

MUSLIMS ON THE AMERICANIZATION PATH?

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American Women Choosing Islam

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A small but growing number of American-born women are choosing to become Muslim, helping the process of making Islam the fastest growing religion in the United States. This growth can be attributed not only to immigration and increase in births, but to the success of *da'wa* (witnessing by Muslims to the non-Muslims) in America.¹ A growing number of families are finding themselves with daughters or sons who have chosen to leave the Christian tradition to become a follower of Islam.

From September 1993 through July 1994, I conducted a study of American-born women who had converted to Islam in the United States and Canada.² Questionnaires were distributed to women converts at Muslim conferences, mailed to those responding to notices in *Islamic Sisters International*, and sent to converts who were identified by those completing the questionnaire for the study. Of the 350 questionnaires given out, fifty-three American Muslim women returned the completed form. The respondents were from sixteen states and one Canadian province, all eager to share stories of their choice to be Muslim. The response rate of 15 percent is fairly low and may be affected by many factors, including the length of time required to answer the ten parts of the questionnaire, the many such questionnaires already floating around asking for the stories of Muslim women converts, and perhaps an unwillingness to share information with a non-Muslim conducting the survey. The letter with the questionnaire stressed that the study was only for Muslim women converts wearing *hijab*, which also eliminated some converts.

The group of women who did answer is self-selected in that they chose to respond to the survey and therefore is not representative of all women who convert to Islam, for their experience tends to be more positive than

the norm. However, information yielded from the survey does at least provide a basis on which to frame questions for future study of a segment of people so far rarely targeted for study. The respondents talked about their religious backgrounds (mainly Christian); explained how they became Muslim and how they learned Islamic practices; described their relationships with their families as a result of their conversion and their roles as wives, mothers, students, and/or employees; and shared the feelings of strength they found in their adopted religion.

Profile of the Participants

The educational background of the respondents (53) ranged from high school graduates to women with doctoral degrees. Fifty-three percent had a bachelor's degree or above: 35 percent of these had a bachelor's degree (B.A. or B.S.) only; 12 percent a Master's (M.A. or M.S.), and 6 percent had an M.D. or Ph.D. degree. At the time they responded, seven of the women were college students working toward higher degrees.

The respondents ranged in age from twenty-one to forty-seven years. The duration of their commitment to Islam ranged from six months to twenty-two years. While the age of conversion varied, it occurred most frequently at the young-adult stage from ages 18 to 30: 27 of the 53 women (51 percent) converted between 18 and 23; 18 (34 percent) between 25 and 30; six between 33 and 44 years of age (11 percent); two of the women did not provide their ages.

Approximately 40 percent of the women reported that they worked outside the home either part time or full time, two women have their own in-home businesses, and 12 percent were working toward college degrees. Half were full-time homemakers, with a fourth of those choosing to teach their school-age children at home.

All but two of the women indicated that they observe Islamic practice by wearing the hijab all the time. For the most part, all observed daily prayers, fasted during the month of Ramadan, and participated in other religious duties. They reported that they were finding fulfillment and happiness in their decision to live as Muslims. As one convert put it, "I am more grounded, more relaxed, more focused. You can't stray too far when the next prayer pulls you back. It has certainly had a positive effect on our marriage and family life, and helped me to be a better and calmer mate and mother." She wrote that spiritual work and spiritual development were most meaningful for her.

Non-Muslims often assume that women who choose Islam do so because of pressure put on them by Muslim husbands. In this sample, however, 20 of the 53 women (38 percent) converted while still single. Half of these were introduced to Islam by Muslim friends they met at college or by Muslim neighbors. Two were attracted to the faith while traveling in Muslim coun-

tries. Two had been divorced from Muslim husbands, and after the divorce began to search and read about Islam. Others found their interest piqued as they read about Islam or had a college course which introduced them to the religion. Most of the women later married Muslim men. Only five were still single at the time of the questionnaire, and two of those have since written to say they have married Muslims.

Single women in the sample (divorced, widowed, or never married) indicated that they were sometimes uncomfortable at Muslim gatherings and thought that marriage would improve their position in the Muslim community. They felt some loss of power after conversion since being married is considered "the natural state" in the Islamic community, and their connection and role in decision making at the mosque was through the husband. Two of the single women, recent converts in their forties, indicated a dissatisfaction with the level of acceptance extended to them by the Muslim community. One felt mistreated and alienated as a woman. The other felt that other women did not trust her because she was single.

Thirty-three of the women reported that they had converted at the time of marriage or within one year thereafter. Where pressure to convert was applied, it was before the fact, with the prospective husband indicating that he would not marry the woman if she did not become Muslim. In some cases, it was agreed ahead of time that the children would be raised as Muslims. "[My husband] would not marry me without my committing to raise any children we might have as Muslims. I felt he had a sound value system and my initial exposure to the Qur'an did not convince me one way or the other. I saw nothing [in Islam] that I felt adverse about teaching [our] children."

At the time of the survey, 90 percent of the women were married and reported successful and happy marriages. They indicated considerable satisfaction at the position they felt was theirs in the Islamic setting. A woman who was unmarried at the time of the questionnaire later married and wrote:

You are probably wondering why I am telling you all of this. I just want you to understand that in Islam the institution of marriage is what has helped me to practice my religion to the fullest amount possible. As an American convert, I found it very hard at first to be a good Muslim and follow all the changes I had to make in my life, even though I did do it gradually. Now with my husband, I feel even more fulfilled. In my heart I know that I have made the right decision. I am most lucky because Allah has guided me to the right path. I am not saying I have no problems, but all I do now is look into my heart and read Qur'an and I feel that all is better.

The Families of Origin

The converts reported a variety of responses from their families to their conversion. Nine women indicated that their parents heard them out and

accepted the change after they had become convinced that it was their daughter's free choice. One woman reported that "there was no need to work anything out with my family because they were supportive." According to another, "After my conversion, I presented myself wearing *hijab*. I explained myself to them. I never worried much about my family. I knew they would accept what I was happy with. I explained and answered questions freely." A third one said, "When I came to Islam, I told my parents. My father was understanding and supportive. My mother was apprehensive . . . [and] voiced her concerns, which is just what I was looking for when I told my parents—questions, concerns and comments."

Twenty-two of the women indicated that their decision to convert caused stress in the family, but that after the initial shock there was a certain degree of acceptance and a willingness to work on the relationship. One said that telling her parents she "was a Muslim was like a slap in the face to them. It was as if I had rejected everything they had taught me as a child. . . . My mother realized [my husband] was not going to leave me and slowly began to accept my conversion to Islam." Another said that "it has been three years and a lot has changed. My family recognizes that I didn't destroy my life. They see that Islam has brought me happiness, not pain and sorrow. . . . Our relationship is back to normal."

The women who participated in this survey do not seem to have chosen Islam out of any feelings of rebellion against their parents or the religion in which they were raised. They generally acknowledged that relationships with families that were strained or fractured because of their becoming Muslim needed to be worked on carefully so that the family could accept changes in dress, food, celebrations, thought, and worship. Often appreciation was expressed for what the parents had given them, but with the acknowledgment that they were now choosing to live out their lives in a different way from that of the parents.

Ten of the women indicated that, although they still had a relationship with their families, the family had made very little effort to understand and accept the decision. Four reported their parents have turned their backs on them and were no longer in contact. Two of the respondents expressed the opinion that whatever they chose to do as adults was their own business, and two indicated they had no family. The remainder gave no indication of the family relationship. With sadness two of the women told of broken relationships. "I have not worked it out with my parents. It has been almost three years . . . since they have seen us, and they still want nothing to do with us." Another said, "I was adopted. The parents who adopted me do not see me any more. They do not even allow me at their house now that I am Muslim. I have no hope for improvement with them because they will not even let me come over."

While many of the women indicated that their families were improving in their attitude, the conversion had brought stress in most family relationships. Some families blamed the husband for their daughter's conversion.

Problems such as where and how to spend holidays, what foods could and could not be eaten, and the proper environment for the grandchildren continued to require attention. The hijab was apparently often a point of conflict. "My parents disowned me, and I have not spoken to them in four years. They are atheists and do not believe God exists and they do not approve of, as they say, 'wearing the rag on your head.'"

Interviews with seven of the parents revealed that their feelings toward the conversion of their daughter had changed over time. In every case, there was movement toward acceptance from the way they had felt at the beginning. One mother said:

She was our daughter. We loved her and wanted to continue being a part of her life. Plus I believe everyone has a right to their own relationship with God and has the right to live their own life in their own way. We argued, fussed, cried, wrote letters until we were basically satisfied. It was a very trying time for me.

Religious Backgrounds of the Respondents

The women in the survey grew up in homes that reflected a variety of religious commitments. Even when a denomination was not named, there was some indication that a majority of parents were Christians. Only seven of the women indicated that the family was not involved actively in some religion.³ Six of the women appear to have been on a religious quest and had experimented with other faiths.⁴

Some of the interviewees seemed to have a need for the religious experience whether or not their parents were involved. One woman changed denominations at age 18. She had read about all the world's religions and was active in both denominations to the point of receiving medals, certificates, and other awards. She considered herself very religious and wanted to become a nun, even inquiring about life in a convent.

Seventeen of the women reported parents who were devout and active in religious organizations. Some said they were turned off from Christianity by the strict attitudes and requirements of their parents.

I did not subscribe to any kind of organized religion even though I did believe in God. I grew up going to church and that is why I was not interested. My parents . . . were very strict about going to church and church activities and religion. But it wasn't really a thing that I wanted to do—it was just one of those things you do because you have to. When I turned 18 and got out of the house, I wanted to get far away from it.

Of the fifty-three respondents, thirty-one (58 percent) described themselves as very devout religiously or as coming from families with strong a Christian commitment which they felt influenced their own religious interests. Six came from families which, while claiming to be Christian, went to

church only occasionally. Seven indicated that their families had minimal association with a church and hardly claimed to be Christian at all. Five of the families represented had no commitment to organized religion.

Three of the women, prior to converting to Islam, were hoping to convert their husband to Christianity by agreeing to study Islam if the husband would consider Christianity. One woman started asking questions of ministers and theologians to help her prove the superiority of Christianity to her husband. She said, "I wanted it so badly; I cried to several of them to help me and most of them said, 'I'm sorry—I don't know' or 'I'll write you,' but I never heard from them."

Concerns with Christianity

Nine of the women expressed problems with the belief in Jesus as God, Jesus as the Son of God, or the concept of the Trinity. Five others said they had major questions about Christianity that no one had satisfactorily answered. Four more felt the Bible has been corrupted. One invited a Muslim friend she had met to attend Mass with her. He said he could not go with her because he was Muslim. In the conversation that followed about Islam, she found herself agreeing with many of his beliefs. She said, "It was just the 'Jesus thing' that kept us at opposite ends of the spectrum." In her search for answers in the following week, she went to a nun and poured out her heart. No help was forthcoming. Then she went to a religion teacher, a lay person, where she grew even more confused. "'Look, I just want you to tell me that, undoubtedly and with full conviction, Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' He didn't look at me when he said, 'I can't tell you that.'"

Part of the strength some of these women saw in Islam was that questions were always answered, albeit from an Islamic perspective. The women often said that what was offered from the Islamic viewpoint seemed more logical, though whether or not they could have expressed these concerns before studying Islam is questionable. These are issues that Muslims stress in their basic reasoning and teaching, and as these questions were raised, the women understood their own confusion regarding these points and were unable to find from Christianity the kinds of specific answers that they could use to dispute these Islamic views.

Three of the women expressed fear of going to hell for accepting the new concepts regarding Jesus. They felt guilty of blasphemy, and it took some time for them to work through these fearful feelings. One described it this way:

My hardest hurdle was getting over the fiery images from my Sunday school books and training of what we would look like burning up in hell. I had been told so many times that if I did not believe that Jesus had died for my sins and was my personal savior, I would go to hell forever

Others were assured by the logic of Islam which seemed to respond to the doubts they had regarding Christianity. Many were intrigued by the practice of daily prayer and the peace and commitment that those they observed the Islamic way seemed to enjoy. Several of the women spoke of the feeling of personal enlightenment and that they were being directed by God. One experienced her conversion out of anguish of heart and life.

Our first son was 18 months old. Our marriage was in deep trouble for a variety of reasons. I turned to the Qur'an to find ways I could use it to manipulate my husband into counseling. Our conflict reached a zenith . . . and I asked him for a separation. I felt I had no options, even though I still loved him. I was calm driving to work. Out of my soul came an intense pain. I cried out aloud for God to help me. At that moment I recognized my desire to be Muslim and it did not matter if my marriage broke up or not. I wanted to be Muslim for me.

The Islamic Way Connects with American Ideals

It is clear that the values these women cherished in Islam had much in common with traditional American ideals including family, dedication to God, good works, commitment to a religious community, education, religious freedom, and discipline. They nevertheless were reluctant to espouse feelings of nationalism and patriotism and instead express bitterness over some of the current foreign-policy decisions of the American government and about much of what is happening in American society today that seems to be in direct conflict with the ideals and values of the past.

The heritage of religious freedom in the United States and Canada allows new converts to appropriate Islamic practices and to integrate them into the routines of daily life. However, they found that these practices often come into conflict with American ways. It is apparent that at the time of conversion, these women were not aware of how marginalized they could feel, or how persistent the discrimination they would encounter would be, especially if they covered their hair. As Haddad writes, "Muslims feel they are living in a country that is hostile, not only to their ethnic origin, but increasingly to Islam and Muslims in general. Their situation has been likened to being on a roller coaster on which they are forced to experience new heights of distortion and vilification."⁵ Despite this experience, they continue to hope that the American ideal of religious freedom will mean that they can eventually gain acceptance, respect, and peace.

Converting to Islam inevitably meant rejecting many aspects of the religion and culture in which they had been raised. More important, many also soon found out that the choice by implication appeared to their parents as a rejection of the values they had tried to impart.

The study revealed that although many immigrant Muslims have a prescribed interpretation of what Muslim life involves, the converts found them-

selves faced with a range of possibilities. They varied in their assessment of how much they could accept or reject of Western culture, often depending on where they were in their own learning and practice. All of them were continually negotiating their relations to the world around them from an Islamic perspective. One woman reflecting on Islam and Westernization wrote:

Islam does not reject the West's positive values or progress. Believing in God and the Qur'an doesn't mean being old-fashioned or authoritarian. Quite the opposite! We are not rejecting "your" culture! We affirm whatever is good in every culture and religion; we believe Islam has come to provide the "finishing touches" to benefit all mankind, not eradicate what they have done.⁶

The women in this survey were practicing Muslims who had accepted what they felt to be Islamically required of them. This does not mean that they all agreed on how to live out their lives, but there were numerous similarities among them. Many of the customs they were adopting were commonplace in countries that are predominantly Muslim, but very different from the conventional American way of doing things.

Putting Islam into Practice in America

With the declaration of faith begins the journey on the path to being Muslim, thereby changing one's life, relationships, beliefs, and religious practice as one selectively rejects the past American culture or combines it with what is Islamic.

One of the first things the converts learn to do is perform the five daily prayers (*salat*) in the Arabic language with the proper positions and ablutions or cleansing. For those working outside the home, it is difficult to get in all the required prayers because there is usually no area at the place of employment where it is appropriate to prepare for and perform them.

After conversion women usually begin to wear more modest clothing, including in many cases the hijab. Fifty-one of the fifty-three respondents in this study cover their hair. Some took to it easily; others found it a daily sacrifice and a test of endurance. As one woman declared: "My biggest battle is the head covering, the scarf. Nobody knows this though, since I accept and submit to the covering for modesty reasons." The hijab also caused particular tension with many parents. One father twisted his daughter's arm in anger and said, "Take that thing off because I don't want to be seen with you in public." Another family that was able to accept the conversion balked when the daughter started wearing for "they worried that I was cutting myself off from society, that I would be discriminated against, that it would discourage me from reaching my goals, and they were embarrassed to be seen with me. They thought this was too radical." One woman expressed how

most of the women felt at heart about dressing hijab: "My husband didn't make me dress this way, and I'm not oppressed. I'm set free—free from the bondage of fashion, clothes, hair, shoes, and the like." Another added, "The American Muslim woman is not oppressed and our cover (hijab) is our right, not a punishment."

Taking of a new first name and even last name with Islamic meaning may happen very quickly in the Muslim convert's life. Some keep their original name for use by the family of origin and as the legal name, and use the new name only in the Muslim environment. Others change their name legally and ask the members of her family of origin to call them by that name as well. Only one mentioned in the survey that she had her name changed legally. Of the 53 respondents, 20 gave first names that seem specifically Islamic, while five others adopted an Islamic name as a middle name or put it in parenthesis. For instance, the author's daughter is called Tahireh by Muslim friends and her husband, but she uses her given name, Jodi, in her profession, business dealings, and with family and non-Muslim friends. One convert who had a preschool-age daughter changed the daughter's name as well. A Muslim woman at marriage may take on the last name of her husband or keep her maiden name.

Diet changed as they no longer ate the forbidden (*haram*) pork and pork products and had to avoid alcoholic drinks and drugs. Many Muslims also choose to eat only *halal*, or approved meats which have been killed in an Islamically prescribed manner. These dietary changes make it very difficult to eat in the homes of relatives or at restaurants and in many cases limit the social interaction with friends and family who are non-Muslim.

Some found the dietary restrictions so cumbersome that they tried to avoid eating in their parents' home or leaving their children with the family. One woman wrote,

I do not leave my children with my family. We have never visited for more than a couple of hours at a time since I became Muslim. In doing this, I avoid another potential problem—that of halal food. My parents do not understand or accept the concept with halal/haram food. We simply avoid the issue—I don't eat at their house.

Other women are more flexible, taking halal meat with them to a family dinner or eating what they can of the meal. Some of the families plan their menus around foods which the visiting Muslim family can eat, or keep halal meat on hand in the freezer. The author's grandson, who attends public school, usually takes his lunch, but he also eats at school, having been trained even by first grade not to eat the meat. One day he told me he gave his teacher the turkey sandwich in the lunch he bought but he ate the rest of the meal.

Converting to Islam involves acceptance of a totally new system of relations between the sexes. Dating and flirting or even friendly relationships with men are no longer appropriate, and the women must think through how best to relate to co-workers, to male acquaintances, and to Muslim men other

than husband or relatives. The patriarchal system and separation of sexes in the mosque and Muslim meetings and activities are seen as a rejection of the way males and females relate in America. One woman described her apprehension when she is

around Muslim males who won't make eye contact or speak to me when I'm around them. I don't bother to ask why. I just tell myself that they don't know English. I don't feel restricted at all as a woman, although I am still trying to get used to the division of the sexes at social functions and at my daughter's school.

Another woman expressed her sense of being

empowered wearing hijab and loose clothing. I feel like no man has the right to undress me anymore with his eyes. Sure they can use their imagination, but my body is protected. I am not a sex object, and to be the "American Dream Girl" is a nice skin to shed. I feel empowered by prayer and the security of Allah's promise directly to me.

Still another woman finds the separation of the sexes a little more difficult, especially at the mosque:

Sometimes I feel the Muslim women aren't given a chance to speak out about their opinions or views on things within the Muslim community. They are put in the back and hidden away. If I go to a lecture [that is not in the masjid], I like to sit near the front, so I can see and hear the speaker. I am dressed Islamically, so why should I sit in the back just because someone thinks men cannot control themselves? Men need to take the responsibility for their own actions. Women cannot always be hidden so that men won't think bad thoughts. We should dress and act so as not to promote that, but I still will not live my life locked up in a cage or in the back row at a university lecture. I can live my life with respect and dignity, and live as a Muslim woman at the same time.

Television, movies, magazines, and popular music are all areas of potential concern for Muslim women. Dating, flirting, love scenes, rock music, dancing, bad language, and disrespect to parents are just some of the scenes and images to be avoided, leaving little the American media offer that is acceptable. As one mother described it:

I don't like them [the children] to watch commercials or dancing, rap music, dating situations, looseness on TV—anything which you can see by turning it on for two minutes or less. Also I don't want them to get used to musical instruments or music which has adult rock and roll rhythm even if it has children's lyrics.

Appropriate education for children is a major consideration. Home training, private education including Islamic schools, and public schools may all be options. Of the women surveyed, 75 percent had children, although not all were of school age. Forty-seven percent sent their children to public

schools, 11 percent had children enrolled in non-Muslim private schools, 26 percent had children in Islamic schools, and 26 percent taught them at home. (This adds up to more than 100 percent because families with more than one child often have them in different kinds of schools.) They want the children to have the opportunity to be with Muslim peers and to avoid the Western values that other children in the schools represent. Many parents want their children to have the opportunity to learn Arabic so they will be able to read the Qur'an. Often children go to a special Arabic class on Saturday mornings or other scheduled times.

Christian and national holidays often pose stressful situations insofar as the renunciation of these holidays may be perceived by relatives as a rebuff of the family itself and can become a source of conflict and pain for both the family and the Muslim daughter. Some of the converts have worked it out; others still struggle with the problem:

I think that for my family, the main point of stress was probably Christmas, whether it's okay to give us gifts, include us for dinner, etc. It took a lot of time and talk to come to terms with Christmas because I cannot turn my back on my family. My husband and I join my family for dinner and receive gifts from them with the understanding that this is a celebration in which we do not participate and that we wouldn't reciprocate the gift exchange. We will, however, reciprocate by including my family in our Islamic celebrations. Everyone was in agreement and this idea and the spirit of the "season" was not dampened.

It becomes more complicated when there are children:

I try to avoid talking about the holidays. My brother and sister understand that I don't celebrate them and respect me for it. But my parents don't understand and keep asking every year if I am coming over for the holidays and what to do with the presents they got for me and my husband and the kids.

Some families are more open in dealing with holidays and celebrations:

My sisters and parents are sensitive to the fact that we don't celebrate Christian holidays. They always ask before giving or doing anything which could be construed to be related to such holidays. They respect our holidays. It helps that we have a varied family encompassing many types of Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslims. It is an unspoken family rule to respect others' beliefs so long as they aren't harming themselves or others.

Muslims, of course, have their own holidays to celebrate. A particular unifying bond is Ramadan. Several of the women stated that they were sad when that special period of fasting and worship was over, even though at first they may have been concerned that they would not be successful.

These Muslim women, having rejected their former American life and adopted the Islamic way, are engaged in a process of acculturation which

Marcia Hermansen⁷ defines as confronting a new cultural context and worldview and having to choose where to adapt to aspects of the context or worldview in one's own life. She describes the three stages of a major life transition as (1) separation—moving from the original personal status and social structure to (2) liminality—a transitional anxiety-ridden state between detachment from the old to attachment to the new, and then to (3) reintegration—moving into the community with reenergized and reinvested commitment. These women take on these new roles not only for themselves but, if married, for their husband and children.

Concern for the Husband's Homeland

Some of the women in the survey indicated that they meant to try to live according to Islam in America as free as possible from the cultural influences either of America or of the husband's country of origin. They believe that if they were to move to the husband's homeland, it would be harder to practice Islam free of the culture of that country. Others understand that they must accept a blending of cultures, trying to let the Islamic emerge as much as possible. Some of them said that they tried to cook the foods their husbands liked, but that their main concern was to try to look at things Islamically:

The only culture is Islam. I even try not to follow the American culture. I try to put Islam first in everything I do. My husband's family is very stuck in traditions from their Indian culture. This gave us many problems on our visit.

Another said:

Our daily life not cultural or traditional—just normal everyday living. What is different about our family is that we look at life from an Islamic point of view, and we explain Islam to our children using events that happen in our daily lives.

Some women reported the family had plans to go to the husband's homeland when finances or situations were more stable. This tends to give them the sense that life in America is temporary. Years may pass in this "temporary" mode, before they finally decide either to make the move or admit they will be staying in the United States or Canada. This situation can cause the woman to feel like a stranger in both countries. One woman expressed this as a feeling of being alienated here—a foreigner in her own land living the Muslim lifestyle and waiting for the time when she will go to her husband's country. But she also admitted that making a visit overseas to his family in a Muslim country made her feel foreign there because of her American ways even though she was Muslim. She had a feeling of always being "a stranger in a strange land." For her, moving overseas in order to feel more comfort-

able about her beliefs and dress and manner is not the answer, for that would require even more adapting. This woman concluded:

I realize that how Islam affects my life is what I do with it. I can follow a culture and old traditions; go with the basics and try to ignore the rest; or study and understand Islam as it affects me in whatever surrounding I am living in. The Muslims of America have a unique opportunity to understand Islam and how to live and practice in a non-Islamic society just as in the early days of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).⁸

Embracing the Ideals of Family Values

A primary role for Muslim women is the care of children, home, and husband, and work outside the home should not interfere with that role. What this means is interpreted in a variety of ways according to the situation in which the woman finds herself, by expectations of herself and of her husband, their school of Islamic thought, and her educational background.

In an unpublished research paper, Zahra Buttar⁹ divided American Muslim women in two major categories. Into the first she placed American Muslim women in orthodox settings whose activities were described in the following way:

- Majority of time spent on child-rearing, cooking, husband
- Low level of decision making over income and household matters
- Not working out of the home (some not allowed to drive cars)
- Male head of family with final decision-making authority
- Women may lack daily "network" of friends, religious study or social group
- Sex-segregated activities
- Often wearing special type of clothing
- Encouraged to pray alone and always sexually segregated

Women in orthodox settings seem to have little choice as to whether to reject or accept Westernization, for they are under the control of the husband's interpretation of how they are to behave and operate. This category might be considered at one end of a continuum where isolation of the woman and control by the male is extreme.

At the other end of the continuum is the category of Muslim women who see themselves as tending toward a feminist view. The term "feminist" is used here to designate women who understand that they have rights under Islam and some power in expressing those rights. Nevertheless, they still have some characteristics in common with those classified as orthodox. They may wear hijab, at certain stages in life they may spend most of their time in child and husband care, or be sex-segregated in activities. Women in this category tend to be well educated and active in society. Many of them "felt

they 'had it all' . . . family, career, social community with like values, a spiritual peace and a strong sense of self-identity and self-worth. The most important element was a strong self-identity/self-worth concept, and the spiritual peace achieved through Islam."¹⁰

Buttar also identified another trend among the American Muslim women who appear to reject traditional Islam while espousing theoretical or Qur'anic Islam.

They realize that traditional Islam as practiced by immigrant males is cultural, patriarchal and oppressive to women and other social groups that are perceived as threatening, to the cultural norms of Islam these male immigrants have brought to America. The true problem is that male immigrants do not know what is Islamic and what is cultural. The two have been so intertwined through the centuries.¹¹

The women who have more choice about how they relate to, or reject, Western values are generally either single or in marriages that are more egalitarian, allowing the wife to determine her own actions.

When they used the word "feminist" it is synonymous with the Western understanding of feminist only in that they both favor women's rights. They part company insofar as Muslim feminists do not ask for the same rights that Western women demand. Buttar says they ask for "complete spiritual, political and social equality as prescribed by God."¹²

The fifty-three women in my survey¹³ tended to describe themselves in ways that would place them in Buttar's Muslim feminist category. The husbands were described as cooperative and helpful in child care; many of the women had careers or worked part-time; and the women described a sense of partnership in the marriage, though one well within the framework of their practice and beliefs of Islam.

The women have great hopes that they can raise their children to be practicing Muslims, extending themselves in trying to create an environment in which that training takes place on a day-to-day basis. By doing so they find it easier to protect themselves from those things in American society which would draw them away from the Muslim path. Care is taken in the selection of playmates, schools, entertainment, caretakers, recreation, always trying to avoid situations that would interfere with the values they want for their children. "American Muslims cherish the hope that their children will not so identify with Western culture that they abandon their faith and that they will continue to espouse and live by the sacred values of their Islamic heritage."¹⁴

Being in the World But Not of the World

The women in my survey reflected a very positive view of the life of American women who choose to be Muslim. While they regret the strain on their

relationships with their family and are not too keen about adjusting to the lack of power in the *umma* or masjid, they are adapting to their new lives, accommodating to the expectations of their husband's culture, while holding on to some of their own American upbringing and interpreting Islamic practices in the American setting. What they have taken on demands strength, commitment, and discipline, and the courage to deal with the pressures that American society places upon them.

It is clear that they are eager to assume leadership in exercising the rights that they believe are guaranteed to them in Islam. Those who return to their husband's country of origin may well exercise a special kind of influence there as they bring new interpretations of what it means to be a woman in a more truly Islamic manner, less encumbered by the many cultural traditions and expectations that have kept women from attaining their fundamental rights as set forth in the Qur'an.

Notes

1. Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Mr. Poston gives an overview of the Muslim missionary strategy in North America and the dynamics of conversion to Islam.

2. Carol L. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path* (Lee's Summit, MO: Yawna Publications, 1996). This survey of 53 American Muslim women comprised a collection of stories elicited from ten areas of questioning.

3. The women indicated their denominational backgrounds as follows: Catholic, 12; "holy roller," 1; Nazarene, 1; Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 2; Southern Baptist, 5; Christian, 2; Episcopal, 2; Methodist, 2; Lutheran, 1; Quaker, 1; Presbyterian, 1; World Wide Church of God, 2; Greek Orthodox, 2; Seventh Day Adventist, 1; Jehovah's Witness, 2; generally Christian, 4; no denomination given, 10; indication of atheist or no religious background, 2.

4. Some had changed denominations before the conversion to Islam: Catholic to Jehovah's Witness (1), Methodist to Catholic (1), Presbyterian to Catholic (1), Church of God to Episcopal (1), Catholic to "born-again" Christian (1), general Christian to Hindu (1).

5. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "American Foreign Policy in the Middle East and Its Impact on the Identity of Arab Muslims in the United States" in *Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 230.

6. Portion of a letter to Carol L. Anway written August 1995, by Noor Grant, editor of *Islamic Canada Reflections*, after her review of *Daughters of Another Path*.

7. Marcia K. Hermansen, "Two-Way Acculturation" in *Muslims of America*, cited above.

8. Personal observation written by Jodi Mohammadzadeh, July 1995, on file with Carol L. Anway.

9. Zahra Buttar, "American Female Muslim Conversion Survey," an unpublished paper presented 3 September 1993, to the University of Nevada Las

Vegas, Sociology Department. It was a preliminary study of American female Muslims.

10. Ibid., p. 14.

11. Ibid., p. 15.

12. Ibid., p. 15.

13. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path*.

14. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "American Foreign Policy in the Middle East," p. 230.