-old woman who grew up in a nuclear family as the oldest of three siblings. Her mother works as a self-employed alternative practitioner, who helped her clients cleanse their bodies and spirits to either make or keep them healthy. Aisha's mother very much believed in the association of the bodily and spiritual world, and patients came to her when the world's doctors had given up on them. Aisha's father was a well-known ceramic artist, but he only worked in Aisha's early childhood. They lived in a single-family house in a Copenhagen suburb with a garden — small enough to feel safe

but big enough to play hide-and-seek in. Aisha and her family lived in the same family home until she moved away to live on her own. Even though Aisha moved away from home, she never lived very far away from her family; she stayed in the vicinity, near enough to drop by for a meal or a cup of coffee. Aisha's family is small; her grandparents died early and there were some conflicts between her parents and her aunt, so they did not stay in contact with her. Aisha does not remember the conflicts but says that she never lacked adults or meaningful relations in her childhood. She enjoys family-like relationships with some of her mother's best friends, whom she calls aunts. It means a lot to Aisha's family to have a strong bond within the family and they value being able to spend time together in the holidays and at weekends.

The family were vegetarians, or at least almost; sometimes they ate lamb because it was her father's favourite food, but they never ate pork or beef. Aisha remembers how her friends in school stared at her packed lunch because it was full of tofu and other meat substitutes, and when she ate at her friends' houses, they found it very odd that she did not eat meat. She attended a Rudolf Steiner school until ninth grade, and she describes it as a cultural shock to face the non-Steiner educational system when she attended upper-secondary school. She had never had to deal with grades in her years at the Rudolf Steiner school and suddenly she was evaluated in terms of a number — a single number to describe everything about her. One of the things she loved the most about the Rudolf Steiner school was the 'attestation' each student was given every second year. The attestation was a two-page document recording the student's social, artistic, methodological and academic development. Looking back Aisha does not think that the Rudolf Steiner school supported her sufficiently well in academic terms, but she believes that the teaching there was significantly important for the development of a pupil as a whole person. Aisha finished upper-secondary school but worked for more than five years afterwards before attending a vocational training school, where she is studying now. Aisha is not sure if the long gap between upper-secondary school and her present studies stems from her academic struggles to get through upper-secondary school, but she does know that she is not a fan of the Danish educational system and its monotonous focus on professional competence.

When it comes to religion, Aisha describes her family as cultural Christians. They celebrated Christmas, as most Danish families do, and they had a creative Easter tradition, where they painted eggs and decorated an Easter tree. The traditions centred around one thing, namely being together as a family and having a good time together. Her parents were baptized and confirmed as Christians — in the Lutheran Church, confirmation is the symbolic affirmation of the baptism. They were also married in the Church, but neither Aisha nor her siblings were baptized. Her parents always said that they would not make that choice for her, but they would support whatever choice she decided to make. They said that the most important thing they could teach her was to be good to the people and things around her. Aisha considers that her parents had some sort of faith and she knows that her mother believes in angels and some kind of spiritual world.

Aisha's father was ill most of Aisha's life and died when Aisha was twenty-two years old. He was in and out of hospitals for most of her life and therefore she learned at an early stage to take responsibility for herself and her younger siblings. She describes her father as a positive and happy man. His illness was something that was just there, something that they sometimes had to face, but it was never a predominant part of their lives.

At the time of her father's death, Aisha lived in her own apartment and worked as a sales coordinator in a fairly large company. She spent her spare time hanging out with her friends, attending fitness classes, shopping and travelling. She describes how she found herself entrenched in a repetitive daily pattern: she got up in the morning, went to work, worked, left work, went to the gym, came back, ate supper, and went to bed. She just longed for the vacation so she could travel, or a weekend so she could hang out with her friends at the café. She felt herself to be living in a void. Sometimes the emptiness could be filled with travelling and shopping, but before she knew it, the feeling was back, and another trip or shopping spree was needed. After her father's death, she started a spiritual pursuit to find out what might have happened to him after he died. She started her search with Christianity, but never found satisfactory answers. She started discussing the issue with her friends — among these were also Muslim friends — and this was the start of her exploration of Islam. One year later, she converted;

two years later, she started wearing a headscarf; and three-and-a-half years later, she changed her name.

Today Aisha is married to Martin, who is also a Muslim convert. They met through mutual friends after they had both converted. Aisha spends her time attending Islamic teachings in the mosque, having conversations with new converts, aspiring to become a Muslim teacher and to be the best Muslim she can be. To her, Islam is about inclusiveness, spirituality and aspiring to be a good and faithful person. When she talks about Islam to new or potential converts, she tells them that Islam is divided into three parts: faith, rituals and spirituality — and to be a good Muslim you must possess all three. She tells them that it makes no sense to pray if you do not have the right intentions and it makes no sense to do things that hurt other people.

Aisha prays five times a day; she wears a headscarf; she goes to the mosque at least once a week; she does not eat during the day during Ramadan; but on Christmas Eve she gathers with her family to celebrate. However, her intention on Christmas Eve is to be a good daughter and have a nice time with her family, which is easily combined with her Islamic faith, since Islam is all about being kind and treating other people well. She has found inner peace in her search to be a good Muslim, and in her inner journey, which she started with her conversion to Islam.

Laura's Story — A Peaceful and Normal Childhood, But...

Laura is twenty years old and she lives in a Copenhagen suburb with her mother, father and younger sister. Laura is a very beautiful girl who knows how to make her hair fall perfectly. She has this beautiful long curly dark hair and her makeup is spotless and looks really natural. Her upbringing was peaceful and, she says, completely normal — but she has an older cousin, Kevin, who is an alcoholic and now suffers from alcohol-related dementia. Laura and her family live in a little red terraced house, with a beautiful enclosed garden where Laura and her younger sister often sit and enjoy the sun or play cards. Laura recalls summer mornings when her mother did her daily yoga and meditation in the garden before the rest of the house woke

up. Laura's mother has a spiritual side and loves to explore this by engaging in meditation in her spare time. Laura's father works as an administrator in the local municipality, while her mother is a teacher at the local school. They have lived in the same house for as long as Laura can remember and, to her, the house is the epitome of love and comfort. Laura has a large family; grandparents, cousins, uncles and aunts, who are all a part of her childhood memories. As a minor negative, Laura remembers that her parents told her that Kevin was often drunk, but actually, she did not spend much time with him and does not really remember him.

As a child, Laura attended many leisure time activities because this was very important to her mother, who believed that this was a good way to support children's development. Laura was especially fond of activities where she could express herself through her body and came to love singing and dancing. All in all, Laura comes from a very typical Danish nuclear family. It was a family maxim that there was no reason to engender disagreement because this might be hurtful to other people, so they were never allowed to discuss either religion or politics at the dinner table.

Laura's educational pathway was very straightforward. She went to the local public school and after her graduation she attended upper-secondary school. Now she is in her first year at university studying religion. School was never hard for her. She was no straight-A student, but she did well in most disciplines and had energy left over to participate in the social activities and hang out with her classmates. Laura's first interaction with religion, she recalls, was when she attended a weekly confirmation class at the local vicarage. Danish young people commonly go to such classes during seventh or eighth grade prior to confirming their baptism at a church ceremony. Laura never really gave much thought to what confirmation was beyond presents and a nice celebratory party. She does, however, remember a particular episode relating to confirmation class. On one occasion, one of her classmates — the only Muslim in her class — stood outside the vicarage waiting for the class to finish and the pastor asked the students what that Muslim boy was doing there and why he came to her house. Laura found the pastor's hostile attitude strange and unnecessary; the Muslim boy was their friend and he was just standing there waiting quietly.

However, once confirmation was over, Laura's social life became more sophisticated, a time of parties and drinking, and Laura certainly recalls taking part in these activities with her friends. Laura's life at that time consisted of school, fitness, friends, work and nights out in town with mojitos and beers. Laura dated a non-practising Muslim boy for a couple of months in ninth grade — but this was just a flirtation. In tenth grade, she started in a new class and came to make new friends. One of these was a Muslim girl who went to Islamic teachings once a week. Out of curiosity and because she wanted to spend time with her, Laura attended the teachings with her new friend. Here she got her first knowledge of Islam and its relationship to other religions and she found this very exciting. She was introduced to stories that they had never talked about or discussed in her family and to a forum where it was allowable to ask questions. When some of her other Muslim friends heard that she attended these classes, they made fun of her, saying: 'You could never be Muslim'. Laura was offended — who were they to judge her?

When she started upper-secondary school, she attended religious studies classes and the first year was horrible. There were no believers in her class, to her knowledge, and she found the dialogue about religion and especially Islam very demeaning. Her teacher directed them to a Salafi webpage and asked them to find answers to their questions on Islam there. Laura felt offended. In her second year, she had a new teacher, and this is where Laura first started to consciously reflect on religion. There was a moment, when she was sitting in a bus looking at the sunrise, when she was suddenly sure that there was something bigger than herself. During her second year in upper-secondary school Laura felt as if she was experiencing an identity crisis. Some days, after reading about Islam throughout the night, she felt ready to convert, but the next night she was out drinking mojitos, dancing and worrying about other people's opinions. This went on for almost a year and she spent long nights studying Islam. During her final exams Laura and one of her Christian friends decided to cut down on drinking and help each other withstand the pressure from the crowd when they went out with their classmates. Now she really wanted to convert and she fully accepted that she would not drink alcohol from that point.

She prayed in her own way for comfort when her last exam came around, and she did well. After her graduation she decided now was the time, although she still faced the fear that she did not know enough about Islam and was also afraid of her family's reaction. Laura joined numerous groups on Facebook to look for help and one Friday night in July, she said the Shahada — the Islamic confirmation of faith — aloud in her room. The day after she said her Shahada the family went on a summer camping trip together and Laura decided not to tell anyone before she had her official conversion. For months after the holiday, she sought an official conversion and searched the internet extensively for help. She was never afraid to contact people, because she was sure that they would give her a good reception if they were Muslims.

She had to look for a long time before she found someone who represented the 'pure' Islam that she sought; an Islam without hidden social or political agendas. She used her gut feeling to navigate safely through the websites. On finding an organization that represented her beliefs, she gave up the Facebook groups, and in November 2015 she said her Shahada in front of an Imam. She describes it as calm, peaceful and very much in line with her perception of Islam — a spiritual comfort zone in which she finds peace of mind and where the primary focus is to be good and respectful towards other people.

Laura wanted to tell her family right away, but she was afraid of what they would say. She felt terrible about keeping such a secret from them but one evening, three weeks after her official conversion, her mother jokingly asked her if she had converted to Islam. Laura looked her mother in the eye and nodded, after which her mother exclaimed 'you just did not do that' and they both started crying.

Laura still navigates instinctively among the different Islamic branches. She also decided not to wear a headscarf because she wants to be a good daughter — of whom her parents can be genuinely proud. She says that if it was only about her, then she would probably wear a scarf, but it is not only about her and she would never put her parents in a position where other people would think that they are bad parents just because she wants to wear a headscarf and make a public statement that she is Muslim.

What Kind of Muslim Are You?

Now, I will analyse the life stories through the concept of habitus as formulated by Bourdieu. To do this, I have chosen three focal points from the converts' lives before their conversion and three focal points from their lives as Muslims. I chose these focal points because they recur often in the interviews with Aisha and Laura, but also because comparable statements recur in similar interviews I did with other converts.

Life Before Islam

The focal points highlighted in this section are spirituality, respect for difference, and being good.

Spirituality

Spirituality is very much present in both of the converts' lives from an early point. Aisha's mother works as an alternative practitioner, believes in angels and tells her children that they must not lie because they will get black spots on their hearts and have inner diseases. Throughout her life, Aisha has been heavily confronted with the innerness of wellbeing, as she states:

People come to my mother, when all the world's doctors have been in contact with them, and they still feel bad; then my mother helps them get better.

In the way that Aisha talks about it, there is an implicit acceptance that inner balance is the answer to physical wellbeing. That illness can be cured or treated through inner balance is beyond doubt to Aisha.

Looking at Laura's life, spirituality is not explicit as it is in Aisha's case, but it is still present. Her mother practised meditation and yoga regularly throughout Laura's childhood and Laura remembers watching her mother find peace and practising relaxation through meditation. What is especially interesting concerning spirituality in Laura and Aisha's examples is that spirituality is the only part of Islam that their mothers accept and both Aisha and Laura use the 'language' of their childhoods to explain Islam to their mothers. Aisha states that:

I remember once, I talked to my mother of a lecture I attended in the mosque. It was about inner peace, which is a part of Islam I pay great attention to, and when we talked, she said, 'that is what I always told you, when you were children'.

Or as Laura says:

Once I told my mother that she could view the prayer as a five-times-a-day break, where I have time with God and myself — just like meditation. Now she does the same, not five times a day, but still. I tell myself that she got it from me.

Respect for Difference

Respect for difference is also fairly dominant in the stories of these two converts, although in different ways. Laura always saw herself as part of the norm in the neighbourhood she grew up in, and Aisha always felt a bit different because of the way the family lived. Laura states that 'I felt so sad, when they talked like that...' when she refers to how her classmates in upper-secondary school referred to religious people. She did not feel offended because she did not see herself as religious at that time, but she felt sad, because she thinks that: '...it is beautiful when we are different and when people find something that makes them happy'.

Aisha always felt a bit different in her childhood. She did not eat what her classmates ate, she went to a school other than the local one, and she had a lot of responsibility because of her father's illness. Consequently, when she left the Steiner School she did everything she could to be like her peers. She started to live a life like her friends: trips to cafés, travel, expensive shopping and workouts. However, the lifestyle of her friends did not satisfy her, and now she does not mind being different. But she also respects that other people might look at it differently. As she states, when referring to her family's reaction to her new Muslim name:

I respect that they use my old name, because that is natural to them and I have to respect that they view Islam and my change of name differently than I do.

Being Good

Being good is the third, and, in my opinion, most dominant principle of the two converts' lives. Aisha was not baptized because her parents thought that their children should decide for themselves and Aisha chose not to be baptized when she got older. When Aisha asked her parents why she was not baptized, they replied: 'It does not matter; the most important thing is to be good to yourself and others'.

In Laura's case, the goodness is reflected in her respect for other people and their choices. More than once, she talks about episodes in her childhood when she felt sad that people were treated badly, as when the pastor spoke unkindly about the Muslim boy waiting for the confirmation class to finish. Laura probably reacted to the pastor's remarks because she comes from a home where they were taught to be quiet rather than cause a row or be unkind, where contentious topics were banned at dinner time to ensure a cheerful atmosphere with room for everybody.

I group these three focal points in what I call a *humanistic habitus*. My definition is based on a rather literal meaning of the word, namely that one cherishes the individual's right to be and think as he or she wants to, and that no individual has the right to harm or judge others. Furthermore, my definition implies that most of what is needed to live a satisfying life is found inside the human being and can be reached by striving for inner calm and balance.

A Muslim Life

As in the previous section, I also found three focal points in Laura and Aisha's perceptions of Islam and descriptions of themselves as Muslims. These are *Ihsan*, *respect*, and *who am I to judge?*

Ihsan

Ihsan can be translated as beneficence or perfection and refers to a Muslim's duty to search for perfection in the worship of Allah. Laura and Aisha often refer to this term during our conversations. Aisha describes how it is a part of an important Hadith — Hadith Jibril. In Islam, Hadith refers to the collections of sayings and anecdotes

attributed to the Prophet Muhammed and his contemporaries, and the Hadith literature ranks, alongside the Quran, as the fundamental scriptures of Islam. Aisha describes this Hadith as an account of the foundations of Islam and its three parts, faith, rituals and spirituality, with Ihsan representing the last of these, spirituality. Both Laura and Aisha pay great importance to this aspect of Islam and refer to the inner journey that their conversion set in motion, and which they find is not evident in the lives of all Muslims. Laura notes that 'some people tend to forget the spirituality' and Aisha makes a similar point:

Many Muslims completely removed the spiritual part... it is all about faith and actions... this is why so many terrible things happen between different Islamic groups.

Both Aisha and Laura were in contact with different Islamic branches at the start of their conversion and they both attended teachings in various Islamic groups. Both describe how they navigated instinctively through these different interpretations and understandings of Islam. Aisha states that 'once I attended a teaching and it felt so cold' and Laura even found herself unable to recognize Islam in one teaching she attended. About that specific teaching she says, 'that is not the Islam I read about'. When asked to say more about that Islam she answers 'you know, pure Islam without hidden agendas', and when asked to describe the teachings she attends now she states: 'there is no political aim. It is just Islam'. From Aisha and Laura's perspectives, Islam in many ways characterizes an individual faith powered by an inner spiritual movement to achieve goodness through worship. Laura explains it clearly by stating; 'to me, Islam is my comfort zone'.

Respect

Respect is clearly fundamental to their perceptions of themselves as Muslims. Aisha describes herself as becoming more tolerant after she converted. She especially remembers how she used to have big rows with her sister before she converted, and how she now tries to remember that there are reasons why they disagree, and that Aisha should respect those reasons. Respect also plays an important role in how Aisha and Laura continue to be a part of the Christian traditions, which are a big

part of their family lives. Laura and Aisha both continue to celebrate Christmas as they did before they converted. They do that out of respect for their families and because, according to them, it is an Islamic virtue to be as good and inclusive as possible towards other people. Provided their intention is to be good and loving family members, they see nothing wrong in participating in the Christmas celebration. There is no conflict with their Islamic faith in being beneficent and respectful family members at Christmas; they are actually being virtuous Muslims.

Laura believes it is very important for a Muslim to respect her parents and to be honest. Therefore, she had found the three weeks between her conversion and telling her parents very difficult: 'as a Muslim it is so wrong to lie to your parents, but I was so afraid of what they would say'.

Although they do a lot to be respectful towards other people, Laura and Aisha do not always feel their respect for the choices of others is required. Laura, for instance, is not convinced that her parents would be able to be genuinely proud of her if she decided to wear a headscarf.

Who Am I to Judge?

'*Who am I to judge?*' is a phrase used by both Laura and Aisha throughout the interviews, and they both say more than once that no human can judge another. They may disagree on other people's readings of the Quran and they can state that 'this is not how I view Islam', but they never talk about right or wrong. When they talk about actions conducted by other Islamic groups, e.g., IS — the militant organisation, Islamic State — they either say 'I don't see how they read this' or 'it is not in line with my perception of Islam', but neither Aisha nor Laura talks about misinterpretations or misreading when referring to other Islamic groups. This is especially interesting when I compare this study to that of Shanneik (2011) as *haram* (forbidden) and *halal* (allowed) are very much present in the accounts of the former Catholic converts.

I find that it is possible to make connections between the *humanistic habitus* I found in Laura and Aisha's upbringing, and their present perceptions of Islam and themselves as Muslims. I find that spirituality becomes a recurring theme and that much of what they say about Islam revolves around an inner journey between themselves and Allah, which

unfolds through their intentions and actions. Inspired by Olivier Roy (2004), I will refer to this as *humanistic Islam*.

Humanistic Islam; Spirituality and Beneficence

The term Humanistic Islam captures a perception of Islam that Olivier Roy endorses in his book *Globalised Islam* (2004). When studying Islam in the West, he saw tendencies towards a more spiritually oriented and individualized Islam. He states that ‘spiritualisation accompanies the individualisation of religion’ and that ‘salvation is as much a matter of worldly things as it is heavenly ones’ (Roy, 2004, 191, 190–91). Roy argues that it is important not to see this as a new Islamic branch, because these values are very much present in earlier Muslim traditions, too. The new thing, he argues, is the relationship between haram and halal:

Norms are reformulated in terms of values, and are subsequently ‘negotiable’, meaning that the issue is not to follow the letter but the spirit of the law. (Roy, 2004, 190)

Instead of strictly sticking to the descriptions of haram and halal, the norms tend to be more fluid and adjustable and this is very much in line with Laura and Aisha’s perceptions of Islam, particularly the way they construe participation in the Christian Christmas tradition as a way of performing an Islamic virtue — goodness and respect for others. Through their intentions to be faithful Muslims, they reformulate norms in terms of values, and follow the spirit of the law when practising their Islamic faith.

Another example of the spiritualization and individualization of faith lies in the way Laura and Aisha navigated between the different Islamic branches they became acquainted with. If they do not feel comfortable with the teachings or find the style of Islam in a particular mosque poorly aligned with their own perceptions, they search elsewhere rather than adapting their beliefs to fit the specific Islamic milieu. This is significant when one considers that these women are converts and might be expected to accept the practices of the first Islamic branch they encountered after their conversion, which in Laura and Aisha’s cases were both Salafi-oriented branches, which they found cold and lacking in spirituality. It seems that Laura and Aisha both held clear expectations

of what Islam is and how it should feel either before or immediately after conversion, which makes them able to navigate instinctively. It is reasonable to argue that these converts lean on their habitus after their conversion, as shown in the discussion of focal points, and also in their ability to use feelings and instincts to make sense of the Islamic context.

The Continuation of Habitus in Conversion

Both Shanneik (2011) and Roy (2004) described the attraction of Salafi Islam for previously religious converts as a continuation of the converts' previous religious habitus in a new religious environment. My analysis of previously non-religious converts reveals a similar process, but not to Salafi Islamic branches, for the converts found these too strict, cold and forgetful of *Ihsan* (spirituality). For Aisha and Laura, Islam offers an inner feeling of individual judgement, a means of spiritual self-development rather than a scripture to be taken literally, and this style of Islam — what Laura terms 'pure' Islam — is more in keeping with their former habitus.

It is clear, both in relation to the previously religious converts studied by Shanneik (2011) and Roy (2004), and the previously non-religious converts presented here, that previous habitus somehow determines where the converts end up placing themselves in their new religious field. Using a Bourdieusian terminology (Bourdieu, 1973) there seems to be an exchange of capitals between the secular social space in which Laura and Aisha are brought up and their new religious social space. Habitus, whether religious or not, seems to play an important role when looking at converts' choices during the conversion process. It seems that the converts draw on accustomed worldviews, practices and understandings — habitus — when they convert.

Discourses We Live By

There is a further point that arises from my study that I consider worthy of discussion. It relates to Laura and her cousin Kevin, the alcoholic. His history of alcohol abuse plays an interesting role in her story, because her reference to it offers a link with earlier theoretical discourses held by conversion researchers. Earlier, I cited works by

Rambo (1993) and Damsager and Mogensen (2007b) that described how conversion research has been heavily influenced by psychology, and conversion was for a long time viewed in terms of breaking out of an unsatisfactory childhood or in other ways related to crises or traumas. Although this perspective is now largely replaced by a more agentic one, I noticed, during the interviews with Laura, Aisha and other converts, that they all in some way circle around this perception, so I have chosen to look further into Laura's example to clarify why this might be so.

When I first ask her to tell me about her life, she says that she grew up in a typical nuclear family, but that she has an older cousin, Kevin, who has a drinking problem. Throughout the interview, she keeps coming back to Kevin even though she almost never saw him as they had little contact with that part of the family — not because of his drinking. Despite this, Kevin keeps turning up in the story, and the story begins to circle around alcohol in general. Even when she describes her decision to convert, the story centres around alcohol and she almost describes the conversion as a choice between alcohol and becoming a Muslim. She tells me that she was surprised how easy it was to stop drinking, although she previously said that she never really drank much alcohol.

Submitting her story to further narrative analysis, I find no evidence that Kevin played any crucial role in her life. She never speaks of experiences with him and yet he is almost the first person she mentions when asked to talk about her life. I surmise that she habitually connects Kevin's drinking problem to her conversion to Islam, perhaps to justify this to herself, maybe to justify it to others. It appears that she may be consciously or unconsciously adopting a commonly held conversion discourse — that of an escape from or break with something traumatic or unsatisfactory. This is particularly interesting as Laura emphasises that her parents' parenting was good and caring. She more than once states that she had a very happy childhood and that she does not want people to think badly about her parents because she converted to Islam. It is difficult for me to corroborate my suggestion that Laura's experience of Kevin's alcohol abuse is not a substantial part of her conversion — not a causal factor but an explanatory device — but I do believe that this is a likely interpretation. When I look at the way it is presented in her story and how the story is created around this experience, compared to

other more general experiences, it appears that her experience with her alcohol-demented cousin fits into the conversion story rather than being a root cause.

As I said, this focusing on a possible problem is visible in many of the interviews I carried out and this suggests that the converts in this study may be living by a discourse on conversion that draws on understandings created by previous research and seemingly embedded within society. I argue, too, that the understandings that underpin this discourse serve to justify the converts' choices when they are explaining these within their local communities.

Perhaps we should pay greater attention to discourses, read more widely, and ask broader questions when dealing with a group of people who live by a discourse so heavily discussed as Islam is now. Otherwise, we may merely end up verifying previous research instead of conducting new work. My study demonstrates that the situation is extremely complex and that earlier theories need to be continually re-considered as they may continue to play a role in real lives even when no longer seen as paramount: historical perspectives and commonly held discourses slow the pace of change, whether this process acts consciously or unconsciously on the individual and society.

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