

## Article

# American Muslims' Da'wah Work and Islamic Conversion

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**Abstract:** Prior to the “9/11 attacks”, negative images of Islam in America were prevalent, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks made the situation for, and image of, Islam more sinister than before. Notwithstanding the extreme Islamophobia, one notes that, ironically in America, more people have been embracing Islam since, at least, the beginning of the twentieth century. Conversion to Islam in America seems to be a deviation from the adverse American public opinions towards Islam. An important question that, therefore, arises is: “Why are Americans converting to Islam despite negative public perception of the religion?” Perhaps Americans have been coerced into conversion by Muslim preachers through the latter’s meticulous and hard-hitting missionary work. In this qualitative study, the authors aim to explore how the missionary work, i.e., “Da’wah”, by some American Muslim missionaries influenced the conversion to Islam of those who were in contact with them. The authors argue that, unlike other Abrahamic proselytizing faiths such as Christianity or the Bahai faith, American Muslim proselytizing was not solely based on direct teaching of the tenets of the religion but also one that demonstrated faith by deeds or actions, which then made Islam attractive and influenced conversion of non-Muslims. These findings come from in-depth fieldwork that included interviews with forty-nine Muslim converts across the United States between June 2014 and May 2015.

**Keywords:** American Muslims; Da’wah work; Islamic conversion

## 1. Introduction

In June 2014, during the first visit to a local mosque in the state of Missouri, USA, I had the opportunity of meeting with a young Caucasian American lady who had come to take the shahadah<sup>1</sup> or oath to announce her conversion to Islam. In the following month of Ramadan, the holy fasting month in Islam, more and more Muslim converts showed up in this small remote mosque, which mainly served Arab migrants and international Muslim students. It seemed as if conversion to Islam was a fast-moving trend. According to the Council on American Islamic Relations, there were approximately 20,000 people converting to Islam each year (Haddad et al. 2006, p. 42). Although these data are too general and ambiguous since they may not actually reflect the special circumstances of the recent years, what seems clear is that an increasing number of Americans are converting to Islam. In addition to the polling data, an imam of a masjid in northern Virginia stated that “in September of 2014 alone, ten people took the shahadah to proclaim their conversion to Islam in our mosque” (Abu Zaid<sup>2</sup>, male, Sunni Imam, 10 October 2014). Ten is a conservative number because some converts prefer to take the

<sup>1</sup> Shahadah is one of the five pillars of Islam, and it refers to the act of claiming to become a Muslim. New Muslims profess the oneness of God, and that prophet Muhammad is the last messenger of God (Aziz 2007, p. 51; Whapoe 2009, p. 13).

<sup>2</sup> Abu Zaid is a pseudonym. Most of the interviewees’ names in this paper are pseudonym to protect their privacy.

shahadah in private rather than in a public space, such as at the mosque. In the context of American society, where more negative images of Islam were posted by the mass media after the “9/11 attacks”, it is surprising that Americans were choosing to convert to Islam. This phenomenon seemed an entirely opposite reaction to the promotion of a negative Islam, and one we felt merited further study to explore what drove the converts to accept Islam either coercively or voluntarily.

## 2. Literature Review

How can we understand what potentially looks like waves of Islamic conversion? Firstly, we review how this conversion phenomenon has been explained in the scholarly literature. Based on the review of the literature, we discovered that at least six types of studies on the various facets of religious conversion have been undertaken: (a) passive or active conversion experience; (b) social, familial, and psychological factors; (c) social justice and equality; (d) gender studies; (e) social functions perspectives; and (f) the forms of preaching Islam.

The passive paradigm explains that, when bad things occur to individuals, they are easily compelled to commit themselves to a new religion as a way of easing the pressure they confront. However, [Straus \(1979\)](#) discovered that not all converts embraced a new religion passively. Some converts were found to be “active” in their interaction with other religious groups in order to achieve meaningful changes. At this point, Straus preferred to use an active paradigm instead of a passive paradigm to explain religious conversion ([Straus 1979](#), p. 158). The brainwashing and social drift models were also used to examine if religious conversion happened coercively or actively. The brainwashing model involved cult members using coercive methods to cause new believers to reject their former identities, depend on the new group, and be easily controlled. In the drift model, new members’ active social experiences contributed to their religious conversion. Given that the “brainwashing model” and “social drift model” explained only half of the religious conversions, the “New Conception of Socialization” was conceptualized to interpret religious conversion as “a socializing interaction, in which both members and novices were active” ([Long and Hadden 1983](#), pp. 1–14).

However, other research has shown that social lifestyle, familial, psychological factors, and public resources played an important role in converts making a decision to embrace another religion. [Zebiri \(2008\)](#) pointed out that, in the United Kingdom, British converts were found to dislike some elements of British social lifestyle, namely materialism, consumerism, secularism, and sexualization. In contrast, the meaningful lifestyle advocated in Islam convinced them to choose Islam over Christianity ([Zebiri 2008](#), p. 248). [Batson and Ventis \(1982\)](#) claimed that the religious atmosphere presented by one’s family had a significant impact on the individuals’ decision to maintain one’s family’s religion or turn to a new religion. The majority of the converts were raised in a family in which their parents did not have a close affiliation with their ancestral religions ([Batson and Ventis 1982](#), pp. 46–47). In addition, whereas Roald’s interview data claimed that few informants had negative relationship with their parents ([Roald 2004](#), p. 92), more researchers proved that the people, who were raised in the families lacking love from parents ([Ullman 1989](#), p. 30; [Deutsch 1975](#), p. 168; [Salzman 1953](#), p. 186), suffered traumatic incidents ([Clark 1958](#), p. 215; [Dollah 1979](#), pp. 48–49), and experienced problems in adolescence ([Allison 1969](#), pp. 23–38), benefited greatly from the psychological comfort that came with embracing a new religion. Bowen stated that, in the post “9/11 attacks” era, the pervasive coverage of Islam by the mass media made all classes of U.S. citizens exposed to the information on Islam ([Bowen 2009](#), p. 47). Moreover, some popular bookstores, which never exhibited books about Islam, started to sell the Qur’an in different languages as well as Islamic books ([Verbrugge 2005](#), p. 102). Such kinds of publicly available printed resources aroused Americans’ curiosity about Islam.

In some studies, conversion to Islam was viewed as a political decision linked to the pursuit of social justice and equality. For example, in 1981, thousands of “untouchables” in the South Indian State of Tamil Nadu, converted to Islam, which aroused serious tensions in Indian society. [Mujahid \(1989\)](#) discovered that the ease of communication practiced among Tamil Muslims, the egalitarianism in Muslim communities, and Islam’s opposition to the caste system were positive attributes which served

to attract the “untouchables” towards Islam. In [Mujahid’s \(1989, pp. 7–9\)](#) opinion, turning to Islam was a strategy of protest used by the converts against the unjust Hindu caste system. Similarly, [De Montclos \(2008\)](#) discovered that, in the southern part of Nigeria, local gangsters and warlords turned to Islam to express their opposition to the local Christian elites ([De Montclos 2008, pp. 71–87](#)). Furthermore, since the 1930s, tens of thousands of African Americans have joined a Black Muslim Group “*the Nation of Islam*” and later accepted Islam because the new religion they embraced supported racial justice and equality ([Armstrong 2003, pp. 18–23](#)).

The literature on Islamic conversion has also focused on female Muslim converts. [Sultan \(1999\)](#) interviewed 30 Swedish female converts and described two stages of the conversion process: how women became attracted to Islam, on the one hand, and how they handled challenges at the post-conversion stage, on the other. [King’s \(2017\)](#) study found that six Australian female converts were primarily attracted to the values, principles, and beliefs of Islam, while [Anway \(1996, pp. 32–42\)](#) concluded that the reasons for American-born women choosing Islam included: “filling a spiritual void, sensing the authority of the Qur’an, and finding answers in Islam”. American Islamic scholars [Haddad et al. \(2006\)](#) concurred with the assertions made by [King \(2017\)](#) and [Anway \(1996\)](#), although their analysis went deeper and extended their samples to African American women. They asserted that some new female Muslims regarded Islam as a religion which promoted women’s rights. For instance, women in their sample believed that modest dress codes were designed to serve to protect women from the wandering gaze of men, and to reach a respectable relationship between men and women. Additionally, African American women had embraced Islam mainly because of being granted equality with men and full participation in a welcoming community, the Nation of Islam ([Haddad et al. 2006, pp. 44–45, 53](#)). [Guimond \(2017\)](#) explored why American-born Caucasian women chose conversion to Islam; she examined the victimization, marginalization, prejudice, and discrimination that the converts endured; and stressed their calling for being seen and heard by their families, communities, and the American public ([Guimond 2017, pp. 110–19, 150–52](#)).

Some researchers explored the social functions of Islamic conversions. [Spalek and El-Hassan \(2007\)](#) conducted surveys in two prisons in England and discovered that the social functions of Islam were not only to provide a moral framework for the prisoners but also to help them build a new life. The converts reported that in the post-conversion era, Islam proved to be a guide to them since it instilled strong self-discipline and awareness of being watched by God, which in turn lowered their levels of aggression and violence ([Spalek and El-Hassan 2007, pp. 99–114](#)).

Finally, the forms of Islamic preaching have also been well researched. Islamic thinkers strongly emphasized that Islamic missionary work was markedly different in its aims and methods from Christianity ([Wiedl 2009, p. 120](#)). Compared with Christianity, Islam, in general, had no specially-trained agents, organized proselytization system, or priesthood to do missionary work. Muslim individuals of all ranks of society had labored for the spread of Islam ([Arnold 1896, pp. 332–33](#)). In Indonesia, [Burhani](#) discovered that young Muslim preachers without authoritative knowledge of Islam could get social acceptance through conversion narratives ([Burhani 2020, p. 154](#)). Knowledge management, such as teaching practices, infrastructures of lecture halls, libraries, and laboratories, government support in Islamic education, and academic research, contributed to the development of Islamic preaching ([Don and Jaffar 2009, pp. 61–68](#)). As for the groups of African Americans, [Bowen](#) stated that the leaders of the early African American movements, like W.D. Fard and his successors, introduced black folks to the idea that black people were the holy people with a pride history, which attracted them to accept Islam. Besides that, uplifting black communities was another appealing way of preaching Islam ([Bowen 2017, p. 243](#)).

Thus, overall, the research that has been conducted was of great contribution to helping people acknowledge Islamic conversion, and it also reached a consensus view that converts chose Islam mainly due to the advantages it offered. This research asserts that only a positive image of Islam could have spurred conversion voluntarily. If a person had a negative image of Islam, he/she would probably turn a blind eye to Islam’s advantages. Similarly, in American society, particularly in the aftermath of

the “9/11 attacks”, when social fear towards Islam increased dramatically, it was almost impossible for Americans to embrace the religion voluntarily. Hence, there was a gap between fearing Islam and turning to Islam, which needed to be bridged to increase our understanding of the factors for conversion despite negative images of the religion. We hypothesize that the missionary work of Muslims might play a crucial role in persuading non-Muslims to turn to Islam, which would help answer the question I posed above. Although some literature had addressed Islamic missionary work around the world, it has not been sufficient to explain the conversion to Islam that happened in American society. Hence, further research on American Muslims missionary work needed to be conducted.

### 3. Methodology

Besides literature review, field research data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The participants of this qualitative study were contacted by using snowball sampling. From June 2014 to May 2015, I visited some mosques located in the states of Missouri, Maryland, Virginia, and Washington DC to make known my project in an effort to identify Muslim converts. In addition to that, I also posted requests online and sent emails to Islamic organizations. In the end, forty-nine American Muslim converts responded and shared their conversion experiences with me through face-to-face interviews, Skype video interviews, and telephone calls. To examine how Muslims’ missionary work impacted on non-Muslims, the interviewees were asked five main questions: (a) How do you recall your first contact with Islam? (b) What was your point of contact? (for example, personal connection, reading Islamic literature, or in school) (c) What was your first impression of Islam? (d) Would you like to introduce the first time you met with Muslims? (e) What kinds of missionary work did the Muslims conduct towards you? (f) How did Muslims help you understand, practice, and accept Islam?

Apart from the forty-nine new converts, some Muslims who were born and raised in Muslim families also participated in some of my discussions on Islam. Some were American-born Muslims, while others were migrants from Indonesia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Usually, they were imams, doctors, designers, college students, technical staff, and housewives. Moreover, a few Christians were also invited to discuss some topics on missionary work. Furthermore, during the process of revising this paper in accordance with the reviewers’ comments, I went back to some interviewees to obtain further information.

### 4. Sample

The forty-nine converts’ geographic locality, gender, ages, age at conversion and the years of conversion, educational, race, and religion backgrounds are noted in the following paragraphs.

At the time of the interviews, twenty-nine (fifty-nine percent) converts lived in the metropolitan area of Virginia, Maryland, and Washington DC. Other interviewees were in Florida, California, North Carolina, South Carolina, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, New Mexico, and New Jersey, while two respondents moved to Canada from America. Nine of the converts in the sample were male, while forty converts were female. The participants ranged in age from seventeen to eighty-five years old with almost forty percent of the interviewees aged between twenty-one and thirty years. The age of conversion varied from fourteen to fifty-five, and around eighty-two percent of the conversions occurred from ages seventeen to twenty-five. Of the forty-nine interviewees, twenty-nine revealed that they embraced Islam after the “9/11 attacks”, whereas twenty participants had chosen Islam during the period from the 1950s to the 1990s. The education of the interviewees ranged from high school to doctoral degrees: sixty-six percent of participants had earned bachelor’s degrees, and twenty percent of the interviewees reported having master’s or even doctoral degrees. With regard to race, approximately sixty-three percent of the participants were American-born with European origins; twenty-five percent were of African origins; ten percent were Asian migrants; and two percent were native Americans.

Regarding religious background, forty-three converts indicated that they were raised in Christian families. Fourteen Christians did not identify their denominations, fifteen confirmed their Protestant

background, and fourteen were Catholics. Four converts used to be atheists, and two were Buddhists. Furthermore, most of the converts in this research were Sunni Muslims, while nine out of forty-nine converts identified as Shi'a Muslims. Interestingly, it was reported that, in the process of conversion to Islam, the converts did not think of different sects of Islam since they were mainly convinced by some common theologies in Islam. In general, it was only in the post-conversion era that the converts made the decision of choosing a school of jurisprudence. For instance, a Shi'a Muslim convert shared that, "I had problems with God having a son from a young age, and when Islam explained it to me, it made more sense. As I learned more about Islamic history after my conversion, I agreed that the Jafari school was more just" (Susan, American-born Caucasian, female, 7 July 2020). A Sunni Muslim convert explained that, "When I accepted Islam, I knew there were a few main groups, but I also read the opinion that sects shouldn't exist in Islam—we are all submitting to the same God. I never gave it much thought past that. The mainstream seemed to be Sunni, so I did just go with that" (Heather, American-born Caucasian, female, 9 July 2020). At this point, new converts discussed Islam in general before their conversion, so sects like Shi'a and other schools of jurisprudence, and movements such as Sufi Islam, were not prominently highlighted by my informants.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. *The Meaning and Principle of Da'wah*

In America, nearly every community has at least one church to serve the local Christian population. From time to time, members of the younger generation dressed in suits would be seen preaching the Gospel from door to door. In contrast to Christians, American Muslims seem not to be active or enthusiastic about preaching their religion. To undertake the research, I visited imams from different mosques all of whom gave me consistent answers: "We never went to non-Muslims to persuade them to join Islam. If non-Muslims had questions about Islam, we were happy to answer them. This is our missionary work that we call Da'wah" (Rash, Iranian migrant, Imam, 12 September 2014). Da'wah is a term basically meaning "to invite, to call" (Poston 1992, p. 3). To put it differently, it meant inviting or calling non-Muslims and Muslims (Wagner 2003, pp. 339–47; Johnson and Scoggins 2005, pp. 8–11) to know about Islam, or to the path of Allah (McCurry 1979, p. 614).

Underlying the concept of Da'wah is the principle of "without force", which is defined in the Qur'an (2:256) in the following way "There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion". In accordance with the principle of "without force", the Muslims' Da'wah work is conducted in low profile. Moreover, it is reported that some Christian countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, had strong Islamophobic reactions as forms of racial hostility and discrimination. People deemed that Muslim women needed liberation and empowerment through taking off their headscarves and the Muslim migrants who were regarded as invaders might create serious demographic change (Bridge Initiative Team 2019). The bad situation of Islam in Christian countries restrained its Da'wah work. In 1968, a Pakistani Muslim, who had done Da'wah in Britain for years, delivered a speech on what Da'wah work in Western countries entailed: "We are doing almost no Da'wah among non-Muslims, indeed, to be honest, anywhere in the world" (Murad 1986, p. 5).

Usually, in some Christian countries, the early Muslim migrants launched Da'wah because of the concern that their offspring might be assimilated into Christian cultures (Wiedl 2009, p. 139). Kose (1996) pointed out that, although a new generation of Muslims in the United Kingdom turned from indirect to direct Da'wah work in accordance with the improvement of their social status, Islamic preaching still could not compete with that of the proselytization efforts undertaken by Christians (Kose 1996, pp. 26–28). Likewise, the same situation was reflected in the United States. Strong Islamophobia in the United States and the conflicts between the U.S. and some Muslim countries were constant reminders for American Muslims to undertake Da'wah cautiously.

## 5.2. Two Ways of Da'wah Work: Indirect Da'wah and Direct Da'wah

How did Muslim clerics in the United States perform Da'wah work? Interviews with imams in the various mosques were illuminating: the views of the clergy or imam of a mosque that has been affiliated with the Muslim American Society (MAS) since 1999 in Virginia was particularly insightful. This mosque had set up a Da'wah Committee that covered a range of Da'wah activities: "accepting invitations to speak at houses of worship and universities, assisting with prison Da'wah, arranging Sunday school for new converts and people of other faiths, visiting incarcerated Muslims, supporting Muslim and non-Muslim homeless people, distributing 'Back-To-School' supplies annually for needy families and presenting gifts to hospitalized patients on Eids" ([Dar Al-Hijrah Islamic Center 2017](#)). In addition, Islamic scholar John Esposito stated that Da'wah work included social service, economic projects, education, and religious publishing and broadcasting ([Esposito 1999](#), p. 21).

In this research, it was discovered that American Muslims undertook Da'wah in two ways, what I call "indirect Da'wah" and "direct Da'wah", both playing major roles in guiding non-Muslims to Islam. The two terms were well addressed by Kose in 1996. In his study, the first Muslim migrant generation in the United Kingdom tried to maintain their Islamic beliefs in the Christian country and preferred to discuss the similarities between Christianity and Islam with non-Muslims rather than emphasizing the superiority of Islam, which was considered as a kind of indirect Da'wah. As for the British-born Muslims who had received good education, they conducted direct Da'wah work: organizing inter-faith dialogues and conferences and inviting well-educated non-Muslims to make deep and meaningful discussions ([Kose 1996](#), pp. 26–28). With regard to this research, indirect and direct Da'wah had different meanings, which are explained in the following paragraphs.

### 5.2.1. Indirect Da'wah Work

Firstly, the "indirect Da'wah" displayed by Muslims referred to personal, embodied traits such as "good" personalities and behaviors. This meaning of "indirect Da'wah" was first raised by an American Muslim convert, and I use his phrase here to refer to this kind of Da'wah undertaken by Muslims. During a fieldwork trip to an outdoor barbecue event organized by Indonesian Muslims in Virginia, Muslims sat in a circle to discuss what they thought to be Da'wah. After some discussion, a Caucasian American veteran, Sunni Muslim convert, male, aged 50, shared his understanding of Da'wah:

"Muslims behaving in a beautiful way is also Da'wah work. For example, I go to Walmart to buy some groceries. After putting all the stuff in the trunk, I will put the shopping cart back. This is a form of Da'wah". (27 September 2014)

It was difficult for me to understand why this convert regarded good personalities and behavior as a kind of Da'wah. However, further interviews confirmed that, even though Muslims neither intended to do Da'wah work nor even spoke much about Islam, their good personalities and behaviors did attract people unconsciously and helped people reflect on their opinions of Muslims and Islam. Such kinds of experiences have occurred since 1965 when greater numbers of Muslims along with highly-skilled professionals from the Middle East and South Asia entered the United States ([Nyang 1999](#), p. 17; [Interfaith 2012](#), p. 4). They stayed in America and became neighbors, classmates, teachers, or colleagues of American non-Muslims. The interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims played a decisive role in changing the latter's negative images of Islam, especially after the "9/11 attacks" when Islamophobia became an American obsession. Some interviewees shared their negative impressions: "In the ninth grade, when it came to the topic of Islam, our teacher played a video which represented the oppressed life of Muslim women", "After the '9/11 attacks', we watched a video at school that showed the process of terrorists attacking the Twin Towers. As kids at seven or eight years old, we were very scared and worried that terrorists might kill all Americans. It has been affecting me for a long time." However, in their adult years, as they encountered Muslims, the good life habits, virtue ethics, beautiful personalities, and behaviors of Muslims changed the non-Muslims' impressions of Muslims and sparked their curiosity towards learning Islam.

Moreover, the converts reached a consensus that Muslims' responses to their conversion to Islam were very impressive: under the principle of "without force", Muslims were not eager to convert non-Muslims or impose pressure on them to convert. Even when the non-Muslims decided to embrace Islam, Muslims suggested them to take it slowly. Instead, it was the non-Muslims who accepted Islam genuinely and voluntarily. This gentle approach to conversion by Muslims was considered as indirect Da'wah by the converts as well.

Furthermore, some informants alluded to the Qur'an itself as an "indirect Da'wah". Although the Qur'an was an object without intention to convert people, the art of the Qur'an, such as the calligraphy and the way of reciting the Qur'an, touched potential converts emotionally and deeply. In addition, its logical theology unconsciously answered non-Muslims' long-lasting confusing questions that made them accept Islam. Moreover, equality in Islam was another impulse that convinced especially African Americans to adopt Islam.

### 5.2.2. Direct Da'wah Work

I observed that Muslims conducted direct Da'wah work as a form of helping non-Muslims understand and practice Islam. My conversations with some American Muslims and the converts on Da'wah primarily shed light on four issues: (a) sharing information with people who are interested in Islam regardless of their beliefs; (b) organizing inter-faith dialogues; (c) helping new converts navigate their new life; and (d) supplying life guidance to prisoners.

First, it appeared that Muslims put in very little effort, for example, in delivering brochures on streets, outside supermarkets, or in any other public places. What they tended to do was to share resources about Islam directly with the people who showed interest in learning the religion. In an email, an American-born Sunni Muslim with African origin, aged 65, working at Tauheed Islamic Center of Wilmington, North Carolina, which was in support of the Mosque Cares, wrote that: "Da'wah is openly sharing or spreading information to all who may be interested in the true meaning of Al-Islam by means of recordings, such as tapes, CDs, and DVDs. Other resources include the newspaper of 'Our Muslim Journal', brochures, books, radio and television news, interfaith activities, or just regular conversations" (Abdul, Imam, 27 January 2015). His approach to sharing Islam became evident after regular contact with him over months: he asked for my mail address and mailed me a package of brochures describing Islam.

Second, some American Muslims were found to be full of enthusiasm about organizing and participating in inter-faith dialogues. On 22 February 2015, the Islamic Education Center of Maryland, which was run by Alavi Foundation and mainly served local Iranian Muslims, organized an event called "visiting a mosque" in which it opened its doors to the public. Some visiting scholars and students from China were invited to visit the mosque to study its architecture, to view its clinic rooms and Islamic education school, and to observe the prayer rituals. A round table inter-faith discussion was also organized to allow for an exchange of ideas between Muslims and non-Muslim visitors to the mosque. By way of observation, Muslims did not seek to convert anyone during the whole event, nevertheless they did fulfill their Da'wah goals. It was clear that the discussion had greatly changed the visitors' perception of Islam. A Chinese male international graduate student, aged 22, shared his experience with his classmates on a school shuttle bus: "Yesterday I went on my first tour to a mosque. The mosque offered us a ride, served tasty food, and gave us beautiful prayer rugs as gifts. I knew more details of Muslims through my first visit. I think Muslims are good people" (Andrew, 24 February 2015).

Some visitors posted their feelings and comments on the social media Wechat:

"I used to think that the serious Muslims might not allow us to take photos inside their sacred mosque. But to my surprise, they allowed us. The Muslims were friendly and patient enough to answer the questions that I raised. They were so different from how the mass media portrayed [them]. The most impressive thing was that the so-called 'aggressive', 'violent' Muslims did not ask me to join Islam". (Yu, 23 February 2015)

Third, as for the majority of the converts, embracing Islam created a new spiritual life, but simultaneously their life turned difficult as they faced challenges from their families and society. One interviewee, a Caucasian American, office worker, Sunni Muslim convert, aged 25 described the hardship she encountered after her conversion to Islam:

“My family felt upset, [and] they even felt ashamed. They do not like Muslims because they see them as terrorists and bad people. They worry mostly that I will become a terrorist. They [also] worry that I will go to hell after death. My father even forbids me from talking to my nephew, who is very small and who he thinks can easily be misguided, he says. In my workplace, I choose not to wear the scarf because of the negative reactions from my colleagues. It may restrict my professional life”. (Firdevs, 18 December 2014)

Taking into account the difficulties new Muslims faced, Muslim volunteers act as *ansars* (helpers) to offer guidance to Muslim converts in their new path. An Indonesian Muslim migrant, housewife, aged 45, was keen to invite new Muslims to Islamic events. She explained that:

“I would love to keep in touch with the new Muslims once I meet them. I understand converts’ pains and hardships they face from their families, friends, and our society. If we do not offer assistance during their difficult period, they probably will leave Islam soon”. (Sitti Sahro Locke, 23 February 2015)

The leaders of some mosques were also concerned about the hardship felt by the new converts. For instance, during the Ramadan of 2016, nearly twenty new female converts showed up in the Women’s Mosque of America, the first female-only mosque in the U.S., which was located in Los Angeles, California. To make the new converts feel more at home, the *ansars* of the mosque invited them to a potluck at Griffith Park in order to answer their questions and help them build new friendships ([Women’s Mosque of America 2016](#)).

Furthermore, American Muslims were found to pay close attention to the missionary work in prisons because of the high incarceration levels in America and the prisoners’ lack of life guidance. It is estimated that, although American people make up only five percent of the global population, twenty-five percent of the world’s prisoners live in the United States ([2nd Chance Books 2014](#)). The imam serving at Tauheed Islamic Center of Wilmington gave the following comments on the significance of prison Da’wah:

“We do Da’wah work in prisons because religion is one avenue of helping an individual to change their thinking and improve their living habits once released from prisons to rejoin their families and society in general. It gives guidance for a deeper understanding of pursuing a better education, human values, financial growth, and citizenship responsibility”. (Abdul, 27 January 2015)

Based on experience in prison, a French American, male, Shi’a Muslim convert, aged 32, who had been sentenced to a ten-year incarceration at age 17, said, “In prison, if prisoners did not get good guidance and education, after being released they would go back to their former friendship circles” (Mateen Charbonneau, 11 January 2015). In 2014, he co-established 2nd Chance Books, a non-profit organization that aimed to “provide proper tools for changing life, free Islamic books on belief, ethics, morality and family structure in Islam” (2nd Chance Books 2014). On receiving letters requesting Islamic books from prisoners, he posted the following message on Facebook: “We have sixteen letters from prisoners requesting books to learn about the family of the Prophet. It takes \$25 to send a package of five or six books. Thank you for your support.” Once he had collected enough funds to buy all the requested books, he spoke of how contented he was to drive to the prison to deliver them.

Besides all mentioned above, new Muslims who were former Christians were more active to seize opportunities of preaching religion. In 2014, after the celebration of the Islamic Festival of Korban in a mosque, I went to a supermarket with a new Shi’a Muslim, a middle-aged Asian woman wearing

a splendid black attire and headscarf. In the supermarket, when a female customer took a second look at her, she responded with a smile and then introduced her exotic attire and the Islamic Festival of Korban. By way of observation, the customer seemed happy to know of the exotic cultures and customs. The new Muslim explained to me that, “I would like to take any chance to introduce Islam and help people break stereotypes of Muslims. It is very important. Actually you can do it everywhere and every time” (Shimmer, 5 October 2014).

## 6. Discussion

The following sections aim to prove how American Muslims’ indirect and direct Da’wah affected the conversion decision of the interviewees.

### 6.1. Indirect Da’wah Work’s Influences on the Converts’ Islamic Conversion

#### 6.1.1. Indirect Da’wah: Good Personalities and Behaviors of Muslims

Based on the narratives, nearly ninety-six percent of the interviewees had contacts with Muslims before conversion to Islam. The contacts mostly occurred after the 1970s when “Muslim professionals moved to America under the provisions of the Immigration Act of 1965” (Haddad et al. 2006, p. 6). Usually, the Muslims were classmates, teachers, colleagues, friends, and even lovers who finally became the spouses of the converts. The interviewees, in general, considered the Muslims to be humble, modest, and well-educated people having good behaviors and life habits.

Notwithstanding the denominations of Islam, most of the converts paid attention to ethics and morality, so they easily appreciated the consensus areas of Islamic generic ethics and morality. In this research, two Shi’a Muslim converts shared how they became attracted to their international Muslim classmates in college in the 1970s. The first interviewee, a Caucasian American female and a social services trainer, aged 58, commented on her Iranian husband:

“I met him in college in the early 1970s. He was a very kind and moral person, who always went out of his way to help others. He had a lot of qualities that I found [were] very good. He attributed them to Islam that taught him the proper ways he should behave”. (Susan, 1 September 2014)

The other convert, a Caucasian American female who was 60 and had become an Islamic preacher, recalled that:

“My two Iranian classmates were excellent in their studies and had good life habits. They never went to bars, no smoking or drinking. They behaved in a very polite way. I was curious about why they did not eat pork. They did not feel annoyed about my questions and gave explanations on this matter from a scientific perspective. Their polite behaviors and respect towards others stimulated me to think why these Muslims behaved so well”. (Iman, 7 December 2014)

Besides these early converts, I also managed to speak to those converts who contacted Muslims after the “9/11 attacks”. Deeply affected by the terrorist attacks, twenty-two converts who used to have strong fears of and hatred towards Muslims sought more knowledge of Islam. They also indicated that, over time, the virtuous lives led by the Muslims played a great part in them breaking away from the stereotypes of Muslims, thereby leading them to rethink Islam. For example, one interviewee, a Caucasian American female, Shi’a Muslim convert, aged 25, started to be interested in Islam because of the beauty of her foreign Muslim girlfriend’s personality. She said, “in 2010, I was studying abroad in Mexico where I met her. When we ate dinner together, she always asked me to try the first pizza slice. Although for her it was a common thing, it was really a beautiful characteristic that I also wanted to own” (Caroline, 20 September 2014). Interviewee Firdevs, office worker, Sunni Muslim convert, shared a similar experience on how she changed her negative perception of Muslims -through her contact with an international Muslim student:

“Five years ago, I did not know anything [the truth] about Islam. I thought that Muslims were terrorists and barbarians who were aggressive, violent and not civilized. I met my current fiancé in 2010. I did not know he was a Muslim at first. I liked him because he was a caring, nice, and generous person, just like a beautiful person. Finally, I found out that he was a Muslim who was born in Turkey and came here for education and career. I used to think that Muslims were terrorists, but he was a nice person. He told me that he behaved in this nice way because he was a Muslim. Although I knew that not all the Muslims acted in such a good way, I started to open my eyes to Islam”. (Firdevs, 18 December 2014)

In addition, some American-born Muslims were depicted as people who “paid more attention to be good persons, to be in good status, and to take more care of family. They typically did not drink alcohol or join parties. Muslims girls dressed modestly, and they did not show off a lot” (Andrew, female, Caucasian American, Sunni Muslim convert, 13 December 2014). More positive comments on Muslims were added, “When I worked in a restaurant, I found that my Muslim colleagues were not greedy. Rather than pushing customers to order more foods, they gave customers good advice. That was my first good impression of Muslims” (Buya, female, Asian migrant, Sunni Muslim convert, 30 December 2014).

Bowen’s research testified that, even when Muslims had close relationships with non-Muslims, they never put pressure on the future convert to embrace Islam (Bowen 2009, p. 52). In our study, the same consensus was reached by some interviewees that, compared with Christian preachers, Muslim missionaries were not eager to convert non-Muslims or pressure them into embracing Islam. For this reason, I regarded it as a kind of “indirect Da’wah”, not explicitly intended but with great visible repercussions. A Caucasian American convert, male, aged 45, who was trained as a Christian missionary at a young age, recalled that “Usually, Christian missionaries try to make you feel that you have original sins first. Once you believe that, you will rely on them to know the ways of cleaning sins. Sometimes this way of missionary work makes potential converts feel uncomfortable” (Mike, Sunni Muslim convert, October 2014). “As an atheist, I was invited to read the Bible for a short time, during which I felt a little bit uncomfortable because some of them were eager to persuade me to become a Christian. When I told them I did not want to embrace Christianity, they were angry with me. The uncomfortable experience made me leave them.” (Ana, Caucasian American, female, Junior Student, Shi’a Muslim convert, 30 October 2014). However, in a similar vein, some Muslims gave future Muslims advice such as “don’t do too much too fast, take it slowly”. Heather, a Caucasian American female who was raised in a Lutheran family, shared that, “My husband is a Sunni Muslim, He mentioned that he was taught that a woman doesn’t need to be Muslim to marry him. She only needs to believe that there is one God. He was totally fine with me being Christian before, during, and after our wedding. My in-laws were not eager for my conversion to Islam either. Even when I decided to take shahadah, they suggested me taking it slowly. It made me feel at ease” (Heather, Sunni Muslim convert, 14 October 2014).

### 6.1.2. Indirect Da’wah: The Logical Theology of Qur’an<sup>3</sup>

A few new converts mentioned their unpleasant contact with Muslims, but they still retained their new beliefs because of the merits of Qur’an. The Qur’an itself was an object that did not contain the explicit call to proselytize, but its logical theology touched the potential converts either emotionally or intellectually, resulting in a closer connection between Islam and the potential converts and even decisions of conversion to Islam. Therefore, in this research the logical theology of Qur’an is perceived as a form of indirect Da’wah.

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<sup>3</sup> This idea was inspired by a scholar in a letter: What is the difference between Da’wah of actors and Da’wah of Islam or the Qur’an? If someone simply encounters the Qur’an and is moved by it, is that the same as meeting a Muslim who inspires?

Interview data showed that a few interviewees were moved by the Qur'an emotionally. For instance, "When my husband read the first paragraph of the Qur'an related to where people came from and why he was created, in that minute, he cried in the prison" (Sophiya, 28 August 2014); "at the moment of my first seeing of Arabic writings on a lecture poster, I wished that I could know this beautiful language" (Fatima, Sunni Muslim convert, 12 November 2014); and "one time I stopped by a mosque to listen to the wonderful music. I was wondering who was singing such a pleasant song. I was told that it was Azan calling Muslims to pray" (Amanda, Sunni Muslim convert, September 2014).

The majority of the interviewees engaged in intellectual study of the Qur'an, during which they were convinced by the logical theology of Qur'an. The frequently-addressed questions on Christian theology were related to the original sins, the judgment criteria on Resurrection day, and the Trinity. Many of the interviewees questioned that why human beings should feel guilty because of Adam and Eve's original sins and suffer from that, why Jesus Christ's sacrifice can redeem human beings' original sins, why horrible Protestants get rewarded with entry to heaven just because of being baptized, but the righteous non-Christians automatically went to hell, and how one God could be in three different forms.

"I was raised in a very religious Catholic family. At grade four, the idea of original sin was very disturbing to me. If a baby died without being baptized, he/she would go to hell. It did not make sense to me because the babies were so pure. In a thirty-minute lecture online, a Muslim man talked about the original sin, which was resonated with me strongly. Islam taught that Allah had forgiven Adam and Eve's sins. At that moment I knew that what I had been looking for my entire life was Islam" (Ahlulbayt TV 2014).

Some converts who were former Protestants were easily convinced by the judgment criteria. A Sunni Muslim convert recalled that, "Jesus died to clean our sins, so you do not need to worry about that. Some people committed sins and did not need to think about the consequences of their deeds. This logic is wrong. But there is a consequence and judgment in Islam. So the religious Muslims watched their behaviors very carefully because there are consequences on Resurrection Day" (Firdevs, 18 December 2014). To be specific, Islam taught that people would be judged depending on their deeds (Rahman et al. 2009, p. 105): "whoever does an evil deed would be recompensed with only the like of it, but whosoever does a righteous deed, be it male or female, they shall enter Paradise" (Qur'an 40:40).

In addition, thirty-three interviewees reported their difficulties in understanding the Trinity. During the long period of searching for the answers, as many interviewees revealed, some priests or pastors explained the questions they had in a vague way or just repeated some creeds. The most disappointing reply was that "just believe in God, do not question why". Failing to get convincing answers from the Christian preachers in 2004, Sky, an African American senior student, female, aged 21, went to a town library to find the Qur'an to learn about Islam. "Surprisingly, my questions in Christianity were all settled in the Qur'an. In Islam, there is only one God. God does not have any sons. Jesus is one of the most significant prophets in Islam, not the son of God. All these theologies are very logical and made sense to me ... In 2009, I embraced Islam" (Sky, Sunni Muslim convert, 23 November 2014). The Qur'an, therefore, served as an important form of Da'wah by providing answers to puzzling questions that these converts had of their previous faith, namely Christianity.

Furthermore, equality in Islamic teaching fascinated some converts. To African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century, equality that was advocated by Islam resonated with them strongly. "Islam taught that all the human beings were equal. Islam is a way of life on how you treat others and how you treat yourself. You should treat people like you want to be treated. In our society, when you went to some places, you were not treated well because of your race" (Labeeba, 85 years old, 19 December 2014). Even for the young generations of African Americans, equality in Islam was still an appealing factor for their adoption of Islam. "As a Black girl, this is so important to me because in the U.S., we put so much emphasize on race, but in Islam everyone is equal. For example, in the prophet Muhammad's last sermon, it was said that, 'An Arab is not better than a non-Arab and a non-Arab is not better than an Arab, and a red (i.e., white tinged with red) person is not better than a black person and a black person is not better than a red person except in piety.'" (Sky, 23 November 2014).

To sum up, compared with Kose's study, the indirect Da'wah in this research had a salient difference. Kose stated that the indirect Da'wah conducted by the first Muslim migrant generation aimed to maintain their Islamic cultures in the United Kingdom. They favored the discussions with Christians on the similarities between the two religions. However, in our research, it was the converts who confirmed Muslims' good personalities and behaviors as indirect Da'wah. Even though Muslims neither intended to do Da'wah work nor even spoke much about Islam, their virtuous ethics attracted the non-Muslims unconsciously and inspired them to reflect on their opinions of Islam. Moreover, the converts mentioned that they were impressed by the Muslims' responses to their conversion to Islam. The Muslims that they contacted with did not put pressure on their conversion decision. Without pressure and discomfort, the non-Muslims continued their affiliation with Islam. In addition, some converts claimed that they were deeply touched by the Qur'an, by its art, theology, or equality, which did not have intention to convert people but made Islam appeal to people. Thus, from the point of the converts, they were not coerced into converting to Islam but attracted by the indirect Da'wah.

The above discusses indirect Da'wah from the perspectives of the converts. Some American Muslims shared their opinions on how they viewed the indirect Da'wah. Muslims did not regard their virtuous performance as a form of Da'wah because, for Muslims, to practice a socially conscientious living as taught by the Qur'an is essential to their identity and practice as Muslims. That is because the Qur'an is a guide and manual that teaches Muslims how to live a good life on earth. Thus, the Muslims did not consider their positive personalities and behaviors as indirect Da'wah since they are just following the teachings of the Qur'an. Some Muslims commented that, "Muslim don't have rights to change or to force opinion to someone especially religion". Moreover, "In Islam, we have a principal that every deed requires the proper intention, or it is not accepted. If I do any good deed for any other reason or to get any benefits, this deed will not be accepted from God because the intention is not pure" (Abu Zaid, male, Sunni Imam, 6 July 2020).

## 6.2. *Direct Da'wah Work's Influences on the Converts' Islamic Conversion*

American Muslims conducted various methods of direct Da'wah to act as ambassadors of Islam—patient and ready to help non-Muslim friends understand theological questions, guide them through their first visits to mosques, and observe the five pillars of Islam, including praying and fasting.

The converts revealed that their theological questions were well answered by Muslims through citing some basic principles of Islam. "I resolved my theological confusions through my Muslim inmate. He showed me verses on Jesus in the Qur'an to prove that Jesus was a messenger and a prophet. All that made sense to me. After much research into Islam, I took the 'shahadah' to accept Islam" (Mateen Charbonneau, Shi'a Muslim convert, 11 January 2015). Lily, a German American female and an office worker aged 58, recalled how her Muslim husband who came from Iran in the 1970s interpreted theology to her, "I am logical, and I always need proof. My first husband made extremely clear to me that Jesus ate and eliminated (went to the bathroom), and that to say that he was God or God's son was demeaning because God or God's son would not do that. All those words sounded extremely logical to me" (Lily, 16 November 2015).

With respect to the observance of Islam, except for only two interviewees who did not have any contact with Muslims nor received any guidance from Muslims before taking shahadah, others practiced Islam with help from Muslims. As for the first time observing prayers and praying in mosques, one interviewee, an Italian American female and office worker aged 27, recalled:

"When I took a part-time job as a resident assistant, I met some International Muslim students. I had seen them praying in the dormitory, and I wanted to join them. My friend showed me how to pray and translated the Arabic prayers. I used to pray as a Catholic but never had a structured prayer schedule. I really liked the idea of planning time in my day to pray. I had never been to a mosque before and wanted to see what it was like. The first visit to a mosque was with my Muslim friend whose mother worked there and could show me around.

When you participated in a congregation with so many sisters, the feeling was so beautiful and peaceful". (Mali, Shi'a Muslim convert, 4 October 2014)

For most of the cases in this study, interviewees had heard about fasting, although their comprehension expanded when they spoke about it at greater length with other Muslims. "I heard about fasting from my college professor," one interviewee, a Caucasian American female, serving at a Spectrum Recovery Consulting, aged 40, recalled, "Before the class, our professor said: you can take your drinks or foods to class, and you are also free to enjoy them. It does not trouble me although I am observing the fast" (Tres, Sunni Muslim convert, 8 August 2014). The interviewee Mali said, "I heard about the fast from my college friend when I was studying at university in Baltimore around 2010. One day my friend informed me that she could not go to the Dining Center with me because she was fasting. This was the first time I came to know about the Islamic fast. I joked: 'Well, I also can observe the fast. In my religion we have regulations about the fast too. We just eat one meal in one day, but drinking is not forbidden'."

Besides that, Muslims also took on the responsibility of providing guidance to converts on how to make the fast easier. Mali added, "Practicing the fast was hard for me, but my Muslim friends gave me some helpful tips: driving instead of walking to delay being tired and thirsty, preparing enough foods with high protein to supply enough energy during the day and, importantly, getting a good night's sleep which were both requisites during the fasting period."

When it came to wearing hijab, although most of the newly converted Muslim women in this research showed up in public places veiled, actually they experienced long periods of struggles. In the process, Muslims were found to be very impactful in guiding new Muslims in overcoming some challenging changes. For instance, "I used to run outdoors in shorts, but after conversion running with the hijab was too hot. I complained to my Muslim sister. She responded that it was not worth giving up all the benefits of the hijab, and then she shared her story about how she maintained her hobby of swimming when there was no gender separation in swimming pools" (Mali, 4 October 2014). The Muslim sister organized a swimming club and rented the swimming pool in her apartment for half day every Saturday. She invited Muslim sisters as her club members who loved swimming but could not go to the mixed gender swimming pools.

In conclusion, direct Da'wah here referred to the fact that Muslims took responsibilities as Islamic ambassadors to help non-Muslims acknowledge and practice Islam, while Kose defined direct Da'wah as organizing inter-faith dialogues and conferences to reach meaningful discussions with Christians. The interviewees of this research reported that, during the whole process of conversion to Islam, their Muslims friends played an impactful role in their understanding Islam and practicing the five pillars of Islam. However, from the Muslims' viewpoint, it was their religious duty to answer questions without intention to convert anyone. Muslims provided truthful answers without changing or adding any things and they also left the choice of conversion to the individuals. In Islam, no one can force conversion; instead, Muslims have to respect others since Qur'an teaches Muslims to explain the truth not to force it on others.

## 7. Conclusions

Numerous academic works claim that Muslim converts were attracted by Islam's merits, such as good life guidance, psychological comforts, and social, and gender justice. However, if we put Islamic conversion in the context of American society, Islam could not attract non-Muslims' favorable attention since Islamic profiles were negatively depicted. Conversely, the fact that a growing number of Americans embraced Islam proved to be an obscure but interesting case study. In this situation, closing the gap between having negative impressions of Islam and having positive impressions of Islam brought on by followers of the religion was an area that deserved investigation in an attempt to understand conversion. Before conducting investigations, I made a hypothesis that Muslims' missionary work might play a vital role in persuading non-Muslims to embrace Islam passively.

Usually, Muslim communities seldom had trained agents, systems, or priesthood to preach Islam. Muslim individuals took it upon themselves to spread Islam (Arnold 1896, pp. 332–33). Today, Arnold's findings are still applicable. Although Muslims were not portrayed as being as enthusiastic as Christians when it came to converting people, my interviewees confirmed that Muslims' impressive missionary work, indirect and direct Da'wah, contributed to their conversion to Islam. To be specific, Muslims' appealing personalities and behaviors were a form of indirect Da'wah. It meant that, although some Muslims did not have any intention to do Da'wah, their virtues of "good" personalities and behaviors were critical in attracting non-Muslims and also proved to be the impetus among non-Muslims to investigate Islam, to break through the biased reports of Islam, and to reflect on their views towards Islam. It could be said that these impressions were critical in materializing Da'wah goals. Additionally, this research discovered that the logical theology of the Qur'an was also a form of indirect or non-conscious Da'wah. The Qur'an did not contain an intention to convert people but unconsciously answered non-Muslims' long-lasting confusing questions that made them accept Islam. Furthermore, it is when the relationship between the interviewees and Muslims became closer that further discussion about Islam would be promoted. At this stage, Muslims could be found to conduct Da'wah in a more direct way and act as helpers and guides to help non-Muslims understand Islam and observe the five pillars. At this point, this research closed the gap between fearing Islam and turning to Islam. It helped us understand how American converts changed their impression of Islam and turned to join Islam voluntarily without force, which was affected by Muslims' indirect and direct Da'wah work.

Moreover, in the opinions of Muslims, all they did was a consequence of following the teachings of Islam, without intention to convert anyone. One reason for this was that, under the principle of no compulsion, no Muslim had the right to change other people's religions. Secondly, any deed with impure or improper intention could not be accepted by God on the Judgment Day. Thus, from Muslims' view, their good personalities and behaviors, as well as supplying truthful answers to non-Muslims, attributed to the guidance of the Qur'an, meant that they did not have intention to convert anyone. However, it was precisely this non-intention that incidentally led to conversion to Islam amongst my informants in this study.

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