lives, and how some of them formulated an alternative discourse in resistance to patriarchal oppression. When I met her again in London in 2003 she reiterated this, expressing admiration for women who could hold on to their dignity as they insisted upon receiving just treatment. "It was through reading that book *[Opening the Gates]* and when I began to read Mernissi and Taslima Nasreen [the well-known Bangladeshi feminist writer] and others that I began to see that all of these women were products of their background and that it was not that these women were trying to be confrontational and to knock Islam—as alleged on the outside—but that [it was] this background [that] was the bane of their lives." Al Toma would not be among those who found it easy to blame the victims.

Al Toma was a young woman when second-wave feminism was under way in Britain, although this did not form part of her own experience as a young woman in Ireland. She acknowledges, "I am very interested in the whole subject of feminism," but she does not call herself a feminist. "I could see as I grew into Islam that Muslim women were dominated and controlled by male patriarchal society. But I always had a feeling that this had built up over the years and was part of culture and tradition and [coming] from male interpretation of the sources of Islam." She confesses: "I accepted it in the beginning because I was under the impression that the attitude about women was part and parcel of the whole sense of piety you had to adopt when you came to Islam. I toed that line for a while until I began to realize that there was something not quite right and that it felt very contrived." At this point in her story she made an explicit connection with the reading she had done and the confidence it gave her to come to her own conclusions in her critique of the patriarchal thinking that had intruded into Islam. In her own words: "The more confident you become with yourself and [in] your reading of Islam [the more] you begin to see things in a totally different light from that which is expressed in normal circumstances." Al Toma's story is another *ijtihadic* narrative. Her story tells us that when a person comes to Islam through an intensely rational path that enables her to critically examine her own religious background, and she has sufficient confidence and strength, she will apply that same critical analysis to issues of gender within Islam. She will recognize the "authority" of her own intellectual conclusions.

Outgoing and after all these years still exuding the excitement about Islam that comes with a fresh encounter, Al Toma devotes herself to assisting new converts, women and men alike. Within the Islamic Foundation at Leicester, where she works, she created the New Muslim Project in 1993. She

edits the association's newsletter, called *Meeting Point*. To address the ritual needs of new Muslims, Al Toma recently published *A Simple Guide to Prayer*.[20] Individuals may go through the formal conversion process in the offices at the Islamic Foundation, which also issues certificates of conversion. Such a document is clearly not a religious necessity, but a modern invention, helping the convert prove her or his new status as a Muslim in cases where this might be required. Such proof, for example, is important when making the *haj* to Mecca. Institutionalizing Islam in public space is a critical part of new Muslim life in contemporary Western societies, and in this Al Toma is playing a salient role. In the United Kingdom, this public space is civil society beyond the circumference of state or governmental public space.

When women (or men) come into contact with Al Toma during their search for Islam, she presents what can be recognized as an Islamic feminist approach, although she would not define it as such. She speaks of the full equality of *insan*, or of all human beings, which is a central principle of Islam. She offers a rational critique of patriarchal practices that are allegedly Islamic. The New Muslim Project is not a women-only site, but a place that brings together both genders. It is also a site where converts and those on the conversion path come together. Al Toma plays a sensitive and significant role in a new convert culture in dialogue with non-Muslims. She not only shares her egalitarian vision of Islam with others, but also understands how other discourses may have something to say.

Al Toma introduced me to Yvonne Ridley, a high-profile British journalist who now works freelance. Her search, following a common pattern, began and continues with the Qur'an, yet her path to the holy book is singular. Following the attacks on 9/11, she gained illegal entry into Afghanistan to cover events as a journalist from inside and ended up being captured. While undergoing interrogation in prison she was asked if she would like to become a Muslim, to which she replied that she could not make such a life-changing decision while in captivity. But she promised that upon her release and her return to London, she would read the Qur'an and study Islam.[21] When she was freed she made good on her pledge.

Thrust in an unusual way into contact with the Qur'an, Ridley approached the sacred text as an inquisitor. "I went through all the women's issues first," she explained, "because I wanted to know what is in this religion that makes men subjugate women." For her the unexpected happened: "The more I read the more I realized that far from subjugating women the Qur'an elevates women and makes this quite clear." Without mincing words, she said: "The

women's liberation movement began in the pages of the Qur'an." "Some of the ideas promoted by the Taliban could not possibly have come from the Qur'an but from Saudi Arabia. Where is this that women cannot drive? Aisha led the battle of the camel. It is rubbish and a distortion of Islam. It is culture over faith in my opinion. I am still on the learning curve but this is my opinion. I want to satisfy myself in so many ways about Islam and when I feel confident—and hopefully will have taken my *shahada*—I want to tackle some of these Saudi clerics."[22] Again we discern common sense and a common pattern. Women read equality and justice in the Qur'an and conclude that patriarchal culture(s) intrude and steal the name of Islam.

Meanwhile, as she explained, Ridley began to bring her lifestyle more into conformity with ordained Islamic practice. For example, she adopted a more conservative mode of dress and avoided pork and alcohol. She describes a gradual process of alignment of her lifeways with the injunctions of Islam, similar to that Köse and Loewenthal (2000) have discussed in their analysis of British conversions. While she makes such modifications in her habitual practices, Ridley as a woman does not shrink from her highly public professional life as a journalist who speaks her mind.

Ridley is prominently linked with born-Muslim women from old Muslim societies, as well as born Muslims living in the West. While she by no means is distant from converts, she is not primarily speaking to and with them. Moreover, her community of Muslims is a global community. In her writing, speaking, and living, she moves around the world. Her story shows how it is possible to participate in the dynamics of Muslim society without being a Muslim, yet one who is avowedly on the conversion path.

Double Embrace: A South African Story

The South African stories are different in significant ways from the Dutch and British stories just encountered. Khadija Magardie (b. 1975), Malika Ndlovu (b. 1972), and Aisha Roberts (b. 1971) exemplify the double embrace of Islam and Islamic feminism. Among the younger generation of the women whose narratives inform this chapter, Magardie and Roberts came to Islam in 1994, and Ndlovu in 2000. Roberts was a feminist before she became a Muslim, and Magardie was raised with a strong sense of gender equality. For both, their Islam and Islamic feminism are highly interwoven at the level of ideas and practice. Ndlovu, who seems always to have been a "free-spirit feminist," expresses her gender-progressive Islam through her intense engagement with the arts.

The Dutch and British stories tell of the search for knowledge of Islam. The earlier generation of Dutch converts experienced difficulties finding materials, while the British woman of the same generation did not, but in both instances these converts came to Islamic feminist publications later in their search. The South African converts came into contact with a feminist Islam early on, and moreover, unlike the Dutch and British, they found a homegrown Islamic feminist discourse and an activist movement (Esack 1997; Tayob 1995). They entered Islam through the door of a postapartheid Islamic feminist activist culture. Through meetings, conferences, camps, courses, books, and articles these new Muslims did not so much have to search for Islam and Islamic feminism as both greeted them full force.

For Roberts and Magardie connections with the Muslim Youth Movement and particular persons within the movement were pivotal in their dual embrace of Islam and Islamic feminism. Roberts had been an antiapartheid activist and a feminist activist as a student at Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape. She had been on a spiritual and religious search when she discovered Islam through contacts with Muslim students. She tells how she picked up her early knowledge of Islam mainly "by osmosis." She became deeply attracted to the religion of Islam as satisfying her spiritually, but was candid in confessing that she was not without certain misgivings concerning how it was lived. "For me the difficult part was reconciling what was in the Qur'an, and the spirit of the Qur'an, with contemporary practice. I could not find justification for a lot of practices, like not allowing women into religious spaces."[23] She decided to convert, "taking on balance the good against the bad," presuming that "the more I got into it the more I would find other explanations and other ways of understanding." Following the common pattern, Roberts continued in the beginning to be mainly self-taught in Islam. Her unresolved questions about gender and Islam and her introduction to archconservative Tablighli circles after her move from the Eastern Cape to Johannesburg put a heavy strain on her commitment to Islam. Roberts's chance meeting with Shamima Shaikh and Na'eem Jeenah at Witswatersrand University, while the wife and husband activists at the center of the Muslim Youth Movement were distributing copies of the MYM paper *Al-Qalam*, took her life in a new direction by bringing her into the Islamic feminist movement. Shamima Shaikh was the head of the Gender Desk and editor of *Al-Qalam* and the "shining light" of Islamic feminism until her premature death in 1997. Shaikh and her Islamic feminism had a huge impact on Roberts, who confessed: "I don't know if I'd have stayed a Muslim if I had not met Shamima." It was Shaikh who

introduced Roberts to Mernissi's work. "That opened my eyes to a totally different gender dynamic in Islam." She found Mernissi's work more accessible than Wadud's hermeneutic work, which she found difficult. Roberts continued her reading, which now included Islamic feminist works, and became active on the Gender Desk of the Muslim Youth Movement.

Magardie embraced Islam during her final year in school. Her purely academic interest in "discovering more about different religions" took her to Islam. She recalls being impressed by Islam as a religion committed to social justice, stressing that she encountered Islam at a very turbulent time in the history of South Africa. Malcolm X's autobiography and the writing of the African historian Ali Mazrui made a deep impression on her. She took the Islamic profession of faith "on the basis of what I liked," admitting that she still had much to learn about the religion. She affirms: "My real introduction to Islam began through the Muslim Youth Movement." She had come into contact with the MYM when she went to its offices (upstairs from the *da'wah* office, where she had gone to make her profession of faith) expressing her interest in writing for *Al-Qalam.* She relates: "It was really in the ranks of the MYM that I became more confident in myself and more confident Islamically because nobody really ever taught me." Through the MYM youth camps she learned about Islamic feminism. She mentions Mernissi and Fazlur Rahman, whose work has deeply influenced Islamic feminist discourse. After entering the University of Natal she continued her study of Islam and Islamic feminist works and also read general works on feminism by Simone de Beauvoir, Germain Greer, and others. Unlike many, who find conflict between general feminist works and Islam, Magardie says: "The more I started studying secular feminism the more I started finding parallels within Islamic circles where feminism was an issue."

While excitedly trying to work through feminist questions and finding confluences between secular feminism and Islamic feminism, and being active on the MYM Gender Desk with Shaikh, her life suddenly took a different turn when she met and married an Iranian cleric and turned to Shi'i Islam. She began to feel that the MYM was not sufficiently orthodox and now continued to study Islam under the tutelage of her husband. But, she recalls, "I neglected the whole women angle." In the meantime Magardie finished at the university and began to work for the South African Broadcasting Company, moving from Durban to Johannesburg. She recalls how proud she was, as a fresh, young professional, to be a Muslim, and a Shi'i Muslim, and that her affiliation gave her a strong sense of identity. She explains that she was told she must, as a Shi'i Muslim, follow a *marja,* a person trained in the Islamic sci-

ences, who would guide her in religious interpretation. In this case Magardie's *marja* was her husband (to add another layer of deference). So she went from thinking to being guided. Eventually she had problems, feeling deprived of her own ability to think. It was gender issues that provoked the turnabout. "I think it was polygamy that started the whole problem." And she says she learned soon afterward about *muta*, or temporary marriage, in Shi'i Islam. She had difficulty locating these practices in the Islam she knew, or imagined. Around this time she came into contact with Iranian Shi'i Islamic feminists. She read Shahla Haeri's book, with its critical analysis of *muta*, and the work of Ziba Mir-Hosseini on marriage and divorce. She questioned the idea of having to go through a *marja* rather than straight to the religious texts on her own.

Continuing to weave together the different dimensions of her life, Magardie explains that her move to Johannesburg and job at a leading South African newspaper thrust her into a wider world:

Perhaps the Mail and Guardian *can be credited with broadening my horizons. As my horizons broadened I guess I just came to feel more and more put down in my own life and thinking this [where she was at that moment in her thinking about Islam] is not really Islam. This is not the Islam that made me get up at the break of dawn and read* fajr *and feel so happy . . . and loving to go to pray. One of the things that made me feel part of a community, because I had no Islamic family, was going to* tarawiah *[the evening prayer after breaking fast] during Ramadan. When I became a Shi'i they told me* tarawiah *was* haram *[forbidden].*

Magardie grappled more and more with the notions of *ijtihad* and her conviction that she could read the Qur'an for herself:

My understanding of the Qur'an—and I stand by it—was that it was not revealed to an elite. The Qur'an is simple. These people make it complicated. It used to frustrate me more and more. Strangely enough, I started drawing on my own inner experiences. Ironically, it was when Shamima had already died that I started saying this to myself. [After she turned to Shi'i Islam Magardie drifted away from the MYM.] It was one of those bitter ironies in life that you only start to think about what she was saying and appreciating the courage of her conviction now. Strangely enough, I returned to her ideas, to MYM ideas.

She returned to her earlier Muslim self. Gender and *ijtihad* brought her back to the place where she had been. She speaks of trying to work out for herself the issue of polygamy by going straight to the Qur'an on her own. "I started to say to myself the only salvation in Islam is *ijtihad*, because it keeps Islamic

learning and debate alive." Narrating and reflecting on her narrative at the same time, Magardie says:

I guess I plot out that particular course to say that my particular conclusion is now that—Allah forgive me should I be wrong and arrogant enough to come to conclusions about his Holy Book without having studied enough—that I firmly believe and I am not turning my back on Islam and it is not even an itch but a pain that brings tears sometimes: that I have got to reconcile that in my heart I am a feminist. You know I have problems with that term. I am a feminist because in the course of my job I have seen the most unbelievable horrors perpetrated against women in the name of culture and religion, and even in the name of nothing.

Magardie affirms: "I am going to take from the Qur'an what I can agree with and what I don't understand I am going to try not to throw aside anymore, because I have done that for long enough, but I am going to try and find an answer because I do believe Islam is the right way."

Roberts and Magardie bring two prior texts to their Islam: a prior text of feminism and a prior text of antiapartheid activism, a proliberation activism with an intense sense of equality and justice irrespective of race, ethnicity, and gender. The narratives of both women reveal the immediacy of these prior texts. They bring the South African vocabulary of struggle with them when they speak of being "conscientized Muslims."

Malika Ndlovu's narrative of coming to Islam is, at the core, a story of "coming home" and experiencing "an inexplicable familiarity with the religion." It is about "finding a degree of peace and relief that I cannot explain." She strongly prefers the term "revert," with its connotations of "return." Again, like other women who newly embrace Islam, there are unanswered questions.

My mind, my intellect tries to figure it out and to come up with questions but now [as a Muslim] the questions are coming from a place of implicit faith, of implicit acceptance [such] that the mind boggles . . . I cannot understand how I came to peace with things I still do not have answers for intellectually. I don't have answers for things I mentally grapple with. It is often like a sea and I would imagine literally the head of a question mark bobbing up and down on the waves . . . a whole range of questions. And constantly a wave comes and washes over these questions. It is not at all that these questions are being suppressed because it is not at all that water holds things down. It is a living, dynamic way of being at peace without having all the answers in order to commit to a certain place.

Ndlovu embarked on a quest for knowledge, wanting to learn about lived Islam through experiences of women. She created Project Nisa (in August 2002), which began as a theater project, as her "first Islam-focused work on the arts." She sought stories from Muslim women about their experiences of polygamy and divorce. Women's experience was the starting point, not jurisprudence. "As an artist and as a young Muslim and a growing Muslim, I have a lot of questions. By the grace of Allah, being an artist is a way I can happily raise these questions, as opposed to participating in academic debate or [being part of] a political saga. I can collaborate with a mixed group of Muslim women and also with non-Muslims." Ndlovu quickly came to the idea of the Internet and how she could be part of electronic story-sharing. The idea mushroomed beyond her expectations. It connected her as a new Muslim with a global community, or "family." Other women, upon converting, have mentioned the lack of a Muslim family and the importance of finding one. "I did not grow up as part of a Muslim cultural community, so if I talk about being from a Muslim community I think global. I do not fit into any of these little boxes." She affirms: "Through Nisa a community can be built of people who want to share and grow and express their creativity in a place where they feel at peace and a part of as Muslims and as women."

Ndlovu integrates her strong sense of justice, of dignity, of freedom to grow in Islam with her self-consciously "Islamic multimedia art." Although she enacts Islamic feminism with other women, new and born Muslims alike, she is uneasy with the baggage that attaches to "feminism." She worries about the notion of "feminism" as an outside imposition and about its elitism alienating the majority of African women. While the term "feminist" and especially its use in labeling are not to her liking, she confirms: "There are feminist bones in my body that rattle about certain issues so that I am totally in alignment with the cause, so to say." And in her art she conveys that women create their own feminism, helping to dispel the tenacious myth that feminism is simply something out there.

The South African convert women are at home in their own country. They do not feel they have to announce their new identity in any defensive way. They come to Islam with liberatory ideas, and these are the ideas of the new South Africa for which people so desperately fought. They came straight into an Islamic feminist movement that is part and parcel of a vibrant progressive Islamic movement led by women and men together.

New Muslims for a New Islam

I begin my concluding thoughts with a return to Wadud. As a convert, Wadud "brings to her engagement with the religion," as Barlas observes, echoing Pektas-Weber's approach, "a spirit of critical inquiry that leads her to ask questions of it that people who are born Muslim often do not consider asking" (2003). Barlas continues about Wadud: "She came to Islam [as a student, taking the *shahada* on Thanksgiving Day 1972] by asking critical questions of it about the purpose of life and her own role in it. . . . in the Qur'an, she found a 'vision of the world,' and beyond, with meanings and possibilities for self that lead to certainty" (2003). Through her hermeneutic investigation Wadud articulated the Qur'anic message of gender equality and social justice, and a call for their implementation, at the core of Islamic feminism.

Wadud's story became part of the story of South African Islamic feminist activism in a most immediate sense when she visited the country for a conference in 1994. At the invitation of progressive Muslims, Wadud was invited to speak at Friday congregational prayer at the Claremont Main Street Mosque in Cape Town. She gave a pre-*khutba* (pre-sermon) talk on the power of mothering. On that occasion women of the congregation came down from their usual places in the loft to the main space and sat together to the right in rows parallel to those of the men. The event, which was immensely inspiring and uplifting to many, was seen by others as an assault on Islam. Threats of violence ensued, but in the end progressive Islam was victorious. Women have since given pre-*khutba* talks and women congregants have remained on the main floor of the mosque (Esack 1999; Tayob 1999).[24]

I would like to quote Wadud from her new preface to the new edition of her book *Qur'an and Woman*, which is relevant for convert women and to all who dare to engage in *ijtihad*.

As an African-American who was embraced by Islam over a quarter of a century ago, I have felt that Islam was a haven in these times of global crisis and chaos. I was unprepared for the schisms that have arisen between me and some members of the Muslim community. Since the publication of Qur'an and Woman, *the gender justice I aspire for is sometimes resisted by more conservative Muslims. I often feel that although I entered into a tradition whose holy prophet required Muslim males and females to seek knowledge until the grave, that as a woman, of African origin, and an American convert to Islam, I was not supposed to seek beyond what others hand down to me.*

She goes on to say:

The two names most consistently hurled at me are "Western" and "feminist." "Western" could mean that I can only be who I am: a daughter of the West, born and raised an American of African descent. It is reduced, however, to mean anti-Islam. "Feminist" is used in a similar reductionist manner. No reference is ever made to the definition of feminism as the radical notion that women are human beings. (1999)

Wadud's story bespeaks the circulations of Islamic feminism and the global intersections of activism. To what extent can her life story be a model for other convert women, wherever they may be placed or "positioned"?

The narratives of the British, Dutch, and South African women reviewed here offer keys and clues about links between conversion to Islam and Islamic feminism. I have tried to follow the clues, to see where they lead in the production of a new Islam that recuperates the gender-egalitarian principles permeating the Qur'an. The converts' narratives form a story of the flowing and ebbing of agency (I intentionally reverse the usual order of this phrase), of the consumption and production of knowledge, of knowledge and knowing as authority, edging, if often haltingly, toward the articulation and practice of Islamic feminism.

The juxtaposition of South African narratives with European narratives reveals the power of history, identity, politics, and positioning in the lives of converts and how they impact gender thinking. In the first two stages, the path to conversion and the moment of embrace, the narratives of the converts are similar.

It is after conversion that the stories split: the South African and European. The South African converts entered (if with some detours) a world of progressive Islam. They entered into a scene in which an Islamic feminist movement enacted by women and men together to eradicate patriarchal injustices was under way. This was/is a progressive movement within an old established Muslim community, a minority community which is at the same time a project of building a new South Africa.

The British and Dutch converts entered new Muslim minority communities whose members are still in the process of finding their place in a larger society as new citizens. Many of them are now of the second generation, struggling to accommodate to a society marked by "cultural racism" in an atmosphere that, of late, has become more hostile. Yet, as I've already observed, the heightened hostility in the wake of 9/11 propelled some convert women

in the West to take charge and to celebrate and enact their strengths as Muslims. Meanwhile, as also noted, second-generation Dutch Muslims who absorbed their religion as a set of inherited cultural practices (modified by their new environments) are starting to seek deeper Islamic religious knowledge alongside Dutch converts. Together, old and new Muslim women are beginning to unravel the patriarchal threads entangled in the stories they have been told about Islam as they work out their own understandings of Qur'an-based gender equality and social justice. Together, they are standing up to the patriarchal projects of political Islam and virulent cultural racism/Islamophobia.[25]

Islamic feminism is both modernist and postmodernist, as it is at once local and global. Islamic feminism clearly is not something "out there," but rather "internal." It is a work in progress: it is being constructed and enacted, refined and redefined, by Muslims at multiple sites. My purpose has been to see how converts access and produce Islamic feminism. This production may come in the form of asking hard questions, looking for sound answers, or having the courage to live by the Islamic principles that Islamic feminism uncovers and reappropriates. The enactment of Islamic feminism is about fighting multiple injustices. Thinking women, as converts to Islam, will not be able to stand back.

Van Nieuwkerk met a Dutch convert wearing a chain on her neck, from which dangled an Allah ornament and a feminist symbol. I end this early chapter in the story of conversion and Islamic feminism by leaving readers with this telling image.

Notes

1. She offers a reflective narrative on her life in "On Belonging as a Muslim Woman" (Wadud 1995).

2. An example to the contrary is Rebekah Lee, who is examining African women's conversion to Islam in South Africa, specifically in and around Cape Town (2002).

3. It was through interviews and oral histories that I first discovered evidence of Islamic feminism quietly taking shape before it became a public discourse. Moreover, this happened quite by accident as I was investigating contemporary Muslim women's definitions of feminism, having previously focused on earlier historical definitions extant in written records or in the historical memories of women (Badran 1993).

4. In this chapter I have drawn from the narratives of three South African women, four Dutch women, and two British women, one of whom is on the conversion path. The imbalance from the British side was a problem of logistics. (Since I completed this chapter, the woman on

the path to conversion has converted. See Bayman 2004.)

5. Clearly, the term "white," and other terms connoting "race," are problematic, and indeed, this came up in one of the interviews, but pursuing this in detail is beyond the scope of my chapter.

6. I interviewed one African male convert from Christianity to Islam in Cape Town, from whom I learned about some of the ethnic complexities within wider South African Islam. On African women's conversion to Islam, see Lee 2002.

7. The standardization of the conversion narrative has been recognized, as Wohlrab-Sahr points out in her chapter and as van Nieuwkerk illustrates in her analysis of online conversion narratives. While analyses of these standard conversion narratives and their stock of tropes can be put to various uses, they have their limitations, as Wohlrab-Sahr remarks. Such narratives are not helpful in probing links between conversion and feminism. To the contrary they suggest the lack of a possible feminist dimension in "the conversion story."

8. On the notion of reversion see Kareema Quick, quoted in Lee 2002, 55.

9. For a discussion of the term "new Muslim," see Harfiyah Abdel Haleem 2003.

10. See, for example, the New Muslims Project, http://www.newmuslimsproject.net.

11. For theorizations of the foreign see Rebecca Saunders 2003.

12. For a highly detailed and complex analysis of authority in Islam, see Khaled Abou El Fadl 2001.

13. Tuula Sakaranaho speaks of the significance of the rational along with the relational for women in coming to Islam, but does not refer to "feminist converts" (2003).

14. See *Thinking about Secularism and Law in Egypt* (2001).

15. By way of comparison, in 1984 Swedish Muslims formed the Islamic Women's Association in Gothenburg. Both converts and born Muslims pioneered in this association, where they played helpful organizing roles (Roald 2003).

16. She refers to her discovery of Mernissi's *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (1991).

17. See Wadud (1995, 264). Speaking of the often unrecognized imbrication of culture and religion by born Muslims, Wadud says: "Whatever has passed for 'Islam' in their cultures (and sometimes it is a big 'whatever') is unquestionably accepted as the full meaning of Islam" (1995, 263–264).

18. See van Nieuwkerk (2004) on the intensification and spread of the cultural difference discourse.

19. Pnina Werbner, who studies the South Asian Muslim diaspora in Britain, writes in "The Predicament of Diaspora and Millennial Islam: In the Aftermath of September 11" (closer in time to the events of September 11), that "The tragedy is that the global crisis precipitated on September 11 will leave its own trace, a sediment of alienation and radical estrangement which will impact on the way people conceive of their identity and citizenship in their country of settlement" (2001). A feminist resolve arising among Muslim women in the West a year or more after the events of 9/11 has yet to receive attention, as well as the way the events led to an intensified bonding of born and convert Muslims.

20. See http://www.newmuslimsproject.net, and Batool Al Toma's Personal Profile there.

21. She has written about her captivity and release in her book *In the Hands of the Taliban* (London: Robson Books, 2001).

22. A recent statement on her journey to Islam issued on March 5, 2003, can be found at http://www.sistersinislam.net.

23. Köse found in his research on British converts that they were turning to Islam because "the articles of faith and practices support each other more." This idealized version of Islam seems widespread in the West, according to the conversion literature (1999, 303).

24. Author interview with Sadiyya Shaikh, who was present at the talk.

25. In December I was invited to Utrecht to give a presentation on Islamic feminism to a small group of Dutch convert women and born Muslim women of Turkish and Moroccan backgrounds. One of the most impressive things to me was the coming together of converts and born Muslims and how some shared common feminist concerns within an Islamic framework and some were intrigued but reluctant, but the fault line was not between "new" and "old" Muslims.

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PART FOUR. TRANSMISSION AND IDENTITY

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CHAPTER 9

How Deborah Became Aisha

The Conversion Process and the Creation of Female Muslim Identity

Nicole Bourque

Until recently, most of the psychological and sociological research on conversion has been concerned with identifying: (1) what type of person might be predisposed toward religious conversion (Allison 1969; Batson and Ventis 1982; Christiansen 1963; Deutsch 1975; Gillespie 1991; James 1962; Lofland and Stark 1965; Meadow and Kahoe 1984; Salzman 1953; Ullman 1989); or (2) why someone converts (Allison 1969; Snow and Phillips 1980; Starbuck 1911). However, as Karin van Nieuwkerk indicates in the introduction to this volume, researchers are now recognizing that conversion is an ongoing process and are focusing their attention on the stages that converts go through (see, for example, Rambo 1993; Köse 1996; Poston 1992; Sultán 1999; Roald, this volume). These works recognize that there are various types of converts, many routes to conversion, and different types of Islam to which an individual may convert. Three important issues, however, are neglected in most studies. First, a consideration of how conversion to Islam requires not only a change in the convert's religious identity, but also a renegotiation of social, gender, and national identities. Second, how these new identities are embodied through taking up new bodily practices. Third, the wider context in which these identities are re-created, including power relations, interactions with other Muslims, and learning how to be a Muslim in a largely non-Muslim society.

In this chapter, I will address these issues by looking at the process of conversion and the re-creation of religious, gender, and national identity in Glasgow, Scotland. The bulk of the research upon which this discussion is based involved participant-observation and interviews with a group of twenty-five female Sunni converts who attended a weekly Islamic education/discussion group for women. I have also included information from an interview with a male convert and his wife who were not attached to this group.[1]

I begin my discussion by looking at the conversion story of Aisha, the leader of the Islamic education/discussion group. Her case study illustrates the importance of considering the social context in which the conversion

process takes place. Not only was Aisha's conversion affected by her interactions with other Muslims, Aisha herself and the meetings she leads have had an impact on other convert women. I then look more closely at the conversion process and the re-creation of identity amongst the women in the group. This will include a consideration of how a Scottish Muslim female identity is embodied through changing bodily practices, shaped and internalized through discourse, and affected by interactions with other Muslims and with wider Scottish society.

Meeting Aisha: Talking to the Converted

When I first met Aisha and she told me her conversion story, she had been a Muslim for twenty years. She was born as Deborah and was raised in a working-class part of Glasgow. One day, when she was seventeen, she went to a local corner store that was run by a Pakistani family. She saw a man kneeling and bowing. She told me that at that time, she knew nothing about Islam. She thought that he was doing exercises. She waited with her purchases until he was finished and then asked him what he was doing. He explained that he was praying to God. The fact that a person would stop selling goods in order to pray impressed her deeply. The man lent her several books on Islam, and she frequently returned to the shop to discuss them.

Aisha said that she found that Islam answered many questions that Christianity did not. She decided to convert, changed her name to Aisha, and married the man who had introduced her to Islam. Aisha's parents accepted her conversion. They said they could see that she had changed for the better. She no longer went out drinking and dancing, as other girls of her age did. She was also more respectful to her parents. Her husband's family, however, were against the marriage. They had wanted him to marry "a nice Pakistani girl." They did not believe that a "white" girl could be a good mother and faithful wife. They feared that she would lead him "away from the path of Islam."

At first, Aisha found relations with her in-laws very difficult. This was complicated by their inability to speak English. Aisha gradually learned Punjabi, adopted the Pakistani style of dress, wore the *hijab*, and learned Pakistani customs. She read about Islam under the guidance of her husband. If she had questions he could not answer, she would turn to the *imam* of their local mosque, who was born in Pakistan.[2] Thus, Aisha's understanding of Islam was and continues to be influenced by people and scholars that meet with the approval of the local Pakistani-dominated Muslim community.