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THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

*An exploration of conversion to Islam and Anglican Christianity
in Mexico*

The Politics of Religious Conversion

*An exploration of conversion to Islam and Anglican
Christianity in Mexico*

Mark Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle

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PREFACE

A beginning of a new beginning

This book has long been in the making, and has only just taken this form. Much has changed since it was written and it should be seen to be a reflection of the position in Mexico as it was during the period of my fieldwork from 2006 to 2007, rather than a secure representation of anything later. Nonetheless, this text opens up some debates and introduces some conceptual terms that it is hoped can last beyond this time frame and that may be applied to different contexts and examples. In a sense, this is a formative attempt at bringing the ideas contained herein into the public domain for discussion. Neither this work, nor its ideas, is intended to pronounce a final word on the subject and it is deliberately experimental in both its form and its content. I expect to come to revise this work later, but wish to commence the discussions it provokes (if any) now.

Religious conversion is, according to this book, an inherently political act, if not by intentions, by its implications. Through the use of three particular conceptual terms, namely the theoretical concept of 'Muslimization' and the descriptive concepts of 'entity-concepts' and 'metareligious conversion', this book reveals how transformations effected by religious conversion alter the political dynamics to the position of converts within their social networks. Considering interpersonal relationships, it demonstrates that there are political implications to the changes brought about by conversion. It then shows how issues about the authenticity of conversion also place the convert within fields of discourse where this authenticity can be politically affirmed or challenged. Subsequently, examining the relationship between the convert and what are called here entity-concepts, the book clarifies how the dynamics of the relationship between the individual and these ideological notions also experience change as a consequence of conversion.

The structure of this book is designed to present a developing body of evidence that demonstrates that religious conversion is inherently a political act, subject to variant power dynamics. Much of this book has been rendered into a more concise form in an article on Islam in Mexico and Latin America (Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle 2015), which is hereby acknowledged. Chapter One introduces the main issues.

Chapter Two presents us with Islam in Mexico in more detail, noting the arrival of Islam in Latin America more broadly, and its development in Mexico in particular. Here I note the paradox to Mexico's constituting a Western context, yet also being part of what has been called the 'Global South'.

Chapter Three documents the development of the Anglican Church of Mexico from its splintering off from the Roman Catholic Church into La Sociedad Católica Apostólica Mexicana, through to its quest for legitimacy in the form of apostolic succession, and on to its most recent change of name, asserting its autonomy from the American Episcopal Church. Both chapters two and three illustrate the significance of the politics of belonging to these traditions in this context.

Chapter Four makes use of Granovetter's (1983) notion of weak ties to demonstrate the politics of religious conversion in respect of the changes in personal relationships that are effected by conversion. Within this, we consider the conversions of Hasan and Benedicto and see how there are political implications to the changes in personal relationships that they undergo.

Chapter Five shows how authenticity becomes an issue for religious conversion, highlighting how conversion itself is subject to debates regarding authenticity, as is mirrored in the way the dual use of a community site as an hotel and a prayer hall receives the attention and criticism of visitors and those within the wider Muslim community, which I consider as an exemplary model to make this point. The notion of 'Muslimization' is considered, which explains how converts themselves act to authenticate their conversion. This chapter was modified slightly and then presented at a conference panel of the

Association of Social Anthropologist Annual Conference in 2007. It has been peer reviewed and published since (Lindley-Highfield 2008).

Chapter Six examines how the use of what I call ‘entity-concepts’ depersonalizes social groups and makes them vulnerable to essentializing criticisms. I consider in this context what I call ‘metareligious conversion’ and explain this term, which is connected to the idea of religious conversion effected for reasons connected to but beyond religion itself. Some of this chapter was presented as a paper at the Latin American Studies Association’s Annual Conference during a panel session I coordinated on Religious Conversion in Latin America (Lindley Highfield 2007a).

Chapter Seven looks at the politics of scholars’ examinations of religious conversion. I consider the general theoretical explanations for religious conversion, but focus more specifically on more recent concentrations on the continuity to conversion. I engage with this by reasserting the significance of conversion events within the process of religious conversion and I point to evidence that the engagement of scholars with the topic of religious conversion gives rise to the consideration of power dynamics too.

In the final chapter, Chapter Eight, I consider the findings of this study as a whole in a brief conclusive reflection.

The intention of this book is that it provides conceptual tools for the examination of religious conversion from a political point of view that are open for application and appraisal by other scholars of religious conversion. It is also hoped that others might find the work an interesting introduction to the communities studied. I remain grateful to those communities for the much-valued contributions they made to this work.

Acknowledgements

Some of the ideas in this book have been tested out in previous work and study, and I am hopeful that this publication itself will feed into my future work. It all began, however, a number of years ago while under the tutelage of Professor Seth Kunin of the University of Aberdeen, when I was invited to observe Islam as an undergraduate, and the first steps to the commencement of this research then began to take shape. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Kunin, Dr Martin Mills and Dr Alex King of the University of Aberdeen for the patience they demonstrated in seeing this endeavour take form. I am also indebted to Professor Michel Clasquin-Johnson of the University of South Africa for his continued support and motivation, which helped me to develop this work into a completed whole. His humour, attention, encouragement and tenacity have helped to see me through to this day.

I am eternally thankful to the ESRC for funding this research originally, and I am also grateful for the help of the Principal's Small Grants Fund in enabling me to coordinate the conference panel for the Latin American Studies Association, and to those sources, acknowledged herein, which have published parts of this work to date.

I make no apologies for using the contraction '(pbuh)' in this work, as an abbreviation of 'peace be upon him', which is said as a manner of showing respect to the prophets, as they might be seen, as I happily return the respect my informants showed me, who of course I also thank, in both the Muslim and Anglican communities, without whose cooperation and hospitality none of this would have been possible.

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THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

*An exploration of conversion to Islam and Anglican Christianity
in Mexico*

Chapter One

Introduction

Background to this work

My study of religion, to any note, began in the classrooms of what was at the time Westminster College, up on Harcourt Hill in Oxford, where Peggie Morgan introduced me to Buddhism, Dr Angie Pears made me think about issues of mortality, sex and gender in relation to Christianity, and Dr Rob Fisher had me grapple with the Problem of Evil, something Professor Richard Swinburne had presumably previously resolved. Engaging with Rob's account of the loss of his son did more than simply help me to learn about the Philosophy of Religion, but also caused me to value philosophical reflection to the extent that I was motivated enough to roll all the way down the hill until I arrived at St Giles', where Blackfriars welcomed me to matriculate for Philosophy and Theology. After passing prelims, I escaped the Hall to elope and then went on to France, where I first discovered my passion for teaching, but that is another story entirely.

The Open University provided me with the opportunity to turn my time at Oxford into credit towards my BA. The one thing I did miss in France was university study. A year later I returned and I went up to Aberdeen as a senior status student, where I took my first in Religious Studies. Aberdeen, at that time, taught religion almost exclusively from an anthropological perspective. This became my epistemological, theoretical and methodological home.

In my final year, I took Seth Kunin's course on Geertz's book *Islam Observed* and later pursued linguistic anthropology in Dr Trevor Stack's offering, Language and Culture in the Hispanic World. These two courses I married (at about the same time my own divorce came through) by asking if Islam was present in Mexico. For my undergraduate dissertation, I responded to this by carrying out Internet-based research to explore people's reasons for adopting the religion, having communicated with a group of converts in the country. This work was then developed by me during my first postgraduate course, in which I explored the literature in greater depth and planned a period of prolonged fieldwork. Thanks to funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, I was able to carry out anthropological fieldwork in Mexico and some of these findings were developed into the thesis for my MPhil and provided the foundation for this book and my further study with UNISA.

My undergraduate dissertation concentrated on a remote examination of the demographic backgrounds of converts to Islam in Mexico and how they felt they were perceived in wider Mexican society (Highfield 2004). These data were controlled with data from non-Muslim Mexicans, who also gave their impressions on the perception of Islam in Mexico. This preliminary piece of work engendered in me the desire to go to study this community in person and to find out for myself, as far as possible, their reasons for adopting the religion. At this stage, religious conversion to Anglicanism in Mexico was not planned to form a constituent part of the study.

I was intrigued by what an Islamic identity would mean for Mexican converts. Going to Mexico gave me an unprecedented opportunity to understand the reality behind my earlier exploration of the issues. It became imperative to me that I gain an understanding of what Islam signifies to converts to the religion, both in their minds before the conversion events, and afterwards, when they constitute members. While I was able to establish the preconceptions of a few new candidates for the religion on having the opportunity to meet them, I have mainly been dependent on converts' post hoc explanations of the views they held prior to conversion, which had undoubtedly been influenced by their experiences of the religion to date. The further

thoughts I had, which follow, with regards to possible reasons for religious conversion helped to shed some light on issues that the converts may not otherwise have raised, but for those who converted some time ago, I had to treat conversion accounts as comments on the past firmly rooted in the present.

In reviewing comments that I had received from converts to Islam in response to my earlier studies, and in reviewing literature I had come across in the context, I came up with two key positions that appeared to reoccur. The first of these was the notion that Catholicism was rejected as it was perceived to be a non-native religion, forced on Mexico's inhabitants historically, so in this sense I would be trying to establish the reason for converts' departure from their old religion and to test if one of the explanations advanced in the public domain held credence with my informants. The second position I would investigate was that Islam was adopted as it resituates converts in terms of hegemonic relations. This is a rephrasing of the situation into my own terms, but is basically the exploration of the idea that the relationship between individuals and certain power dynamics to which they are subject is altered by their religious conversion and that their motivations for conversion are to some extent aligned with this transformation. I had no hard facts to prove either of these positions, but they gave me a starting point with which to begin and to explore in my encounters with the community I would be studying.

In terms of whether Catholicism was seen as forced, Hassig (2000: 81) informs us that the first message that the indigenous peoples of Mexico received from their Spanish conquerors contained the demand 'that they recognize the authority of the church, the pope, and king, on penalty of subjugation.' The Muslim Centre de Mexico (MCM in English, or Centro Cultural Islámico de México, or CCIM, in Spanish) is the main organization operated by the Muslim community who constitute the informants to this study. Within their narration of Mexican history, the organization also mentions the idea of forced religious conversion (MCM 2003b):

The Spanish who had recently forced Christianity on Muslim Spain by brutally expelling, raping, killing and tormenting

Muslims intended from the beginning to do the same in Mexico and besides that steal all their gold.

Furthermore, an informant to my preliminary research advised me that she viewed her own ancestors as having been forced to adopt the religion (Highfield 2004). This led me to ask myself if this view, that Christianity had been forced on the native peoples of Mexico, has been catalytic to the abandonment of Catholicism as a religion. I knew that I would need to interview a greater number of people in greater depth in order to examine this further, as this particular informant was a female amongst a male majority group. Nevertheless, as Seth Kunin (2001) has illustrated with regard to Crypto-Jews in New Mexico, the notion of a present religion having been forced can act as a catalyst for people to depart from their current religion. It could, though, be argued that the historical forced conversion of the peoples of Mexico was likely to have little bearing on the choice of an individual to join a new religion in the present day, but it could still be asked, then, why the notion of Catholicism as having been forced is still present in Mexican Muslim folklore and contemporary discourse today, a question to this point in time remaining unanswered.

In respect of the second issue on which I had been deliberating, whether Islam has been adopted as it resituates converts in terms of hegemonic relations, I had in mind here an application of Gramsci's understanding of the impact of education (cf Crehan 2002); in this context this was in the practical form of an intellectual programme intent on creating a homogenized sense of identity, in the principally Catholic mestizo concept, which in this context denies and diverts attention from wider diversity: As soon as a drop of Hispanic blood merges with that of an indigenous person, that indigenous identity is lost. By redefining the generic Mexican (if there could ever be such a thing) as mestizo, the state shifts the focus of their identity from indigenoussness to citizenry, and we see in this a literal politic of a conversion of sorts. Also from this theoretical perspective, I began to contemplate the ways in which Mexicans might be placed in a certain intellectual framework in relation to other nation states, and indeed

their own, that might be challenged by religious conversion, something I would come to examine further.

On this same topic, Austin-Broos (2003: 1) asserts that ‘the very idea of the secular state is being contested in many parts of the world’ and points out, ‘The dynamic of world religions also intersects with that of nation-states’ (Austin-Broos 2003: 5). Quoting Tambiah (1996), she highlights how different nationalisms call on notions of ‘blood descent or race’ and ‘mytho-historical charters’ to produce social solidarity (Austin-Broos 2003: 5). While accepting the view that the dynamic of world religions intersects with nation-states in this production of racial, ethnic or mytho-historical social solidarity, I decided to turn my attention to the idea that Islam was adopted as it transforms the position of converts in terms of hegemonic relations, which can be understood as occurring at this level in reference to their identities, particularly in relation to the impression of the world they would have gained through socialization and societalization and the resultant power structures in which they would be embedded owing to these preconceptions, particularly in terms of national and global dominance. This then begs the question as to whether such a shift in religious identity results in a shift in the power dynamics between the individual and the state, or indeed other states. I was beginning to formulate ideas that I could test by gathering data during my period of anthropological research.

Issues raised by these deliberations, then, would be whether there is any notion of ummah (Muslim community) amongst the converts, how any such a concept is maintained over such a large and divided geographical expanse, and what converts understand by the term. Initial research has indicated that, whilst there are individual concentrations of Muslims in Mexico, some individuals are disparately located and have little contact with other Muslims face-to-face (Highfield 2004). Understanding how the notion of ummah is constructed in Mexico provides some comprehension of how such natural obstacles, such as distance and fragmentation, are overcome, in addition to telling us something about what it means to be a Muslim in Mexico. The role of the Internet is significant to this discussion, as a number of Muslims have approached the Muslim

Center de Mexico via this medium. Yet this very interesting area of the social dynamics to religious conversion, while raised within it, is reluctantly beyond the scope of the present book, yet remains an issue worthy of further research. Indeed, a paper on the subject was greeted receptively and heard by a panel at a conference of the Society of Latin American Studies (Lindley Highfield 2007b).

The final area I wanted to examine was why conversion has occurred and how completely this has happened, so I sought to discover the underlying reasons for conversion and somehow measure the extent to which conversion could be said to have taken place, in terms of orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Ethnography on Roman Catholicism has pointed to heteropraxy within Mexico. Cahn (2003: 31) describes the parish church in Chamula, Chiapas, which is adorned with traditional Maya cultural objects in addition to the habitual Catholic icons:

[Instead] of the usual array of pews, worshippers sit on straw-strewn floors in front of any of dozens of glass-enclosed saint figures, decorated with multicoloured ribbons and dangling mirrors. In front of each glass case, believers leave candles and bottles of Pepsi as offerings. [...] A nearby ethnographic museum run by the community proudly states that they have mixed Catholic saints with pre-Hispanic gods. They believe the world is a cube supported by pillars surrounded by water.

As a precious commodity, Pepsi is given as a formal offering, demonstrating the amalgamation of pre-Christian and Catholic praxes. Yet, by no means is religious syncretism specific to Chiapas. According to Ingham (1986), a strong fusion of Catholicism and folk beliefs can be found in Morelos, in central Mexico, where I spent six months of my fieldwork, and these elements are manifest in such public ritual events as the Day of the Dead, which is something I mention in Chapter Four.

While it is axiomatic to say that willing converts are more likely to observe orthopraxis in their worship than someone forced to adopt a religion, as, in Mexico, old religions are often intertwined with the

new, I thought it important to establish whether there is orthopraxy to Islam in Mexico, as Sunni Islam generally stresses orthodoxy and orthopraxy, yet some Sufi orders allow syncretistic practices. Observing the level of syncretism amongst the converts would enable me to gauge, to some extent, the strength of their conversions and the extent to which Sunni Islam in Mexico is orthodox.

It is interesting that Alfaro Velcamp (2002) observes the formality to worship with the Muslim Center de Mexico (MCM) in Mexico City, yet Garvin informs us that Chiapanec Muslims left the Murabitun Sufi movement for the Muslim Center de Mexico, as the Murabitun showed 'disrespect for indigenous culture' (Garvin 2005a: 19). This raises the question as to whether the MCM had compromised on its expectations of orthopraxy to gain converts in this south-eastern stronghold, which is another issue for future research. Perhaps these differences in praxis between the relatively controlled environment of Mexico City and the less controlled situation in Chiapas are simply a product of there being no resident imam (or director of ceremonies) in Chiapas, and because there are only relatively infrequent visits by officials from Morelos or Mexico City. If so, this is worthy of further exploration, as it raises the interesting question of how epistemological boundaries between religious practices and cultural practices are construed. What is more, Geertz rightly points out that a Muslim in a non-Muslim country discovers that being Muslim there is 'a rather different matter than being one at home' (Geertz 2005: 12), just as being at home, but of another religion is similarly something different, and Geertz elucidates, this has an effect on the individual's religion, challenging it or adapting it; thus those propagating Islam in Mexico may well be putting forward a different 'brand' of Islam to that found in Muslim countries, so the Islam to which converts belong in Mexico could be quite different to those in Muslim nation-states. Whether or not this is the case is, alas, a question beyond the scope of the present research, but a subject worthy of another tome's investigation.

Such were my initial research intentions, nevertheless the experience of being in the field was to modify these objectives, yet to draw on their relevance. Indeed, the very fact that they showed themselves to

be significant was evidence of the importance of the politics of religious conversion, which became the ultimate focus of my research.

Rethinking the question

As my approach was anthropological, I was particularly interested in understanding the grounds for conversion as they were comprehended and communicated within the context. The diverse nature of Mexican cultural practices suggested that my discoveries would be particular not only to individuals, but also to communities and to different regions. I held it to be essential to examine conversion in terms of both beliefs and practices, since I saw these as contextually significant factors, thus the significance of changes in behaviour were analysed alongside verbal narratives of transition.

Such issues were addressed by the asking of the following questions: What, if any, elements of the converts' life were they unhappy with prior to conversion? In what ways, if any, was their previous religion failing them? What does their old religion represent to them? What were their expectations of their new religion? How did they find out about it? How was it communicated to them? Do they see any continuity between their new religion and their previous faith? In what ways are they different? Why did they choose to convert? What does their new religion represent to them? What difference has adopting it made to their life? Is their new religion any different to their expectations? With whom were they associated before conversion? With whom do they associate now? What practices have they ceased? What new practices do they employ? What areas of their lives have not changed since conversion? Has their new religion empowered them? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

Questions such as these allowed me to begin to understand the nature of the transformation that had taken place for converts, how wholeheartedly and whole-bodily they had adopted their new religion and also the significance in changes to the dynamics of their relationships to and with other people, objects, practices, ideologies

and beliefs. They revealed that the initial research questions I had set myself essentialized religious conversion in Mexico far too much and did not take into account the richness or diversity to people's reasons for adopting a new faith. What they did do, however, was draw attention to the political nature of factors affecting religious conversion and also resulting from the same, which then became the focus of my work.

The Politics of Religious Conversion

Within the title of this book, I write of the politics of religious conversion. I use the term 'politics' in terms of power relations. There are many ways in which religious conversion can be seen to be political in this sense, and indeed this is to such an extent that I could not possibly enumerate them all here. Within this work, I shall explore how religious conversion has political implications in and of itself by considering how changes in social relations alter the power dynamics to relationships in which an individual is embedded, plus how motivations for conversion themselves may be described as political, especially when autonomy is equated with personal power and when the transformation effected by religious conversion may resituate the convert in a new field of discourse. This I do by examining two converts' reasons for leaving their old religions and for adopting their new faiths. I also examine reasons for debates surrounding the informants' and their peers' determination as to whether conversion has been 'successful' or is 'complete' as a political matter, in addition to political motivations for conversion and the political implications of scholarly analyses of the adoption of a new religion.

I see power as connected with but separate to discourse, as per Foucault (1980). Religious conversion permits individuals to re-narrate their life story and begin to tell it from a new perspective. Such a process gives them control over the discourse of their life, resulting in a change in power dynamics. Some personal relationships are changed by conversion, because the relationships become structured within a new field of discourse. For example, the nature of

the relationship a Catholic Priest has with a Catholic individual is transformed by that individual adopting a new religion, because the dominant field of discourse in which they are located has been changed. Some such changes may be deliberate; others may be coincidental. Yet if adopting Islam, the convert is in a new field of discourse that is more legitimately ruled over by more established Muslims, who then are able to evaluate the authenticity of the convert's conversion within this new ontological framework. Furthermore, while the convert has redefined his or her self in terms of a new discourse, scholars examining this individual's conversion can subject the convert to new fields of discourse through the nature and manner of their academic evaluation of the convert's religious transformation. We can thus clearly see there are links between politics and religious conversion. So when I considered informants' verbal narratives, I looked at them from the perspective of the political dimension to changes in interpersonal relations, and I examined changes to behaviour in relation to the politics of authenticating religious conversion, which we see mirrored in other debates surrounding authenticity in the context, as Chapter Five attests.

The Literature

Rambo (2003: 219) discerns, 'Research on conversion should include more serious studies of Islamic conversion.' The need for academic debate on conversion to Islam in Mexico is affirmed by the popular debate that has been engendered by media attention, both in Mexico and in the United States of America, which has often been critical. In a context where the arrival of conversion to Islam is a relatively new phenomenon, where knowledge of the diverse nature of Islam is lacking and homogeneity is presupposed, it is imperative that the multiple forms of Islam are expounded so that one Muslim group is not associated with another simply because it falls under the umbrella of the term 'Islam'. Otherwise, stereotypes that may well apply to one group will become extended to another. This is a dangerous eventuality, as it may lead to social tension, particularly as the Murabitun Sufi group has received strong criticism already (e.g.

Garvin 2005a), which is considered problematic owing to the admitted problem of access (Garvin 2005b).

Rambo (2003: 211) notes that Islam has ‘captured the hearts and minds of many who desire to transform the world’s economic and political realities -- especially those living in places around the globe encumbered by the legacies of Western colonial oppression, military domination, and economic exploitation.’ Quite what the transition from Catholic to Muslim represents in the context is, thus, significant for us too, since any transition from belonging to this majority seems to constitute a clear statement of identity -- seemingly an oppositional one. Accordingly, this tells us something about the political relationship between indigenous peoples and the nation-state. Furthermore, scholars have long acknowledged the tension between the USA and Mexico (e.g. Simmons 1953; Stephan et al. 2000). It is important that I establish how Islam fits into this relationship, as, since Huntington (1993), America (or, better, the West) and Islam have been set in opposition. Should converts to Islam share this opposition to the US, they may be presumed to be associated with ‘fundamentalist’ or militant extremists. Such an interpretation would prove problematic for the Mexican state, as the transient borders of the NAFTA (Northern American Free Trade Agreement) have already been brought into question (BBC 2005b). For these reasons, this research is held to be of interest.

Diane Austin-Broos (2003: 1) remarks that ‘Recent years have seen a resurgence in the study of conversion’. This text hopes to help sustain that revival. Yet, conversion to Islam in Mexico has only recently captured the attention of the academic community, and the sparse work that has been produced on the subject to date has in the main centred its attention on the Sufi Murabitun movement, which has received the most popular attention also, owing to the highly politicized views of its leader. Whilst scholars have acknowledged that there is no real evidence of radicalism amongst the converts to Murabitun Islam themselves (e.g. Garvin 2005a), speculation has still been hefty, due to the ideological leanings of their remotely situated leader. Converts to Sunni Islam, however, who have remained devoid of such fanatical conjectures, have only just begun to receive

attention, despite their wider prevalence in the context. Through this work, I seek to help to remedy this imbalance.

From an empirical point of view, this research follows in the footsteps of other anthropologists who have turned their attention to Islam, the baseline of which is well established in the literature (e.g. Geertz 1968; Mernissi 1975; Gellner 1981; Gilsenan 1982; Asad 1986; Ahmed 1988). While some scholars have looked at Anglicanism in dominions and former colonies (e.g. Ward et al. 1998), this will be the first specific ethnographic study of the Anglican Church of Mexico. Contextually, the research incorporates the first ethnographic study of conversion to Sunni Islam through the Muslim Center de Mexico based upon prolonged fieldwork in this particular context, however a later study has now been published (Pastor 2015). Alfaro Velcamp (2002) met with Omar Weston, the organization's director, but the resultant research was based only on their conversations and readings of the group's promotional literature. The motivations and experiences of converts were not taken into account firsthand. Of the previous studies in the context that have been genuinely ethnographic, all have been published in Spanish or have tended to concentrate on conversion to the Murabitun (Klahr 2002; Ruiz Ortiz 2003; Morquecho 2005). Garvin's (2005a) research is a recapitulation of the work of domestic researchers, however she has brought the phenomenon of conversion to Murabitun Sufism in Chiapas to the attention of the English speaking world. Alfaro Velcamp's (2002) earlier study omits the existence of Islam in Chiapas, thus -- at present -- there is a gap in the ethnographic literature on the Muslim Center de Mexico's Chiapanec converts, which therefore remains an area ripe for future study. Furthermore, this work will be the first to look across the diversity of conversion to Sunni Islam and Anglican Christianity in Mexico to understand the political dimensions to religious conversion, enabling similarities and differences of experiences and motivations to be observed between these variant religious groups. According to Touché Porter (1996), the origination of the Anglican Church of Mexico has been considered, in brief, in a study of the dissemination of the *Book of Common Prayer*, however no study of the community has been carried out based on prolonged fieldwork in the context of Mexico City. I explain in Chapter Three

how my consideration of conversion to Anglicanism in Mexico came about, however suffice it to say here that the politics of religious conversion was evident in this context too, making it directly relevant to this study.

Despite the Anglican Church of Mexico's longstanding connections with both Britain and the United States of America, it also has received little attention as a topic of research, most likely owing to the relatively small size of the community and the Anglican Communion's own traditional restraint from evangelizing actively in Latin America. In the *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, David Hamid (2002: 360) remarks:

Generally the Church extended into areas where the British Empire (or the US economic power) ruled. There were some interesting exceptions: Madagascar passed from British to French possession at the end of the 19th century, but Archbishop Benson refused to withdraw Anglican bishops and clergy at the transition, suggesting that the Church of England had a right to be in places beyond where the British Empire reigned. There was, however, a general reluctance to initiate mission work where other branches of the Church were established. This meant, for instance, that there was little mission work undertaken in Latin America, except where the Church of Rome had made few inroads, such as among the Mapuche of Southern Chile who had never been conquered by the Spanish conquistadores. It was after the Anglican Congress of 1963, and a subsequent meeting of Anglicans in Cuernavaca, Mexico, in 1967 which determined that Latin America was "baptized but not evangelized".

The Anglican Church of Mexico has only recently asserted its autonomy in relation to the American Episcopal Church. This has given it a degree of independence on the Anglican world stage. While the Episcopal Church in the United States has been torn by such issues as the ordination, and indeed consecration, of homosexual and female clergy and bishops, and blessings of same sex unions -- issues which have been stretching the Anglican community as a whole, the Anglican Church of Mexico has had the opportunity to find its own

voice, which has permitted the development of a particularly Mexican form of Anglicanism. This raises interesting questions about the position of converts within this forum for the expression of their sense of self, which is highly relevant to the issues facing the Anglican Communion as a whole at the present time.

From a theoretical point of view, this research is situated within a marriage of discourse analysis to the realm of symbolic anthropology, which latter domain has been reigned over by such names as Victor Turner (1967), Clifford Geertz (1973) and Mary Douglas (1982a). Whilst it clearly constitutes a meek contribution in comparison, I hope to have captured an element of their precision in relating symbolism to reality. As I will examine symbolic relations as they stood before and after conversion events, my method is comparative, and these two ‘snapshots’ of symbolically embedded situations are used to facilitate the measurement of the changes in fields of discourse that are effected by conversion. I look at religious conversion as a ‘turning from and to’ (Rambo 1993). These changes in symbolic relationships highlight the characteristics and qualities that converts choose to abandon and those which they seek to adopt, thus revealing the underlying motivations for conversion, what, in the context, Islam and Anglican Christianity are seen to represent, and how religious conversion impacts on the power dynamics between converts and these associations. A key theoretical difference between my work and that of some other contemporary anthropologists is my reassertion of the significance of ritual events, such as rites of passages, in processes such as religious conversion. In particular, this engages with the work of scholars who assert the continuity of conversion (e.g. Anderson 2003; Austin-Broos 2003; Coleman 2003; Reidhead and Reidhead 2003).

Rather than explicitly following the thought of Lewis Rambo, which I am inclined to respect, this research coincides with much of Rambo’s (2003) position in terms of calling for the adoption of an ‘interdisciplinary’ approach and in sharing the concern that the religious element to religious conversion remains ‘tangible’ within any study. Where I differ is in my identification of the politics of religious conversion as one of the disciplines that should be numbered

amongst those incorporated into this interdisciplinary approach, which relates to the major claim of this book, that religious conversion is an inherently political act. Similarly, I take the view that religious conversion is a process, rather than an event, however I still hold that a conversion event is often and usually a significant part of that process; I assert the importance of ritualized conversion events within the same and advocate, as per Turner (1969), their transformative capabilities. I am particularly concerned about the way that the politics of religious conversion is manifest, and I highlight four of those specifically here: the politics of religious conversion in terms of transformations in the dynamics of interpersonal relations as a consequence of conversion, the politics of debates about the authenticity of religious conversion and the role of Muslimization within these, those motivations for religious conversion that I call metareligious conversion in terms of what I call entity-concepts, and the politics of the scholarly treatment of religious conversion. Through these four areas I seek to establish that in studying religious conversion, scholars should also examine the political dimensions to religious conversion as it is an inherently political act, and also suggest that scholars should acknowledge the political implications of their own treatment of their informants' experiences, and indeed that of other scholars. In other words, I see religious conversion as an inherently political process, however as one that can be either implicitly or explicitly political, yet is always subject to power dynamics, even in the hands of the scholar.

My introduction of the terms 'Muslimization', 'entity-concepts' and 'metareligious conversion' is in order to provide conceptual clarity about certain types of phenomena that occur in respect of religious conversion. I argue that they are significant enough concepts to warrant individual attention and especial vocabulary. They are original contributions to the discussion of religious conversion in this context and could be applied readily to others.

Chapter Two

This chapter seeks to describe the methodology applied during this research, including illustrating how my approach focuses on the political dimensions to religious conversion. It also introduces the fieldwork contexts, exhibiting their relevance to the study, and considers the advent of Islam in Mexico and perceptions of that community in particular.

Fieldwork sites

My visits to Mexico took me to two main religious communities within which I lived over a twelve-month period, which came to constitute the field sites for my study. Six months was spent with Sunni Muslims in Tequesquitengo in the state of Morelos, followed by a subsequent six-months period based at the Anglican Seminary in Mexico City. The six months in Morelos served as a reorientation process for language acquisition in addition to allowing for the development and affirmation of connections both there and in Mexico City, while providing the context for the first part of my fieldwork. This was principally as I had only a very basic level of Spanish before arriving. I had completed an introductory university-level course before my departure, but I did not gain true fluency until I was in the field.

After arriving in Mexico City, I moved down to Dar as Salam, the Muslim Center de Mexico's da'wah (or mission) centre in Morelos, approximately 75 KM south of the capital. My first two weeks were spent in conversation classes with the caretaker of the site. After this, I joined in with the worship of the convert community and helped out on a nearby plot of land, where they grew bamboo for furniture and cultivated plants for resale. I spent the first month of my six months

here immersing myself in the language, whilst trying to assess the validity of my research questions, deciding how I should frame them, in addition to sourcing my initial data. Within this stage of my research, I spent my time between Dar as Salam, the local village of San Jose Vista Hermosa, San Gabriel, where the community had the small-scale farm, and Puente de Ixtla, where I went to learn local people's views of the Muslim community. I also made a number of short trips to visit Muslims in Mexico City, Puebla and Veracruz. While based in Morelos, I visited the Cuernavaca diocese of the Anglican Church of Mexico. Initially, this was to obtain a little bit of time out from my fieldwork site once a week, but eventually developed into being a complimentary fieldwork context. In Mexico City, a number of members of the Muslim community I was studying would go to the Friday prayers at a prayer hall in the district of Polanco, so I attended this on a number of occasions. Towards the end of my first six months in Mexico, the community established an outreach office in Coyoacán, near Mexico's national autonomous university, UNAM, which I visited regularly.

It had been my intention to spend the second six months of my fieldwork period with the Muslim community in Mexico City, in a flat that the community rented in Coyoacán, however this became impossible for reasons that I explain in Chapter Three, hence I had to arrange to board at the Anglican Seminary as a place to stay at very short notice. My Muslim informants' parents' often critical views of their adoption of Islam rendered it difficult to stay with any of them so I had to find alternative accommodation. From that, my study of conversion to Anglicanism arose. While staying with this second community, it became apparent to me how there are political dimensions to conversion more broadly, across religious contexts, validating the consideration of this second fieldwork site.

My second six months was therefore spent living at St. Andrew's Seminary in the district of San Ángel in Mexico City. It was close to the Muslim community in Coyoacán, plus they were willing to accommodate me at very short notice. While there, my time began to be split into two separate lifestyles – one spent with the Muslim community, attending the Friday prayers, helping out in their outreach

office, going with them to propagate the Muslim message; the other spent studying with the Seminarians at the Anglican Seminary, following their curriculum, the general order of their day, their worship. I dedicated half a week to each. This led me to get to know the Anglican congregations at San Pedro el Martyr, a suburb of Mexico City, in addition to those in the capital itself. Clearly, then, the work I was doing constituted multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), since the research took place in varied contexts, including residential religious communities, outreach sites, places of worship, homes, and even over the Internet.

Methodology

As per the longstanding tradition established by Malinowski (1922) in anthropology, participant observation was employed as the key mode of examining practices at the two main sites. Before going into the field, it was debated as to whether I would be able to participate in Muslim worship without being a Muslim myself. I held that I could, although a member of research staff I spoke to thought that this would be illegitimate and considered it a covert approach. Since I was forthright about my own religious persuasion, there was no covert element to my participant observation and I was nonetheless invited to participate in worship, which I elected to do, following the routine of the community. I made attempts to integrate into wider Mexican society, such as by naturally developing a Roman Catholic surrogate family, who I would visit when I could to gain a better understanding of perceptions of Islam within the context. I also practised deep ‘hanging out’ with my informants.

Before arriving, I learned that the Muslims of the main organization that attracts converts in Mexico, the Muslim Center de Mexico, were noted as being ‘very active in the propagation of Islam’ and ‘hold five prayers on a daily basis’ (Alfaro Velcamp 2002: 287). Furthermore, their figurehead, Omar Weston, had already demonstrated some degree of cooperation with researchers (e.g. Alfaro Velcamp 2002; Highfield 2004), and consequently extended to me an invitation to stay. The Anglican Church of Mexico also offered to receive me

warmly. Hershfield et al. (1993) raise the issue of trust with respect to carrying out fieldwork in particular in rural areas, which was an issue relevant to the research I executed with the Muslim community in Morelos. My openness during my initial stay with them facilitated my meeting Muslims in other areas of Mexico, including Puebla, Veracruz and Mexico City. Bryman (2001: 290-298) points usefully to the distinction between covert and overt ethnography, highlighting the fact that a covert presence can inhibit the maintenance of field notes; a point Ditton (1977) has voiced before. My overt approach assisted in enabling me to both photograph and film my informants in addition to using audio recording equipment and notetaking, where appropriate and when consent had been granted.

In addition to participant observation, the principal methods that I used for data collection were informal interviews and conversations with converts, followed by semi-structured interviews based upon my preliminary findings. Fully structured interviews were held to be inappropriate for a study of this kind, as it was imperative that the individuality of the explanations for the reasons for conversion were retained as comprehensively -- and diluted as little -- as possible, however semi-structured interviews were essential, so that I could address my research questions and collect the appropriate data for the intended testing of my initial ideas. Furthermore, the framing of my questions needed to match the ethnographic reality, so informal interviews were required as a precursor to the semi-structured interviews in order that the necessary issues could be identified.

Briggs (1986) describes how researchers may incorrectly assume that the metacommunicative terms of reference they employ are shared with their informants, which may lead to hermeneutic misinterpretation. My participation in communal activities helped to establish these terms of reference and thus ensure that the semi-structured questions focused on the correct issues within a conceptual framework shared with the informants. Conversations, and both informal and semi-structured interviews, were also carried out with non-Muslims and non-Anglicans, where possible, in order to gauge how Muslims and Anglicans were perceived within the context. When out of the field, I kept in contact with my informants via the

Internet in order to maintain relations. My analysis was primarily of a qualitative nature, as I principally examined verbal and written narratives. Among the limitations to the research were the issues of access to female informants owing to religious taboos surrounding gender and the small number of conversion stories that can be examined in a work of this length.

Computer-based field notes and a journal were utilized as the main mode of logging the data, however -- as stated -- I used video and voice recording equipment also. Bryman (2001: 321-323) asserts the indispensability of tape recording and transcription, albeit at a potential cost when either a malfunction occurs or when an individual declines to participate. His writing predates the advent of cost-efficient digital recording equipment, which is sometimes not only less intimidating in appearance, but often offers longer recording times. I recorded a number of conversations with a mini-disc recorder holding it to be a relatively dependable medium, offering long recording times and the opportunity to backup data on my computer.

There are certain reasons why these general methods were decided upon: Field notes provided a consistent method for recording the data in their entirety where all findings could be kept in a uniform manner, facilitating their comparison, interrelation and extraction. When in written form, this provides the disadvantage that this information, if lost, is lost as a whole, without any backup. The use of recording equipment for interviews, and cultural and ritual practices with vocal or musical elements, complemented my typed notes and simplified transcription, as this could then be exercised remotely, after the event, and assured greater accuracy. A small notebook computer was taken into the field for typing up my field notes and fieldwork reports, which were stored encrypted.

From the point of view of methodology, Schensul et al. (1999: 49) explain that the second step to carrying out ethnographic research, after having initially identified and defined the research remit, is to decide how the phenomenon will be measured. To this end, I adopted a specific method that permitted the measurability of conversion -- to some extent at least. Geertz (1973: 90) has defined religion as a

‘system of symbols’, which complements my view that symbolism is perhaps the most adequate means of examining conversion phenomena; and as conversion is from one religion to another, approaching the subject from this perspective was thought by me to constitute the most consistent methodological approach.

In order to gauge the changes that take place in these symbolic relationships, it was necessary for me to audit the symbolic relationships that were present pre-conversion and to compare these with those present after the conversion event. My definition of symbolic relationships extends to relationships between the convert and both real (as in individuals) and imagined (such as, perhaps, the ummah) entities, thus encompassing people, objects, practices, ideologies and beliefs. An examination of the relationships that are abandoned through the conversion process helps to identify the categories or characteristics of the old religion that are rejected by conversion, just as an investigation into the symbolic value of adopted relationships may indicate the categories or characteristics the convert sought to absorb.

Granovetter (1983) has established how weak ties between certain individuals, such as acquaintances, represent connections between two distinct groups, which are each intrinsically close-knit. This perspective translates well to symbolic relationships in respect of conversion, since people, objects, practices, ideologies and beliefs that relate to a particular convert can all have weak or strong ties to other individuals or groups, and therefore can house symbolic associations with these other entities, and then with what they in turn represent as a consequence of these connections. Thus, the embedded motifs inherent in such symbols indicate the fields of discourse for the symbolic analysis and point to the implications of, and possible grounds for, conversion. As stated in Chapter One, discourse is seen by me as significant to the issue of power. I utilized diagrams drawn by or with the informants to map out these relations. This process meant that not only was I charting the transitions that converts went through, but I was also following the movement of symbols. In this sense, in abstract terms, I was ‘following the thing’, as Marcus (1995) has described the pursuit of objects in relation to multi-sited

ethnography, and the thing here in reality was the convert's position in terms of divergent fields of discourse.

In terms of ethics, *The Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice of the Association of Social Anthropologists* (ASA 1999) provide a professional code of conduct, which furnishes British and Commonwealth anthropologists with a best practice for their research. They advocate a general duty for researchers to protect the interests of their informants and the interests of the scholarly community, obtaining consent where it is required, maintaining confidentiality when requested, and leaving the phenomena open for future academic research (ASA 1999).

Mexican converts to Islam in particular have received a great deal of attention in the nation's media already (e.g. de la Cruz 2002; Gomez Duran 2001; Jimenez Caliz 2003; Martin Perez 2004; Milenio 2002; Tabasco Hoy 2004; Yahoo! Noticias 2004). Owing to its proximity to the United States of America, research on the growth of Islam in Mexico -- even through indigenous conversion -- may attract further public attention, particularly as a result of the heightened profile of Islamic fundamentalism over the past two decades. The numerous terrorist attacks that have taken place around the world have added to a culture of suspicion in relation to some Muslims' activities, thus apprehensions may be magnified in such a climate, as we have seen before now with regard to the US's policy over the US-Mexican border (BBC 2005b). This predicament means that it was all the more important to observe the ASA's (1999) guidelines on confidentiality and the anonymity of my informants, which I have maintained throughout this work, except in the case of community leaders whose identities are already in the public domain. While obligated to provide an accurate and honest testimony of life as I find it, the ASA (1999) reminds anthropologists that not all areas of human life need be our concern. Accordingly, discretion and sensitivity should be employed in gauging the areas of informants' social lives relevant to the research and care should be taken to respect the views of the informants themselves on such issues, unless the information is genuinely crucial to the investigation. My Anglican informants revealed private details to me about their sexuality, in respect of

which they similarly have a right to anonymity, but which are significant to the analysis of my research. The sensitivity of these issues made it all the more important that I made clear to them exactly how I would be using their information in my research in addition to guarding their anonymity.

In the process of negotiating informants' consent, the ASA's guidelines call upon me to explain the purpose of my study and how their data will be made use of within this (ASA 1999, Section 4). It is emphasized that consent is not a one-off event and therefore that it may be necessary to return to informants for further permissions if I intend to make use of their contributions in any way other than I initially describe, such as, perhaps, in the case of publication. The ASA (1999) also assert the informants' right to decline the use of any audio or visual recording equipment and explains that the capabilities of such technical equipment should be made clear. People's agreement to be filmed or recorded may similarly need to be revisited in the future in the event that such recordings are used for public broadcast. These are all issues I took into account in carrying out my research.

The anonymous recording of data was particularly important as I had concerns that I might be interviewed by the Mexican authorities. CISEN, the Mexican Intelligence Service, has already taken an interest in the activities of Muslims in Chiapas (Arab News 2005), and if awareness of the US's policy of putting future intelligence officers through anthropology departments had spread (Farndon 2005), the potential interest in an anthropologist's work on the subject could have increased accordingly. Thankfully, there was no such intervention. Yet, as the number of my informants is relatively small and the participants are possibly easily identifiable, it has been necessary for me to break up some contributions into themes and to attribute different aliases for each of these, so that their identities are protected as comprehensively as possible. I have, however, ensured that the sources of particular pieces of information were identifiable by me, so that I could analyse unitary data. The ASA also stipulates that domestic data storage regulations must be observed and that the consent of informants is obtained for all contributions (ASA 1999,

Section 4). I maintained the strict anonymity of my informants so as to comply with this requirement.

Arriving at modern-day Catholic Mexico

Some reflection on how Mexican society became as it is today is merited to understand what is happening now in terms of religious conversion. One of the ways in which Mexico has been transformed dramatically is linguistically. At the time of the conquest of Mexico under Hernán Cortés, a translator was required for the Spaniards to communicate with the country's indigenous inhabitants. Thankfully for Cortés, two Spanish crew members, who came to the New World on a voyage of discovery, survived their ship being wrecked some years earlier and found their way to land, where they integrated into the local community, intermarrying and learning to speak in the native tongue. They became the gatekeepers to the Spanish dominion of this territory. According to the year 2000 census of the Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática (INEGI), the percentage of Mexicans aged five years or over who speak an indigenous language now stands at only 16.9% (INEGI 2005b). The same sample reveals that 88% of the population identify themselves as Roman Catholic at present (INEGI 2005a), such has been the impact of Cortés stumbling upon two Spaniards who were washed up by the sea.

Present-day Mexico is a country of extremes. Mexico City has been home to the richest man in the world, Carlos Slim Helú (Forbes 2010), but Chiapas, Mexico's south-easternmost state, has had 'no telephones or electricity at all in most of the rural areas' (Froehling 1997: 291). The country's most Catholic state, Guanajuato, with its well-respected university established by the Jesuits in 1732, has had 96.4% of its population claiming a Roman Catholic religious identity. Mexico's least Catholic state, however, with the smallest number of people identifying themselves as Roman Catholic, was Chiapas, where (at 63.8%) this is less than two-thirds of its population (INEGI 2005a). Often identified as a Roman Catholic nation, Mexico is beginning to increase in its religious pluralism.

Anthropologist Peter Cahn (2003: 64-65) tells us that religious freedom in Mexico was established under the 1857 Constitution, after which, in 1870, Benito Juárez suggested that the introduction of Protestantism might help to bring the indigenous peoples of Mexico under federal control. Accordingly, under the presidency of Lerdo, missionaries from the United States were welcomed in 1872. This is clearly a contributory factor to the heteropraxy that can be found in Mexico today.

Mexico is a large oil producer with substantial reserves. Nearly one-third of the government's revenue comes from this sector and it is one of the United States' major suppliers (BBC 2005a). Mexico's oil reserves are one of the contributory reasons for Chiapas having been called 'a rich land and poor people' (Benjamin 1989). Despite their ongoing and codependent trade relationships, the Entente between Mexico and the United States has not always been Cordiale. The US's annexation of Texas, and then California, between 1845 and 1846, helped lead to the United States-Mexican war of 1846 in which Mexico was heavily overpowered by its much more developed, and heavily populated, neighbour (Zoraida Vázquez 2000). In more recent history, on the issue of the war in Iraq, for example, Mexico, together with Chile, held the view that the evidence of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction was inconclusive and recommended the continuation of weapons inspections rather than the use of force. This position led former President George W. Bush to refuse to take the Mexican president's phone calls and a rejection of the reopening of discussions regarding positive US immigration reform (Valenzuela 2005). Many Mexican families are dependent on revenue earned in the United States, with migratory work being a norm. The US recently, however, reviewed the transient nature of the US-Mexican border as not only a problem of illegal immigration, but also a security issue. In May 2005, former President George W. Bush instituted a new law permitting the building of a security fence along parts of the border and that would render it illegal for temporary migrant workers to drive in the US without having a special permit (BBC 2005b). The profile of this issue has been heightened by Republicans' claims that 'poor security on the Mexican border could be used by terrorist groups to move their members into the US' (BBC

2005b). It is under these circumstances that conversions to Islam and Anglican Christianity have been taking place.

Islam in Mexico

The arrival of Islam in Mexico

The circumstances of the arrival of Islam in Mexico are left to speculation since there is no firm documentation to confirm when the first Muslims came. The broader literature on the relationship between the slave trade and the wider Americas suggests that the first Muslims in the New World were brought over from Africa under slavery. Sylviane Diouf (1988) estimates that out of around fifteen million Africans taken to the Americas, about two and a quarter million to three million were Muslims.

There is also the possibility that Muslims travelled over with the conquistadores or as a result of the Spanish conquest of Muslim Spain. In 711 CE Umayyad Muslims conquered the Kingdom of the Visigoths, an area comprising the majority of present-day Spain, and by 1200 CE eighty percent of Iberia's population was Muslim (Segal 2001). As Henry Charles Lea (1901) has pointed out, following the accomplishment of the Reconquista, on the Christian conquest of Granada in 1492 CE, Iberian Muslims had the option to convert to Christianity or face expulsion. Some religious leaders, such as Fray Jayme Bleda, remained suspicious that the Muslim converts to Christianity were awaiting the aid of Moors and Turks in order to recapture the peninsula, and called for the annihilation of the Muslims of Spain as a consequence (Lea 1901). Such threats could have caused true Muslims to hide their identities and to pretend to be Christian in order to avoid massacre or expulsion. Seth Kunin (2001: 42) documents that Crypto-Jews in New Mexico claim descent from 'the Jews forced to convert to Catholicism in Spain between 1390 and 1492', showing how the threat of forced conversion has led to the occultation of religious identity and migration in other contexts.

The notion that Islam may have been present in Mexico as long as Catholicism has received widespread support from the Muslim community. An historical novel set in the sixteenth century, *Un hereje y un musulmán* by Pascual Almazán (1962 [1870]), which has a Muslim as one of its chief characters, has often been cited as proof of Islam's age-old presence in the country. This text has been quoted regularly as though it were a primary source, even though it was written much later, in the nineteenth century.

It is not until the nineteenth century that we have any firm evidence regarding Muslim migration to Mexico, although even this does not permit us to build a comprehensive picture. Teresa Alfaro Velcamp (2002) rightly comments that post-revolutionary perceptions of ethnicity in Mexico have discouraged any focus on immigrants since they do not fit neatly into the tripartite model of a society composed of Spaniards, indigenous Mexicans and the hybrid mestizo. More recent academic work has moved on to consider migration from the Middle Eastern region, with scholars such as Martha Díaz de Kuri and Lourdes Macluf (1995), Roberto Marin Guzman (1997), Luz María Martínez Montiel (1992), Jorge Nacif Mina (1995) and Carmen Mercedes Páez Oropeza (1984) having examined migration from the Lebanon, and with Doris Musalem Rahal (1997), María Elena Ota Mishima (1997) and Zidane Zeraoui (1997) having moved on to consider Palestinian and Arab immigration more broadly. Alfaro Velcamp's (2007) work is the most thorough study of Muslim immigration to Mexico to date.

Mexico's openness to immigration stems from the Immigration and Naturalization Law of 1886, created under Porfiro Díaz, which automatically naturalized property owners. While immigrants suffered some torment, and in some cases murderous violence, from the nationalism evoked during the Mexican Revolution of 1910, it was not until 1922 that immigration law was tightened and immigration fees heightened dramatically for 'Chinese and Negroes' (Wood 1922, quoted in Alfaro Velcamp 2002: 282). This situation barely changed until World War II had passed, when it was realized

that a certain amount of immigration would be beneficial to national development.

There is something of a consensus that the majority of Mexico's first Muslims came as immigrants from the Greater Syria area of the Ottoman Empire, as of the late nineteenth century. Alfaro Velcamp (2002) observes that out of 8,240 Arab immigrants coming to Mexico between 1878 and 1951, 343 were Muslims, constituting a little over four percent. Over half of these are documented as having arrived during the five-year period from 1922 to 1927. Increased immigration in the second half of the last century has seen the population rise since and this increase in immigration has been complemented by a number of conversions to Islam.

Abdullah (Gregory) Weston, brother of Omar Weston, the founder of the Islamic Cultural Centre of Mexico (el Centro Cultural Islamico de México, or CCIM), a Sunni organization also known as the Muslim Center de México (MCM), explained to me that a man called Yasin Ramirez is thought to have been Islam's first Mexican convert:

As far as I know he was the first community in Mexico. He was a convert, he was about 50 years old in 1990, and he had been a Muslim for 10 years. He was a bit of a Sufi. And he used to teach here; he used to have a small mosque here, in Mexico City, and there was a committee of about 20 people.

Abdullah, a Sunni Muslim with empathy for Shi'i Islam, explained how he ceased to worship with this group when he discovered it to consist of 'Qadiyanis', or those he viewed as unorthodox Muslims not accepting Mohammad (pbuh) as the Seal of the Prophets, and expressed his remorse that Yasin "died in unorthodox Islam".

It is thought that the Murabitun Sufis came to carry out missionary work in Mexico in the mid-1990s, which is about the same time that the Centro Cultural Islamico de México was founded, in 1994, which is dedicated to calling native Mexicans to Sunni Islam. Since this time, proselytism has been active.

Mexico's Muslim Population

In 1986 Mohamed Ali Kettani approximated that there were about 15,000 Muslims in Mexico (Kettani 1986). *The World Christian Encyclopaedia* upped this estimate to 39,000 by the year 2000, based on the calculations of Mohammad Bin Abdullah Noor (Barrett 1982). Some figures as high as 318,608 have been suggested (Wikipedia 2007), however there are no known sources to substantiate such a high statistic, albeit that Mexico's vast population would not seem to prohibit such a number, at about 0.3% of the total population, yet the census of the year 2000 raises clear doubts about the claim. What Alfaro Velcamp warns about immigration statistics equally applies to the numbers attributed to the total Muslim population in Mexico: they are 'estimates at best' (Alfaro Velcamp 2002: 283). The chief reasons why we have only had estimates to rely upon and why such widely varying numbers appear are owing to the lack of detail of Mexico's pre-2010 religious censuses, which focus almost entirely on the Christian faith, and the occultation by people of their true religious identity.

In the year 2000, the national survey which enquired about the religious affiliation of all people aged five or over only differentiated between Catholic; Protestants and Evangelicals (divided into Historic; Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal; Church of the Living God, Pillar and Support of the Truth, Light of the World; and 'other Evangelicals'); Biblical, but not Evangelical Groups (divided into Seventh Day Adventists; the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, or Mormons; and Jehovah's Witnesses); Jews; 'Other Religions'; 'No Religion'; and 'Not Specified' (INEGI 2007). 261,193 people fell into the category of 'Other Religions', seemingly nullifying the claim that there are 318,608 Muslims in Mexico, yet 732,630 people did not state their religion and we could readily expect the Muslim population to have increased between 2000 and 2007 owing to Muslim missionary work, which has featured prominently since the mid-1990s. It has been reported that there have been over 500 conversions to Islam in Mexico City alone (MCM 2003a), although Natascha Garvin (2005a) has estimated the number of Muslims in Mexico to be as low as 1,000 people in total, very different to the other estimates

and demonstrating the great variation incurred by a lack of precise census data. Garvin may have meant converts however, but this was not made clear. As I report elsewhere, based on this work, official statistics of the 2010 census also bring into question all previous figures, citing the number of Muslims as being in the low thousands (Lindley-Highfield of Ballumbie Castle 2015).

Divergent Communities

While the number of Muslims in Mexico remains in question, we do have some firm ideas about their geographical spread. At the time of my fieldwork, Alfaro Velcamp's (2002) study was the most comprehensive extant survey of the Muslim population in Mexico in English. Recent writings by Mexican researchers have complimented these findings (Ismu Kusumo 2004; Sanchez García 2004). Alfaro Velcamp rightly observes that the Muslim community is composed of a mixture of immigrants, descendants of immigrants, diplomats and converts, although these groupings are not entirely discrete with some individuals falling into more than one of these categories. She cites the presence of Sufi and Sunni communities in Mexico City, a group of Shi'i immigrants from Lebanon in Torreón, an active Shi'i community in the northern state of Chihuahua, some small Sunni Muslim groups in Zacatecas and Monterrey, and some Muslim medical students in Guadalajara (Alfaro Velcamp 2002). The indigenous Mexican converts to Islam in Chiapas are omitted from her work, as are the Muslims of Aguas Calientes, Morelia, Morelos, Puebla and Veracruz, where small communities exist.

Mexico City shows some of the religious diversity to Islam that we might expect from a capital city. Natascha Garvin (2005a) comments on the presence of Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufis, informing us that they are said to mix feminism with New-Age mysticism in a relatively unorthodox form of Islam. Alfaro Velcamp (2002) points to the presence of Baha'i practitioners, and also 'Qadiyanis', who do not believe that Mohammad (pbuh) was the final prophet. She also describes her attendance at a gathering of the Halveti-Jerrahi Order of

Dervishes, in Colonia Roma, and that the 20 to 30 people present were mainly women of European appearance, commenting:

The service began at around eight in the evening and lasted until midnight, with breaks to eat and smoke cigarettes. The group differed from [a Sunni organization] not only in its predominantly female constituency but in what seemed to be its much more tolerant interpretation of Islam. As was expected, its prayer service had a more mystical feel than the Sunni service I attended, which was more structured and formal.

(Alfaro Velcamp 2002: 288)

The Halveti-Jerrahi Order of Dervishes describe themselves as a traditional Sufi Muslim order and are international in scope, with branches in western and central Europe, Latin America, and the United States (Jerrahi 2005).

At the time of Alfaro Velcamp's (2002) study, the Iranian Embassy coordinated meetings and events for Shi'i Muslims and diplomats in Mexico City. Now they refer worshippers to an educational centre and prayer hall in Polanco that is not exclusively Shi'i (el Centro Educativo de la Comunidad Musulmana, CECM). They have held occasional conferences on Islam and have sponsored annual book fairs. The employees of the embassies of a number of Muslim countries often work with CCIM, which actively propagates the Muslim message and now operates a missionary programme called 'Dawa Amigo'.

At the time of my fieldwork, CCIM was slowly building a mosque in Mexico City and had an educational and recreational centre in Tequesquitengo in the state of Morelos. The latter site has a resourceful library, a mosque area, living accommodation, hotel accommodation for raising capital, and a swimming pool. This is described more fully in Chapter Five. They no longer rent the house from the Saudi Arabian Embassy as they were doing at the time of Alfaro Velcamp's (2002) study, but as she notes most Muslims attending the CCIM's prayer services are still male and the services are quite structured and formal. More recently, they opened a dawah

office in Coyoacán in Mexico City, near to the National University, UNAM, where they would discuss Islam, hand out promotional literature, observe the five daily prayers and sell goods imported from Muslim countries. This office had large ground-floor display windows facing out onto a main road very close to the Miguel Angel Quevedo metro station and it attracted a number of curious passers-by with its Arabic curios and its posters about the religion.

As Alfaro Velcamp (2002) documents, the CCIM has ten key objectives: to facilitate prayer; to educate about Islam; to teach Arabic; to nurture Muslim children; to organize social events; to provide scholarships to Islamic universities; to translate and publish works on Islam; to disseminate Muslim literature from elsewhere in the world; to establish musallahs (prayer halls); and to fundraise. A number of my informants have been to study at the Medina in Saudi Arabia or at al-Azhar University in Egypt. Public education about Islam has taken a number of forms, including handing out leaflets to passers-by; making speeches on the metro; praying in public spaces; operating shops; ‘flashing’ prominent signs at media-concentrated events; and travelling to other cities to speak about Islam. Since Alfaro Velcamp (2002) wrote, the building of Dar as Salam, its educational and recreational centre next to Lake Tequesquitengo in Morelos, has been completed and CCIM has helped to establish musallahs in Guadalajara and Chiapas, in addition to Mexico City. They have also certified establishments preparing halal (permitted) food, which raised funds for a number of early dawah (missionary) projects. They presently produce a journal on Islam in Spanish (*‘islamenuidioma’*), have a comprehensive website with a chat room facility, and coordinate a discussion list on yahoo.com.mx. The group attracts converts from all over the Mexican nation via the Internet, in addition to those who approach them, or whom they approach, in person. Its director, Omar (Mark) Weston, a former junior water-skiing champion, was born in the UK in 1968 and was raised in Mexico, having converted to Islam himself at the central mosque, Orlando, Florida in 1988. It is principally to this group that the informants to the present research belong.

Omitted from Alfaro Velcamp's (2002) study were the Salafi centre, run by a convert named Muhammad Abdullah Ruiz, and the educational centre and prayer hall in the district of Polanco (the CECM). Only a handful of converts belong to the Salafi group, which is reluctant to cooperate with researchers. The majority of the city's Sunni Muslims (of whichever affiliation) attend the Friday prayer at the prayer hall in Polanco. This educational centre admits to being primarily Sunni when asked, although is visited by Muslims of varying traditions within the faith. Often there are 30 to 60 people in attendance. Men and women are segregated, the men praying on the first floor while the women congregate to the rear of the building downstairs. The hutbah (or sermon) is delivered in Arabic and then Spanish. There are washing facilities for wudu (ritual ablutions) and there is a kitchen area, where a meal is prepared for all those in attendance at the Friday prayer. There are some deep divisions between the leaders of these competing communities, who have all worked together at some point in the past, usually in fundraising, from which their competition stems.

All three of the CCIM, the educational centre in Polanco and the Salafi centre operate on a national scale, seeking to represent Islam in Mexico. They compete in terms of attracting converts to Islam in addition to their sourcing of financial support for the Muslim community from abroad. CCIM has had historical ties with Saudi Arabia and more recently has benefited from assistance from Muslims in Britain and Kuwait. The CECM educational centre in Polanco is connected most strongly with Syria. The Salafi centre is thought to be funded independently, although indubitably has Saudi connections.

Outside of Mexico City, where there is the largest concentration of Muslims, the second most substantial communities may be found in Torreón and Chiapas. More recent waves of immigration have come from Syria and the Lebanon and there is now a strong group of Shi'i Muslims in Torreón, in northern Mexico, from these parts. Alfaro Velcamp (2002) observes that the members of the first generation of these immigrants have retained a large amount of Lebanese culture and of their Islamic faith. They tend to know Arabic and are thus able to read the Qur'an. Most have managed to marry endogamously, and

some even to patrilineal parallel cousins. The second generation, however, have intermarried more widely with Catholic Mexicans and, even though their spouses are unlikely to practice their faith, a Muslim marital setting has been the norm. Many are unable to read Arabic and thus approach the Qur'an in translation. Dietary prescriptions are followed by almost all although Arabic food in particular is, in some cases, eaten only occasionally. With regard to worship, some of the group choose to pray privately at home, whereas others attend Torreón's Shi'i mosque, Suraya, which was constructed in 1989 as a memorial to the daughter of a wealthy merchant family who was killed tragically in a car accident. These Shi'i Muslims 'do not appear to be actively reaching out' in so far as proselytism is concerned and produce literature for their community's sole use (Alfaro Velcamp 2002). Alfaro Velcamp (2002) asserts that this group cannot be considered fanatics, or fundamentalists, considering their intermarriage into Mexican society and wider integration into the community. A Sunni informant of mine commented on how this group is not particularly publicly devoted, a point reaffirmed by those questioned by Alfaro Velcamp (2002: 285):

Some of those interviewed expressed disappointment that the facility is not fully used. They said that, while on some days up to ten people pray at the mosque, other days no one shows up.

In addition to those Chiapanec converts affiliated with the Centro Cultural Islamico de México, there is a Sufi group in Chiapas which belongs to the worldwide Murabitun movement (Garvin 2005a). Marco Klahr (2002) reveals that a Spanish missionary, named Muhammad Nafia, came to Mexico not long after the Zapatista uprising of 1994 and tried, without much success, to convert EZLN members (a revolutionary group). It was thought that these revolutionaries, who fight for the rights of indigenous peoples, might relate well to the ethos of this particular brand of Islam, yet the dialogue was inconclusive. He did, however, have success with the leader of a Protestant organization who – together with his followers – had been driven out of his home in San Juan Chamula in Chiapas because of his Protestant conversion. The subsequent conversion of this group to Islam laid the foundations for what is now said to be a

community of some 200 members, made up of a mixture of Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya Indians, ‘mestizos’, other Latin Americans and Spanish immigrants (Garvin 2005a). Garvin (2005a) confirms that the group now lives in a self-contained commune in the impoverished outskirts of San Cristobal de las Casas, and they have their own Islamic ‘school’ and kindergarten, and skills workshops where they can learn carpentry and tailoring. Although it is mentioned that there are women and children within this community, its precise gender composition remains unconfirmed. Garvin (2005a) has suggested that the people of Chiapas are the most open to other religions, since official statistics reveal it to be Mexico’s most religiously plural state, yet stories such as that of the Protestant who was run out of his home leave this ‘openness’ in question. Some of this religious plurality may come from religious mobility however, where people chop and change religion, which could lead to fluctuating community populations.

The Murabitun movement has members in Africa, Australia, Europe, Southeast and Central Asia and the United States, having originally been set up in the UK by a Scotsman, Ian Dallas, who is now known as Shaykh Abd al-Qadir as-Sufi al-Murabit (Garvin 2005a). The group belongs to the Darqawi order, sympathetic to Sunni Islam, which was established in Morocco in the late eighteenth century and stresses the relationship between Islam and the cultural heritage of the West. Garvin (2005a) relays that the group has been associated with Nazism and Islamic fundamentalism and that they are prone to target heavily politicized areas such as Chiapas. She also repeats the allegations that Muhammad Nafia has been imprisoned in the past for Islamist activities and that weapons were offered to Zapatistas on the condition that they converted to Murabitun Islam (Garvin 2005a: 19). While the strength of Garvin’s source of the linking of the Murabitun movement to Nazism appears tenuous (a disgruntled former member of the group), the group’s sheikh is publicly critical of Western hegemony, positivist science and capitalism, as Garvin (2005a: 18) suggests. Garvin (2005a) echoes heavy criticisms of the radicalism of this group’s leader, however the views of Murabitun Sufis may be broader than the particular depiction Garvin propagates.

Perceptions of Islam within Mexico

Teresa Alfaro Velcamp (2002: 278) labels the ‘turco’ stereotype as ‘perhaps [Mexican Muslims]’ biggest challenge’. Based upon an article by Ignacio Klich and Jeffrey Lesser (1996) and witnessed in the telenovela, or soap opera, *El privilegio de amar* on TV Azteca, which ran from September 1998 to February 1999, Alfaro Velcamp discerns that this stereotype ‘is associated with Muslims throughout Latin America’. She explains:

In a recent episode of a popular Mexican telenovela (soap opera), for example, the heroine whispers to her friends, “The Turk is cheap.” The Arab merchant has a large hooked nose and sports a comical bushy moustache with the ends twisted up. While this character is not particularly important to the storyline, he does make an appearance, with his stereotypical features, trying to swindle these Mexican women.

It was inevitable that I had to test this perception with my informants since Alfaro Velcamp gave it such weight and described it as ‘inextricably linked to the issue of Muslim identity’ (Alfaro Velcamp 2002: 279). None of my informants were able to make this association, which I have taken to be an indication of how radically the perception of Muslims has changed in Mexico rather than as any statement as to the invalidity of the particular association at this earlier date. Since Alfaro Velcamp’s article was written (although after it was published) the colossal event of the destruction of the twin towers in New York has taken place, 9/11, which has totally transformed the general associations with Muslim identity. While *Milenio* carried a balanced article on Islam in 2002 entitled ‘Changing religion’, which gave a convert to Islam the opportunity to explain Islam denounces terrorism and violence (de la Cruz 2002), a number of derogatory news headlines have been published since, for example ‘Radical Islamic groups present in Mexico’ (Jimenez Caliz 2003) and ‘Chiapas: Islamism and family breakdown’ (Yahoo! Noticias 2004). In 2005, Gaspar Morquecho published an article in the National University, UNAM’s newspaper on ‘Gender equality in speech,

traditional servitude in reality’, in which he characterized the Murabitun Sufi group in Chiapas through ‘authoritarianism, fidelity, subordination, violence, obedience, growth and splits, revolt, disobedience, and unification and divisions in the community, marriages, the family and in personal and interethnic relations’. The article reached some balance by painting the local Sunni community in a more positive light, to which some of the Sufis had ‘defected’.

While I was staying with the Muslim community at their educational and recreational centre in Tequesquitengo, I learned the local community’s perception of the Muslims when a friend I had made hailed a taxi for me, asking the driver to take me to “the Taliban’s house” (la casa de los Talibanes). This ‘negative’ depiction of Muslims was echoed to me by an informant I shall call Raaiz, a primary school teacher who had converted to Islam, who informed me that the biggest stereotype with which he was confronted was the association with “terrorism and Bin Laden”.

H. G. Reza (2005), writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, quotes Marta Khadija Ramirez, who encountered Islam at a British school: ‘Islam was unknown in Mexico then. It wasn’t easy for my family to accept my decision.’ Because Mexico’s Muslim community is small, it has to struggle to communicate exactly what Islam is about, where perceptions of what it is to be a Muslim are created more forcefully via television and the media. It is clear that there has been a shift in the news-driven perception of Muslims in Mexico since the attacks on the World Trade Centre, which is partially fuelled, both positively and negatively, by Mexico’s proximity to the United States. Clearly, Muslim identity in Mexico is not perceived apolitically.

Perceptions of Islam in Mexico from the outside

The advent of Islam in Mexico has received the greatest attention in the media of the United States, far beyond the scholarly attention it has received, which has led to the transmission of the news on a global scale. A revision of a US news article has, for example, been

reproduced in the German newspaper, *Der Spiegel* (Glüsing 2005). A brief survey of some of the articles communicates how the phenomenon has been perceived.

An *Associated Press* (2002) report entitled ‘Official says Mexico will expel some Islamic missionaries’ admitted that the action ‘was apparently based on the alleged violation of immigration laws, not terrorism concerns’ yet repeated a Mexican commentator’s remarks that ‘Authorities began investigating the group, which is linked to the Morocco-based Murabitun World Movement, following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks’. Jan McGirk (2002) wrote, in the *San Antonio Current*, ‘Radical Islam takes root in Chiapas’ beginning ‘In a volatile corner of southern Mexico...’. Susana Hayward (2003) described the phenomenon as a ‘battle for converts’. Such language, focusing on issues of conflict, reinforces an association of Muslims with violence. In its extreme, such an association can reinforce extreme right-wing prejudices, as responses to a *Houston Chronicle* article, entitled ‘Islam taking root in southern Mexico’, posted to *FreeRepublic.com* demonstrate. The following are four separate verbatim posts to the discussion following on from the article (FreeRepublic.com 2007):

Make no mistake, Islam is attempting a full blown invasion of North America. Apparently they see south america is our “soft underbelly” and the abject poverty and misery of these people as fertile breeding ground for their propaganda, false promises and anti-America hate.

Oh, great. Now there is free access for al Qaeda terrorists to walk across our borders after having emigrated to Mexico, assimilated with the population, learned Spanish and found obscurity in the midst of Muslim congregations.

Yet another reason to close our borders.

Oh, great. BinLadenistas.

Interestingly, as Derek Copold (2001) has pointed out critically, some writers have used Mexico as an analogy for Palestine in comparing how America would act if it were attacked by Mexicans as a mode of

justifying the Israeli position. Copold quotes Russell Smith: ‘if Mexican militants were lobbing shells across the border and sent suicide bombers to discos in Los Angeles, the US would immediately act.’ Copold finds a similar comparison drawn by Jonah Goldberg:

A Mexican suicide bomber walked into a pizza restaurant in a Santa Fe, N.M. mall this morning, killing at least 15 people, mostly children. Up to a hundred others were wounded... Militia in Tijuana, Mexico, fired rocket grenades into downtown San Diego, killing 20, wounding 50 and, once again, snarling morning traffic.

These jocular attempts to authenticate the Israeli position do little to dampen any fears that the presence of ‘radical’ Muslims in Mexico would be detrimental to the US-Mexico border issue. These particular slants on the issue tend to dominate the output of the media in the American Southwest, where the readership is in closer proximity to the border.

In contrast to this negative focus, North America’s Hispanic Muslim groups have responded to the advent of Islam in Mexico very positively. Michelle al-Nasr (2002) writes of ‘a monotheistic revolution’, celebrating that ‘people are embracing Islam by the thousands jettisoning the Catholicism imposed upon their ancestors in Spain.’ In Shamim A. Siddiqi’s (1993: 95) *The Dawah Program*, a guide for Muslims who are to carry out missionary activity, he points to the Hispanic people’s receptivity to Islam:

It has been noted through Dawah efforts in this community that very often [Spanish-speaking people] are found akin to Islam. They express less indifference to Islam and the Da’ee [the individual carrying out missionary work] in comparison with other Christian communities. It is easy to talk with them with reference to their Spanish origin and its past Islamic culture, the evidences of which are still very much visible in Spain a country they fondly relate to. Many of them, I have found, are in search of literature on Islam in the Spanish language. Many a time when they saw the Qur’an in Spanish in our hands or on display on the table at marketplaces, they rushed to it with reverence. Some of them held it with tears in

their eyes. In view of this, Spanish-speaking people should be given special attention by the Islamic Movement in the American perspective.

This special attention is increasingly present in Mexico.

The broader Muslim world has acknowledged the potential for Islam in Mexico and also the economic needs of the Mexican people. As a consequence, Muslim individuals and organizations have supported Muslim missionary activities in Mexico morally, logistically and financially. For example, the University of Cambridge's Muslim Community Services group hosted Omar Weston, Director of CCIM, on 15 November 2003 for a lecture and video presentation on Islam in Mexico to promote CCIM's work and to raise funds for the Mexican Muslim community. These changes taking place in Mexico need to be understood in the context of broader transformations occurring around the world, with which the Mexican situation is inextricably linked.

Islam in Mexico in relation to the wider global situation

Alfaro Velcamp (2002) acknowledges the identification of Mexican Muslims with the wider Islamic world and insightfully notes the arrival of a more pan-American Muslim consciousness. A foundation for this is present in the historical ties between Latin America and Muslim Spain. Hisham Aidi (2003) points to an affinity that has existed between the Latin American states and the Arab region:

Throughout the past century, particularly during the Cold War, Latin American leaders from Cuba's Fidel Castro to Argentina's Juan Peron would express support for Arab political causes, and call for Arab-Latin solidarity in the face of imperial domination, often highlighting cultural links to the Arab world through Moorish Spain. Castro, in particular, made a philosophy of pan-Arab pan-Africanism central to his regime's ideology and policy initiatives. In his famous 1959 speech on race, the jefe maximo underlined Cuba's African and Moorish origins. "We all have lighter or darker skin.

Lighter skin implies descent from Spaniards who themselves were colonized by the Moors that came from Africa. Those who are more or less dark-skinned came directly from Africa. Moreover, nobody can consider himself as being of pure, much less superior, race.”

Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez also called on his people to ‘return to their Arab roots’ in an attempt to gather up support from Venezuela’s mestizo and black majority to act against the white Bush administration’s alleged support for a coup against him (Aidi 2003). Such statements attest to cross-cultural commonalities, which add to a favourable perception of Islam for some people in Latin America.

A number of the factors attracting Muslim immigrants to Mexico, and that also draw native Mexicans into contact with Islam, are hallmarks of secularization: industrialization, urbanization, rationalization, bureaucratization and societalization (Wilson 1966). While globalization and the presence of Islam in Mexico facilitate the growth of the religion in this region, as Bowman, Herbert and Mumm (2001: 73) narrate, ‘Wilson sees the increasing number of new faiths as part of the secularization process.’ In such circumstances, we might enquire if the advent of religious pluralism in Mexico will begin to affect the social significance of religion in Mexicans’ everyday lives.

Dialogue concerning Islam in Mexico necessitates discussion of the presence of Islam in a non-Muslim state, or ‘Islam in the West’, as we might, ideologically, call it. Mexico is within the Americas and is situated in the geographical ‘West’. Yet Robert Young (2001) observes ‘a revolutionary black, Asian and Hispanic globalization, with its own dynamic counter-modernity [...] constructed in order to fight global imperialism’, which is set in opposition to the conventional modernity of the imperialists, who we must presume, in everyday terms, to be encapsulated within the notion ‘the West’. Accordingly, we witness an opposition to the West within a Western nation. This double identity, of both being and not being the object in question, reflects the deep polarization of economic reality in Mexico. I have already mentioned Oliver Froehling’s attestation that in

Chiapas there are ‘no telephones or electricity at all in most of the rural areas’ (Froehling 1997: 291), yet as *Forbes* regularly reports, Mexico is home to one of the world’s richest men, Carlo Slim Helu, once the richest man in the world (Forbes 2010). Such economic injustices leave Mexico in the geographical West whilst at least in major part still in the economic South. This highlights Mexico’s, and Latin America’s, status as an anomaly in comparison to other examples of Islam in the West.

With Islam’s historic connection with Spain and its alternative perspective to a white-Western-dominated discourse, the divergent Muslim communities of Mexico call for our attention, while a new chapter of Mexico’s history is unraveled. It is clear that a Muslim identity carries a number of strong symbolic associations with other factors in Mexican society and there is clearly a politics to these.

Chapter Three

The Anglican Church of Mexico

Challenge to Identity

My encounter with the Anglican Church of Mexico began during my first placement with the Mexican Muslim community in Morelos, while staying at the religious retreat Dar as Salam. It began as a weakness in my fieldwork technique: I was all of a sudden far from home, distant from my recently betrothed fiancée, and beginning to lose parts of my identity through immersion in a new cultural milieu on many different levels: As I started to feel my hold on my identity slip, I began to travel into the city of Cuernavaca on a Sunday to attend an English-spoken service of the Mexican Anglican Church. This section sets out the relevance to my study of the conversion to Anglicanism of seminarians studying at the main seminary of the Anglican Church of Mexico in Mexico City, while also introducing us to the history of the Church, and the role it played in the maintenance and formation of my identity during my fieldwork experience.

My participant observation added many Muslim practices to my daily routine, such as carrying out wuduh, or ritual cleansing, joining in with prayers on the calling of the adhan, the call to prayer, eating halal food, and reading the Qur'an. On a Friday, I would also travel to hear the jutba (Mexican spelling) Friday prayer in Mexico City, and I visited a number of community projects, at some of which I worked or studied. For example, I took Arabic lessons at the Dawa Amigo office in Mexico City and I helped to lay irrigation tracts in fields farmed for the community. These various activities not only helped me to bond with my Muslim colleagues, teachers and

informants, but also meant that my identity went through a process of Islamization. There are parallels to be drawn here between this Islamization I underwent and the Muslimization I observed in relation to newly converted members of the Muslim community, as discussed in Chapter Five. Both involved the need to authenticate the legitimacy of one's identity through certain outward manifestations of the same in front of others. In my case, this was my role as a social anthropologist through carrying out participant observation, and in that of the new converts, this was the need to legitimize the conversion itself. There are clear political elements at play here.

In addition to this call I felt on my persona through practice, there was also a growing call on me to adopt Islam personally as my own religion. I had spoken freely about my personal beliefs with Omar Weston, the community leader, and other Muslims resident at Dar as Salam. These conversations were perhaps tests of my attitudes in relation to religion in general and also to Islam in particular from the point of view of the community. In a sense, they permitted the community leader to assess the extent to which I might make a Muslim, and provided a basis for asking me why I did not do the same. These conversations were persuasive, and caused me to question my own religious beliefs.

It is widely stated that identity is asserted when it is under threat, as Martin (1978) asserts in the context of pressured religious conversion, and my experience adds further empirical evidence to support that proposition. One day a week for two hours I abandoned my public persona of the anthropologist carrying out participant observation and fed that part of me that missed home by going along to Anglican church services held in English in a city nearby. I gained a sense of emotional well-being from this experience and it added to my senses of security and personal continuity, even though I view it as having been a weakness in my fieldwork technique, although an intrinsic element of my humanity.

The Anglican Church of Mexico

The Anglican Church of Mexico, despite its present name, was founded through the outward action of Mexicans rather than the inward action of foreign missionaries. Following the new constitution of 1857 and the laws of reform created under the leadership of Benito Juárez, a group of Roman Catholics seeking a ‘thorough doctrinal, liturgical and moral reformation of the Church’, who became known as the Constitutional Fathers, entered into communication with an Hispanic Episcopal priest from New York, Reverend Angel Herreros-de-Mora (Touché Porter 1996: 7). Reverend Herreros-de-Mora supplied them with a copy of the *Book of Common Prayer* in Spanish and information about the Episcopal Church and the wider Anglican Communion. Feeling certain that there was no means of reforming the Roman Catholic Church in Mexico from within, this group of disenchanted priests established an independent religious society under the new laws, called La Sociedad Católica Apostólica Mexicana, in 1861. As Bishop Carlos Touché Porter (1996) explains, the word ‘Society’ was chosen deliberately as its members did not wish to claim to be a church since they were sensitive about the absence of bishops. The group set up an Episcopal Committee to exercise the managerial functions that would normally be the responsibility of a bishop, which was made up of both clergy and lay members. The Society formally declared the American Episcopal Church’s *Book of Common Prayer* to be ‘their guide in public worship’ (Mees, quoted in Touché Porter 1996).

Raised in the Roman Catholic tradition and sensitive to the notion of Apostolic succession, three members of the Society’s Episcopal Committee travelled to the American Episcopal Church in New York to request the consecration of a bishop. Their request was declined on canonical grounds. Seeking to overcome this complication, the Society asked for the guidance of an Episcopal Priest in order to lead them closer to achieving their objective. In 1868, Reverend Henry Chauncey Riley came to Mexico as a delegate of the American and Foreign Christian Union. Reverend Riley contributed significantly to the conversion of Father Manuel Aguas, a respected Dominican preacher of the time, who immediately became the Society’s new

leader. Father Aguas was critical of the level of disorganization in the group due to the number of displaced congregations missing any truly unified overarching structure. As a consequence, he formed the various congregations into a unified church which took the name La Iglesia Mexicana de Jesús. As Touché Porter (1996: 9) notes, ‘The name was chosen to make it clear that this was the Mexican Church of Jesus, whereas the “other” was the Roman Church of Mary’. The new church grew substantially under Father Aguas’s direction and it expanded outside of the Federal District. In 1871, the Synod elected him to the position of their first bishop, but he died before his consecration.

After the death of Father Aguas, the church reached a state of crisis, as it had expanded to such an extent that there were not enough priests and there was no one to ordain them. As a consequence, Holy Communion was no longer the focal point of worship. In 1873, the church elected Reverend Riley to be their bishop and they hoped that the American Episcopal Church would effect his consecration. Alas, they did not. Hearing of the problem of the lack of priests, the American Episcopal Church sent Alfred Lee, the Bishop of Delaware, to Mexico to investigate the situation. Disturbed by the church’s predicament, he ordained seven lay members to the clergy and confirmed nearly two hundred individuals. The same year, the church restyled itself La Rama Mexicana de la Iglesia Católica de Nuestro Señor Jesucristo, asserting its Catholic rather than Protestant nature. Bishop Lee assured that intercommunication was established between the American Episcopal Church and the Mexican church in 1875, which was a key step towards the absorption of the church into the Anglican Communion.

In 1879, Reverend Riley was consecrated a bishop, as the Lambeth Conference of 1878 decreed that the Communion needed a bishop who could unify Spanish and Portuguese congregations into churches. This demand on his time drew him away from the church in Mexico and led to its decline and his later resignation, despite their eighteen-year wait for an Episcopacy.

In 1891, the church became La Iglesia Episcopal Mexicana o La Iglesia de Jesús, under its new Episcopal Delegate, Reverend William Gordon of Delaware. This was following the rejection of the church's amalgamation into the American Episcopal Church as a Foreign Mission. The church maintained a dual nomenclature to exhibit both its gradual integration into the American Church and its independent beginnings. Two years later, Reverend Forrester, an Englishman, became the second Episcopal Delegate. He founded the church's seminary in 1894 and developed its own hymnal and provisional prayer book. In 1906, the Mexican Episcopal Church was accepted as a church of the American Episcopal Church's Missionary District of Mexico, making it a member of the worldwide Anglican Communion. 88 years later, the General Convention of the American Episcopal Church released Mexico's five dioceses from its jurisdiction and in 1995 the Mexican Episcopal Church received its autonomy, becoming La Iglesia Anglicana de México. Converts to the Church, who are studying in its Seminary, San Andrés, constitute the non-Muslim informants to my study, although my first encounter with the Church was in Cuernavaca.

Diocese of Cuernavaca

While a resident of Dar as Salam, I often dined with its Chilean caretaker in the local village of San José Vista Hermosa during the evening, who himself had converted to Islam some years earlier. Part of his daily routine was to call in at the local Internet café, through which we were able to communicate with the outside world. Chatting on MSN Messenger was a regular part of his every day. Stopping off here permitted me Internet access and it was through this that I was able to locate the presence of a church, holding services in English.

Initially, this took me to the Diocesan centre in Cuernavaca, where I had read a church met, holding some services in English. This centre was located in an affluent district of Cuernavaca. This much was evident from the scale of the buildings in the vicinity and also the many security measures each had apparent. It was not unusual for some of these homes to have a manned and armed guard's post at

their entrances. The Diocesan centre was expansive and had large open areas. The church here was really a meeting place for a fluctuating community of primarily North American ex-patriots and tourists, for whom makeshift services were held in a large hall, somewhat resembling a large primary school assembly hall both in proportion and style. I was welcomed very warmly by the staff in the Diocesan centre and they took an interest in the topic of my research. In response to my quest for a place of worship, they gave me the address of a church in the centre of Cuernavaca, St. Michael's & All Angels, led by a lady lay pastor Brigitte Anneliese Klinge Gutbrod, and here I attended.

St. Michael's & All Angels proved an interesting place to attend for worship, as Sunday mornings had services in English and then Spanish one straight after the other. It was thus possible to witness the same service held in both languages. The church was actually a tiny cathedral and its number of worshippers was equally small. Often only four people attended the English service with a few more, perhaps eight to twelve, attending the Spanish service. The church could be differentiated from a Roman Catholic church by its level of statuary and iconography, which while elegant was much simpler than one would expect to find in a Roman Catholic church. One of the things that struck me about the church was how as an Anglican from the UK one was accorded almost instantly an ambassadorial kind of status: There were invitations to dine at the lay pastor's home and to read scripture almost straight away. Also, the interest shown in the United Kingdom by Mexican members of the congregation amounted almost to a form of Anglophilia. One informant remarked, "You are so fortunate to live in the UK. It is a beautiful place. Have you been to Canterbury?" The personality of the Archbishop of Canterbury was given much greater weight here than I had ever experienced at home. There was a cult of personality at play, according Rowan Williams (at the time) a quasi-papal status, perhaps indicating how outside concepts are understood in internal terms. These were factors I also witnessed later in Mexico City.

Visits to this Church regularly punctuated my stay in the state of Morelos, each Sunday being a day I caught a coach into Cuernavaca

and attended a church service. Retrospectively, I do view this as a weakness in my fieldwork technique, as I had shown that I needed to cling onto a part of my previous self to make my participant observation within the Muslim community manageable. Going to an English-language church service reminded me of home and yet helped ground me in my new context. It was a liminal state (Turner 1969), in that it bridged my existence in Mexico with my former existence at home. Of course, the ambiguity however was more in respect of which religion I belonged to rather than whether I was ambiguously positioned between Mexico and home. I did not feel that I was betraying the Muslim community by allowing myself to express my spirituality in this way. In fact, I felt that it aided my appreciation of Islam from a spiritual point of view, as practising and engaging with both religions side by side caused me to realize their commonalities to a greater extent than I had ever done before. My conversations were more informed and as a consequence I learned of matters such as the significance of the Messianic return of Jesus (pbuh) at the apocalypse for one of my Muslim friends. The regular practice of both religions added to what I would call a religious-mindedness, which simply meant that my discourse was framed easily and regularly within religious terms. This provided me with a form of cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu 1986) when engaging with my Muslim informants, since we both conversed within a spiritual field of discourse (Foucault 1980). While I was not yet a Muslim for the Muslim community, I was respected as a religious person. This did, albeit, add to the call for me to adopt Islam as my personal faith, to which I gave very serious consideration.

A place to stay

One thing I have learned to appreciate through life is the value of a roof over one's head. Experiencing short term homelessness has taught me this, as have nights of missing a last train home or occasions of being between addresses. The issue of being taken in by a person into their intimate home environment shows you human kindness at a level we do not readily witness every day. I shall

forever be grateful to the Carmelites on Boar's Hill, Oxford, who gave me shelter when I needed it most. Similarly, I became grateful for help when accommodation became a concern during my fieldwork.

The Muslim community in Mexico has not been without external scrutiny. CISEN, the Mexican Intelligence Service, were temporarily monitoring attendees at a Mosque of the Muslim community in Mexico City and carried out an immigration raid one Friday. As mentioned earlier, Intelligence Services – particularly in the US – are now more inclined to employ anthropologists, and as Farndon (2005) suggests, this puts the relationship between ethnographer and informant in jeopardy. It is not without reasonable concern, then, that my nickname amongst the Muslim community became James Bond, and that a situation arose that I had to placate and pacify by adopting the James Bond theme tune as my mobile telephone's ring tone. Embracing and humouring the concern was a productive way of overcoming it. Yet, there was still an element of risk for the community.

The community's leader, Omar Weston, understood that some Muslims he accommodated who had fled from the United States may have been in that country illegally. There was some risk then that he could face possible action for helping these people. While making their immigration status no matter of his concern, and thus not being complicit in any illegal migration of any kind, Omar exercised what he saw as his moral and religious duty to help those brother Muslims who were homeless and penniless on their quest to get home, wherever that may be. During my stay, I encountered Muslims from Kenya, Somalia and Iraq in such situations, two of whom had resided with me at Dar as Salam.

The second half of my fieldwork was due to be spent in Mexico City. Omar had a flat he was renting and using as a base for some Arabic lessons in the area of the University, UNAM. He suggested that I could base myself there for the final six months of my stay. Everything was organized for me to move in here, but a week before I was due to do so, the arrangement collapsed. The Kuwaiti sponsor

who had been funding the rental of this property had indicated to Omar that he no longer wished for me to stay there. I was told this was because of concerns about the unknown immigration status of other people who might be living there and that the issue might come to the fore if I remained there with regular contact with them. The possibility that I might be 008 perhaps was a real concern, however it is more than likely that the sponsor did not want to be associated with anything that might possibly be exposed as being unethical, although as my initial paragraph of this sub-section indicates, what it is exactly that could be considered unethical about giving a homeless person a home is something I would like to question. Now, though, I had a date to move out of a property, but no new place into which to move. This predicament was to bring Anglican informants into my study.

The Anglican Seminary

My Muslim informants in Mexico City who I knew best were not best placed to accommodate me in their homes. They were young adults still living with family members, and their relatives had not adopted Islam, which was often a point of contention. It would accordingly be very difficult for them to bring an anthropologist studying their Muslim identity into their households. I had tried to locate a place to stay within the community until there were just a few days before I had to move, and I had still found nowhere. I thus resolved to contact the Anglican Church in Mexico to see if they could do anything to help.

As it transpired, the Diocesan Office for Mexico occupied the same site as the Church's seminary. The head of the seminary, Padre Pablo, who became for me a much respected teacher, kindly offered me a room to rent, where I would be able to stay, fed and watered, for my final six months in Mexico City. Clearly, while this was a huge relief in terms of accommodation, it was a further challenge to my fieldwork, as I would no longer be residing among the main community I was studying. As a result, this situation was less comfortable with me than the earlier one-day-a-week escape to the

church. I would be residing with the Anglican community but going out each day to visit the Muslim community, or so at first I thought.

The seminary was within walking distance of Omar Weston's offices in the University district of Mexico City and was just a short bus journey away from the Mosque at which Friday prayers were held. In this sense the location was ideal, yet I felt uncomfortable living somewhere bearing an heraldic flag with a symbol that has appeared in historic confrontations between Christians and Muslims. While the cross of St. George is the same symbol, it appears more conflictive when borne on an escutcheon (shield), since this is the symbol often used on tabards to denote crusaders in popular culture. Whether this cultural sensitivity would have been shared by my informants, I did not find out by keeping the dual locality of my field sites mutually distinct. To say the least, I was wary. I now saw the Anglican part of my identity as a threat to my study of the Muslim community; however, I overcame this by separating where I lived from where I worked, at least in this respect.

The early morning and late evening routine of the seminary became my own. Seminarians woke and readied themselves for morning prayers at eight, which lasted until half past, and then went for a communal breakfast in the refectory until 9am, when their first lessons began. My role within the morning prayers began as observer but then extended to participant observer as I was invited to give readings and eventually even ad lib prayers. These took place in Spanish. If I was at the seminary for lunchtime, there was a sizeable three-course cooked lunch eaten seated around the table in the refectory too. Everyone on site attended this session. In the evening, dinner was in the kitchen and everyone helped themselves to preparing some food from the cupboards. Occasionally the more proficient cooks produced something to share with the others present. Mealtimes were indicative of a kind of conviviality that underpinned the ethos of the institution. Sometimes I would stay with my Muslim friends late into the evening and thus would not return in time for the evening meal. On other occasions, I was there in good time and found the evenings a good opportunity to get to know the

seminarians. This is how I found out that some of them were converts to Anglicanism, which led to them becoming informants to this study.

As my stay at the seminary progressed, the greater my involvement became, until such a time that I divided my week into two halves, half each for the two communities I was studying. My participant observation of the life of the seminarians then extended to attending classes with them and socializing with them in the evenings. This allowed me a degree of access to my Anglican informants that matched that which I had experienced with their Muslim counterparts, giving me a realistic opportunity to integrate myself into this additional setting. This proximity to my informants enabled me to learn once again just how political religious conversion can be.

Chapter Four

In this chapter, I explore how religious conversion leads to a change in the power dynamics to relationships. This type of change can occur on a number of different levels. Some of these changes will be the focus of Chapter Six, when I turn to consider what I call metareligious conversion, which is when issues that can seem to be beyond religion itself are understood to be fundamental to conversion events. Within this chapter, my focus will rest on transformations that take place between individuals in their social networks as a consequence of conversion. Some of these transformations may be deliberate in that the neophyte purposefully intends to alter the dynamics of these relationships through the conversion event. Other transformations will be coincidental to conversion and will mean that the field of discourse in which the convert is situated is shifted by the changes brought about by religious conversion. Following my earlier equation of power with positional status in relation to fields of discourse, as mentioned in Chapter One, I continue to examine these relational symbolic changes in terms of discourse dynamics.

The issue of social relationships

It is a legitimate question to ask how conversion can be anything but nominal if social relationships, which were present before the conversion event, are maintained with some of the same people, and of the same nature, post-conversion. As stated earlier, I understand conversion to be a multifaceted process and its key constituent components as being conversion from one religion and conversion to another, as two distinct but interrelated factors. An examination of the relationships that existed pre-conversion in comparison with those relationships that exist thereafter is a legitimate means by which to establish exactly what changes in the dynamics of personal relationships are affected, and indeed effected, by conversion.

Yet clearly such an approach has its limitations. For instance, in the collection of data in respect of these transformations, I have been dependent on the statement of the relationships converts had pre-conversion after the conversion events themselves. Furthermore, there is always the possibility that the status of their contemporary relationships, by which the converts define themselves after the conversion event, is a product of factors of influence from their new religious environment: They may be more representative of where the converts feel they should be rather than indeed where they actually are. Yet, as I will go on to show in Chapter Seven, this does not in itself need to pose us an insurmountable problem, as I follow Priest (2003) in understanding that religious conversion can be 'complete' when individuals measure their behaviour, their social relationships and their position in their new religion's terms, although I accept that this intellectualist position does not apply in all cultures, as Tooker (1992) has illustrated in relation to the Akha Zan of Highland Burma. This is a matter I address more wholeheartedly in my later chapter, Chapter Seven, on considering the politics of religious conversion from the point of view of scholarly engagement with the issue.

The strength of conversion

That the strength of conversion may be gauged we may ascertain from the literature, albeit that this is in no linearly quantifiable way (positivist sociological statisticians may well, however, disagree, since they may devise an index by which the strength of conversion may be ascertained and then measure any given individual against this scale). My own position, however, is that you may represent it, but you cannot quantify it completely in any single exercise. Some scholars see conversion as easier to gauge in terms of completeness. For instance, Travisano (1970) differentiates between alternation and conversion, pointing to alternation as incomplete conversion, where remnants of one's cultural heritage and prior commitments are retained, and conversion itself is seen as the holistic process by which one departs from one's former worldview and obligations, leaving them in the ever more distant past. I am inclined to side with Geertz

(1971: 97) in terms of understanding the notion of ‘worldview’ as ‘the collection of notions a people has of how reality is at base put together’. Travisano’s distinctions have been brought into the more recent present by Wohlrab-Sahr (1999), who employs the terms ‘syncretism’ and ‘symbolic battle’ to signify alternation and conversion respectively, in the context of conversion to Islam in Germany and the United States of America. Wohlrab-Sahr’s focus is on symbolism, thus ‘syncretism’ denotes, as the anthropologist or sociologist might expect, a co-existence of symbols representing the prior and the present religions, and with ‘symbolic battle’ constituting an arrival of new symbolic expressions, in terms of the adopted faith, and a rejection of any previous symbolic representations. It is twixt this polarity that the problem lies.

The construction of identity

The question is, then, an ontological one, in that we must ask how the identity of a convert is constructed. Intuitively, we may feel that absorbing a label is not enough on its own, so simply declaring “soy musulmán(a)” (I’m a Muslim) would appear inadequate. Indeed, as I address in my chapter on the political dynamics to scholars’ scrutiny of religious conversion, religious conversion is seen by some as necessarily being a continuous event that presumably as a consequence never reaches its theoretical optimum. However, to admonish the potency of people’s statements as ineffectual is to at least some extent unsatisfactory in this case, for in Austin’s (1962) terms words do have a perlocutionary force in Islam in that, for example, the recital of the shahadah, the Muslim declaration of faith, is deemed to effect conversion, just as the thrice given admission of divorce before a stipulated number of witnesses is seen in certain Muslim states to be of sufficient legal substance to actually effect the divorce. These proclamations are both statements and acts all in one. What becomes significant, then, is the context in which these statements are framed. It is the context that binds the statements to the perlocutionary force of the remarks that gives them their effect.

In Mexico, custom dictates that the shahadah is said after a period of religious instruction, based upon the Qur'an, in a manner not dissimilar to confirmation training within the Christian church, together with a period of familiarization with the community and its practices. During this period of contemplation, a neophyte would be expected to absorb the cultural practices of the religion he or she is seeking to adopt, i.e. the dietary prescriptions, conventional forms of dress, times of prayer, et cetera. The adoption of this praxis would signify transition from the former sociocultural setting to the new one, building credence in the veracity of the plight of the convert and, therefore, the efficacy of the conversion itself. As I address in Chapter Five, this need to demonstrate the veracity of the conversion event is another political dynamic to religious conversion in this context. Yet, in such a transition, a number of associational circumstantial factors and relationships will remain intact. This, I will illustrate with an example.

My ethnographic example is taken from Kunin's (2001) structural analysis of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico in the American Southwest. Those belonging to the Crypto-Judaic community 'claim descent from the Jews forced to convert to Catholicism in Spain between 1390 and 1492' (Kunin 2001: 42). Kunin breaks the Crypto-Judaic community down into four ideal types: those who overtly admit to being Jewish, also demonstrating adherence to a number of Judaic practices; those who admit to having Jewish forebears and thus Jewish influence in their families, who show some evidence of Judaic practices, albeit that these are more ambiguous; those who deny any Judaic identity at all, yet have recognized Judaic practices; and those who claim a Judaic identity, yet have neither evidence of Jewish forebears nor Judaic customary observances.

Torn between two contexts

An informant falling into the third of Kunin's categories, i.e. those who deny Jewish identity, yet have identifiable Judaic customs, which is interestingly the largest group within the fieldwork sample, viewed herself as a fully practising Christian, yet observed restrictions on

eating pork, spoke in the local Judeo-Hispanic dialect, and built jachal booths, alike those produced during the Jewish festival of Sukkot (Kunin 2001: 50). Despite the fact that conversion to Christianity is likely to have taken place in her family between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, interaction within her local social associational group, composed of her family and similarly socialized members of her local community, has kept Judaic practices alive despite her clearly professed Christian faith. We see, here, the possibility for distance between the claim to an identity and the observance of the cultural practices attributed to that same identity, while we may posit that old customary practices may have continued to exist because the conversion was historically forced, thus differentiating between forced and voluntary conversion. On this subject, as I mentioned briefly earlier, Martin (1978: 9) has made it plain that imposed religious practices are less likely to be maintained and those traditional practices deliberately executed in resistance to such pressure are much more likely to endure. While clearly this cannot be stated post hoc to be the cause for the continuation of Judaic practices in this particular ethnographic example, since there are many generations between the likely period of any conversion and the present day and the existence of no concrete evidence to support such an hypothesis either way, it does at least explain to us how such practices may persist in theory. Furthermore, there is evidence to support the view that conversion was forced in the Mexican context, which may well have the impact of promoting rebellion against those religious practices that lose social significance through being understood to have come about in this way (e.g. MCM 2003b; Highfield 2004).

The retention of remnants of a prior identity on a shift of sociocultural environment is neither exclusive to religious conversion nor the Hispanic context. Ong (1988), for example, astutely illustrates how in Malaysia indigenous spirit beliefs persisted after the assimilation of village folk into the corporate sociocultural setting of a multinational factory, despite attempts at 'Westernization'. People who worked in the factories returned to their villages after work, where the stories of, and beliefs in, spirits endured. Efforts to reacclimatize the workers notwithstanding, the maintenance of contact with their former

sociocultural setting caused prior practices to survive to at least some degree. Ong (1988: 33) explains,

For Malays, the places occupied by evil spirits are nonhuman territories like swamps, jungles, and bodies of water. These amoral domains were kept distant from women's bodies by ideological and physical spatial regulations. The construction of modern buildings, often without regard for Malay concern for moral space, displaces spirits, which take up residence in the toilet tank. Thus, most village women express a horror of the Western-style toilet, which they would avoid if they could. It is the place where their usually discreet disposal of bodily waste is disturbed. Despite their fear of spirits residing in the water tank, an unaccustomed body posture is required to use the toilet. In their hurry to depart, unflushed toilets and soiled sanitary napkins, thrown helter-skelter, offend spirits who may attack them.

While this is not an example of religious conversion per se, it is an instance of a change in circumstances that necessitates an ideological switch, without which frustrations ensue. We can see this as a syncretistic situation. Both of the examples do, however, demonstrate that whilst a change is predicated (conversion, in the case of my study), in some ways and to some extent there is no change at all (retained social associations and practices). Considering this predicament in terms of social networks assists with the illustration of this point.

The strength of weak ties

Adams (1998) advocates the utilization of network topologies to represent virtual place in terms of online or computer-networked relations. This methodology is readily applicable to social networks, upon which Adams models his study. In such a format, all social relationships can be expressed in terms of nodes and links. Nodes represent social agents and links represent the nature of the relationship between them, which can be in one of four forms: none;

one-way A to B; one-way B to A; and two-way (A to B & B to A) (Adams 1998: 91). Unless charting out hierarchies or similar explicitly unidirectional relationships within them, human social network topologies tend to consist of two-way links, as social discourse and influence flows in both directions (still seeing power framed in terms of discourse).

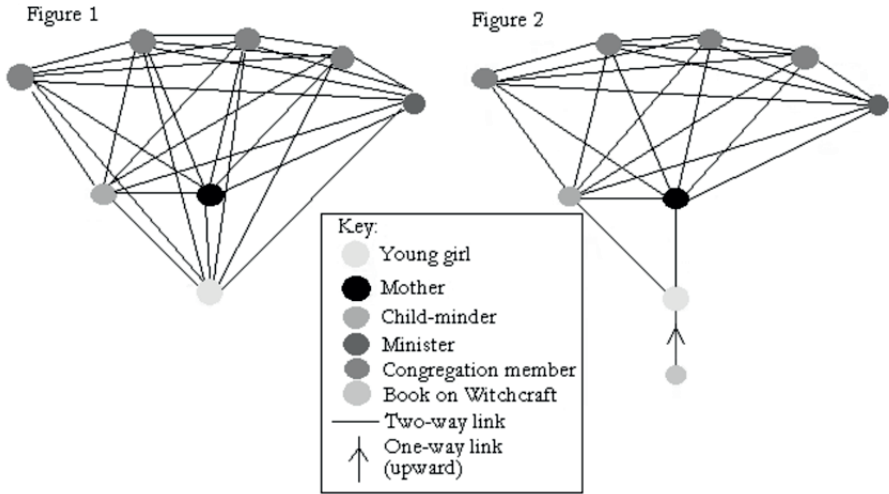


Figure 1, above, on the one hand, illustrates a hypothetical social network for a young girl from a single-parent family with no broader relations, who is educated at home, has a child-minder, and is never allowed out of the house apart from a weekly visit to Church with her mother, where there is a congregation of five other people, including her child-minder, and a minister. While these circumstances are highly implausible, they are drawn upon to facilitate the composition of a network topology, as too large a number of social interactions would complicate the visibility of an example. For the same reason, the social network topology illustrated extends only to those network relationships between those contacts within this group of people. External contacts are not represented. Figure 2, on the other hand, depicts the same social network if the girl withdraws from going to church as, for example, she chooses to experiment with white witchcraft, having read a book on the subject, represented by the second lightest node. In order to extrapolate the directions of communication, black lines have been used to represent two-way links and lines with an arrow signify one-way links (i.e. the author of

the book communicates with the girl, but the girl doesn't communicate with the author of the book; although we might argue that the act of interpreting the book is itself exercising a communicative force in the direction of the book). Figure 2, therefore, illustrates the position of the social network after the girl has left Christianity and converted to witchcraft. The bottom node is the book, above that is the girl.

If we contrast these two network topologies, a salient point becomes clear: While the convert has removed herself from the religious environment in which she was situated previously, she is still in direct contact with social agents who are located in that sociocultural setting, and through these parties she maintains an indirect connection with that setting. The influences of these connections need not be insignificant. From a public point of view, in terms of how the girl would outwardly identify herself to the world, we may say that the young girl has abandoned her old religion and has adopted a new one. From a private point of view, however, she retains communication with agents who belong to her previous community. In such circumstances, we might expect that community to still have some impact on her life. A problem with social network theory is that it presupposes influence through connections without necessarily any qualitative data to substantiate that such influence actually exists, either before or after such a transformation. To avoid falling into this trap, we shall consider two accounts of converts who have described their relationships before and after conversion by doing so qualitatively.

Two conversion stories

HASAN

Hasan, as I shall call him here, was the first native Mexican Muslim I met in person. He came along to greet me with Omar Weston, the chief proponent of Islam in Mexico, when I first arrived in the state of

Morelos in central Mexico, only hours after my landing in the capital. It was a hot February afternoon and this remarkable heat was not the sole cause for perspiration, since I had been anxious as I had not managed to contact Omar to let him know that I was on my journey, as he had requested, while his telephone line was down. Omar knew which coach I was taking, but there was no sign of him when I arrived. I kept on trying to call to no avail, the line still ringing through disconnected. During the two-and-a-half hours I was waiting a number of assumptions formed in my mind. Most cars that went past were old and run down. I had read much over the Internet about the Muslim community's need for financial aid, so I expected my hosts to be coming to collect me in a similarly tired-out vehicle. In fact, each time a shabby car pulled into the coach station, up were built my hopes. Such hopes became apprehensions as further time went by. Was everything going to happen quite as neatly as I had planned?

After the second hour of waiting had passed, I began to start formulating contingency plans, such as where I would go if no one came to meet me. I had not pre-planned this; with hindsight it became obvious that this was something I ought to have done. Just as I had jotted down and resolved upon a firm 'Plan B', a very modern, glimmering white Jeep 4x4 pulled up briskly into a parking space close by me and out stepped Omar Weston and Hasan. Omar sported a white polo shirt with brightly coloured stripes, short combat trousers coming down to just below the knee and brown leather sandals. Hasan wore a white tunic with matching white trousers, which is quite traditional within Sunni Islam. Both were presentable and when they spoke their amiability immediately stood out.

From the coach station we left to head to a restaurant where I experienced my first Mexican-made food. We all ate *cecina*, a salted beef dish, traditional to Morelos state, which was 'sizzled up' right in front of us. From there I was taken to a riverside piece of land, where Omar grows bamboo, flowering plants and tomatoes with a view to providing employment for the Muslim community. He hopes to grow plants to retail in Mexico City once they have grown sufficiently and when he has secured an outlet shop. We then went to Dar as Salam,

the Muslim residential retreat that became my home for the first six months of my stay.

Hasan remained at Dar as Salam with me, painting a newly built accommodation block in lieu of paying rent. After a few jokes from Omar and Hasan about the possibility of my working for British Intelligence (see Chapter Three), I came to view Hasan's presence as that of a guardian in the sense of being there to watch over me, also living on the site for the first six weeks of my stay. As a consequence, we developed quite a close friendship and during our many conversations I learned how he discovered Islam and its role in his life. Most of our conversations took place either sat upon the terrace looking out over Lake Tequesquitengo at Dar as Salam or at a local billiards hall in the closest village, San José, where we taught each other our respective nation's games.

Hasan, at the time, was a thirty-year-old convert to Islam. He has been a Muslim for twelve years. He describes himself as the fifth convert to Islam in Mexico, which he announces with some pride. Notable is the fact that this position discounts the earlier presence of converts to Sufism, intimating at the unorthodoxy of their Islam from his point of view. Seniority in his community is established primarily in terms of the length of time a convert has been a Muslim or via the number of people he or she has introduced to the religion, from both of which Omar Weston's authority chiefly stems. This is demonstrated in a number of converts' ability to rank themselves in relation to the formation of the group. Similarly, community divides centre on the personalities through whom individuals converted. Furthermore, the stature of the prospective leader of the community, a Mexican convert named Isa García, comes mainly from his success in introducing the majority of his direct family to the faith.

Hasan's seniority manifests itself in his singing the adhan, the call to prayer, when other Muslims are present. The only other Muslim to take this role when there are multiple persons in attendance is a young convert and ethnomusicologist who is esteemed for his singing voice, yet even in his presence Hasan is most likely to perform this role. He also spends time conversing with prospective converts to the religion,

such as a seventeen-year-old caretaker and groundsman, who looks after a wealthy family's weekend retreat some forty minutes away while they are based in the city during the week, and a local blacksmith experiencing marital difficulties and suffering from an alcohol problem.

Hasan has some command of Arabic, which he learned from more senior members of the community and also while he was in Egypt studying at al-Azhar through the sponsorship of the Saudi Arabian government. A small number of converts have benefited from an education at the Medina in Saudi Arabia or at al-Azhar in Egypt. Those more closely tied to the related, but competing community based in Polanco, Mexico City, have studied in Syria, whence the leader of this group hails. Hasan and Omar regularly converse in Arabic during his stay at Dar as Salam, since Hasan says that he has barely had the opportunity to practise the language during the two prior years. He regrets that he did not complete his studies at Al-Azhar; he left for personal reasons. He would like to have become a religious leader, which he now feels is less feasible as a consequence.

Hasan is on the verge of completing a degree at the time of my speaking with him. He has taken a vocational course in tourism management, which has involved placements with a number of major international hotel chains present in Mexico. He is qualified as a chef and hopes to work in hotel catering management. Hasan exercises his culinary skills for the benefit of fellow Muslims, regularly preparing meals for others in addition to himself. Hasan observes the avoidance of eating pork, although does not insist on other meat being halal (permitted) in terms of it being sacrificed in the name of God, albeit that he was the individual who gave thanks for the lamb sacrificed at the festival Eid. I have observed Hasan eat with both his left and right hands, despite the hadith, or saying of the Prophet Mohammed, specifying that the right hand should be used. He describes himself as middle-class, 'lower to middle middle-class', saying that he is fortunate that he has never lacked a meal to eat or anything essential to his life. He labels his ethnicity as Indian rather than mestizo on being questioned.

Hasan married three years ago in a Muslim ceremony and he and his wife have chosen not to register their marriage with the Mexican state. In terms of Mexican law their marriage is thus not recognized, however it is valid in the eyes of God for them from a Muslim point of view. Hasan's wife was not a Muslim at the time of their wedding, but she adopted Islam one year and ten months after the ceremony. Fatima, as I will call her, comes from quite a strict Catholic family and she and Hasan believe that her family would disagree with her conversion to Islam. As a consequence, her parents are unaware both of their marriage and of her conversion and this affects the extent to which they are able to cohabit. They reside together for half of each week and spend the other half of the week apart, when Fatima lives with her family, however her status as a student affords her residence with her husband during part of the week while at university. Hasan voices little concern about the situation, since he states that his wife is happy as a Muslim and that they manage to live this staggered life without much unease.

When questioned about the impact of his adoption of Islam, Hasan responds quite poetically:

It is like the difference between night and day. Between darkness and light. Like being blind, and then gaining sight. Like understanding, following ignorance. Like a life with a purpose after a direction-less life.

He adds that he is in essence the same person he has always been, but with something good added in place of something bad.

When asked why he converted to Islam, he describes the qualities of Islam and their attraction to him:

The thing about Islam is that it is easy. When I started to read about Islam, everything was logical. There was nothing that didn't make sense. The essence of Islam is simple. For example, as a Muslim I know that God, Allah, will judge me individually for all of my good deeds and my bad deeds. If I do bad, I know I will be punished, but for every good deed I do, I will get blessings. Catholics think that they can do whatever they want because of salvation or because they can confess to their priest, but when they go out of the church,

they forget about God and live as they want to. That isn't logical to me.

When asked about what he meant by saying people can live as they want to, he explains the problem he sees:

In Islam, I see a world that I want my children to grow up in. I want to have a family one day and it is important to me the sort of society they are educated in. You hear about homosexual marriages, like Elton John's, about Germans doing "watersports" and people like Michael Jackson with children. That is not the sort of world I want to have children in. I like the idea of moving to a Muslim country, like Indonesia, where I can start a new life, living as a Muslim.

Hasan also criticizes what he sees to be widespread corruption in Mexican society. When we lost our electricity supply at Dar as Salam, he explained that the electricians would not treat our problem as a priority without the payment of a bribe.

As to how he discovered Islam, he explains:

When I was a teenager, I used to be in a gang, for about three years. I had a friend from another gang who found a Qur'an in a bookstore one day. After he read it, he completely changed. I used to smoke cannabis at this time and my friend did too, but after he converted to Islam, he came to me one day and handed me this big bag of weed. There was a lot there, worth a bit of money. He said he didn't need it any more. This surprised me a lot. It made me curious about Islam, so when my friend offered me a copy of the Qur'an, I read it. That was my introduction to Islam.

Other conversations with Hasan also saw the themes of the simplicity to Islam, its logic, and its ability to offer a better style of life cropping up regularly as his motivations for conversion. The situation reveals itself to be a little more complicated, however, on discussing how his interpersonal relations have changed.

Hasan describes his life before being a Muslim in negative terms. He had a number of girlfriends from whom he was emotionally detached and he did not feel close to his family. He belonged to a gang, which he saw more as his family at the time. The gang was involved in burglaries and robbery. He went along with them once to burgle a house, but he felt so uncomfortable he did not do it again. Instead, he agreed to sell drugs, keeping to what he thought was a cleaner crime. He himself developed a drug addiction and was sent into rehabilitation by his family. He was also close to his friend in the other gang, who eventually converted to Islam. Although he was raised a Catholic, he says he took a dislike to the church from a very young age, so used to play with his friends while his family went to mass. Immediately before his conversion, he saw himself as an atheist.

He says before Islam he was without direction in his life and was not achieving anything. He spent his time with the gang, buying and taking drugs and avoiding the police. Most of the time he was on the streets or in bars, and the places closest to him were Mexico City, where he lived, and Oaxaca, where his family came from. His sole preoccupations in life were making money and obtaining drugs. He explains that the biggest emotion he had back then was hatred, for society and for God. He had rejected God as he couldn't understand why there was so much bad and inequality in the world.

Somewhere inside himself, he felt that he would like to be able to help poorer people and look after his family, but these were difficult for him to realize at this time. In comparison, he describes his life after becoming a Muslim much more richly. Rather than having one close friend by name and the rest collectively described as 'the gang', he lists a number of people on first name terms that he now considers friends. The only people with whom he has remained in contact after his conversion are his family and the friend who converted to Islam. He has cut himself off completely from the other gang members and, rather than now having a string of girlfriends, he now has a wife. He cites five new friends that he has made who are all Muslims and he describes them as closer to him than anyone used to be before his conversion.

After his conversion he has gone to university, so his time has been spent on his studies, learning more about Islam, the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the lives of the four rightly guided caliphs, praying, working to finance his education, and on hobbies that he has developed, such as going to the cinema with his wife. The places that were once important to him have changed too. No longer does he mention being out on the streets, Oaxaca or Mexico City, but instead Mecca, the Medina, Egypt, Dar as Salam in Tequesquitengo, the Centro Cultural Islámico de México and the Pakistani Embassy have become important to him. During his transition, he occasionally drank in bars. Now he does not focus on drugs and money, but on having just enough money to survive, to travel if possible, to get a house one day and to complete his studies. He wants to find a good job, to have a family of his own, to buy a house for his parents and to buy himself a house in a Muslim country so that he can leave Mexico behind. Emotionally, he feels that he has more focus, ambition and self-confidence and believes that he is more at peace and feels more comfortable in general in his life.

It is clear that Hasan's religious conversion has had an impact on his social relationships as they were before conversion. His adoption of Islam as a religion has led to the redefinition of his life. It becomes clear on hearing Hasan's account that his conversion has had a purifying force for him and in terms of discourse he is now able to redefine his life in his new religion's terms and also in light of his conversion itself.

Hasan is now separated ideologically from his previous lifestyle. His new religion does not permit these practices, so he has a legitimate basis for distancing himself from the gang he was involved with before. He can draw direct comparisons between his pre-Muslim condition and that which he is in post-conversion, such as the commitment he has shown in marriage. In these numerous different ways, the transformation he has been through in religious conversion places him in different political relationships to parties than he was before. The politics of his conversion concerns purity within his lifestyle and having the ability to wipe his past slate clean. Not only

has he redefined his own personal story through conversion, and has thus taken ownership of his personal field of discourse, but he also has been able to reframe his whole life in a manner that means it can be interpreted from a new position from now on and in one that alters the political dynamics to his interpersonal relationships. This is no clearer than in his abandonment of gang culture and his now being in a position where similar behaviour to that he partook in while in the gang is expressly prohibited. By repositioning himself within a new field of discourse, Hasan is politically repositioned in that he now has a fresh ideological basis for reformed behaviour. He therefore also has the opportunity to embody this new ideology (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) to utilize the new frame of discourse to justify a new sense of self; one that has clearly broken from his past. This is not entirely dissimilar to the experiences of the Anglican converts.

BENEDICTO

I met Benedicto, as I call him, at St. Andrew's Seminary. Most of our conversations took place in the seminary's television lounge, where during an evening we would occasionally all sit and relax. Benedicto was already ordained a Deacon, but still had some courses to complete before he was ready to assume a formal position. He was ordained in America and served as an assistant priest in the Episcopal Church. While his ordination was effective within the Anglican Communion globally, he could not take charge of a local church until he had studied the church history and canonical law of that region. Benedicto was thought, justifiably, by others in the community to have a gift in ministering to the sick, which perhaps stemmed from the life experience he had gained in the USA as a hotel porter. His empathy was strong and he was compassionate with people who were suffering. Benedicto was almost wholly devoted to his vocation. He spent little time socializing and he was involved in transnational religious prayer groups for humanitarian aid. Benedicto admitted to being homosexual, but made clear that he maintained no relationships owing to his commitment to his faith.

Benedicto has been an Anglican for twelve years and at the time was thirty-one years old. When asked why he left the Roman Catholic Church, in which he was raised, he explains:

Although my parents aren't very religious, my grandmother used to take me to church almost every Sunday all year from as early as I can remember. My mother only goes three or four times a year. As a child, I was playing celebrating the Eucharist with my sisters and cousins. I always used to be the priest. I went through the church, being an altar boy between the ages of twelve and fourteen and I was the leader of the youth group, but something was wrong. Being part of the church was fulfilling me, but not completely. I had my own view of God, a loving God, who was accepting and forgiving, but this is not what I experienced in the church.

I ask him why this was the case. He replies:

All of the sermons spread fear. They told the story of a God that was a punisher. It gave me the impression of a bad God. I could imagine this type of God being a God that would hit you and punish you. I can remember being on my own one day and I cried, asking God why he had done this to me. I couldn't understand how God as I thought I knew him could let himself be represented in this way. I left the church for three or four years, disillusioned with my faith. I retained personal faith, but I no longer had confidence in the church.

In contrast, he explains the appeal the American Episcopal Church had on him, which he encountered in the United States:

All of a sudden, I experienced what I had been waiting for all this time. They preached that God is love, that God loves you, that he wants to save you. They taught that you can be as you are. Sin was not made out to be a curse, but instead you were told that if you put your faith in God, he would change you. When the time is right, God will help you overcome sin by himself. I liked this. And then there was the fact that we always used to have at least a glass of water or something to eat after the services. There was a real sense of community. I wanted to be part of this. Not long after, I was.

Benedicto's explanations for his conversion centre completely on his understanding of the nature of God and of the conflict with this that existed in his old religion. Wider discussions revealed that these relationships are not only symbolically connected to his faith, but to relationships with his family too. Prior to his conversion, Benedicto felt distant from his parents, confused with the identity of God, and closest to his sisters. He spent regular time in prayer and was principally dedicated to his work. He had severed his connection with the church and only prayed in a small private chapel that he visited in the hospital where he worked as a porter. He held the United States, where he was living then, to be an important place for him and he felt more at home there than he had done in Mexico. He explains that his relationship with his father had broken down and for this reason he chose to move away.

Benedicto likens the image of God that the Catholic Church was portraying to him to the impression that he had of his father. Both were telling him how to live his life, rather than accepting him for how he was, and he saw both as cruel judges and unforgiving. What Benedicto wanted most at this point in time was to be free to choose his own future. He felt confused about his faith and found it difficult to accept himself as a person while the church's teachings remained in his memory.

After his conversion, Benedicto has managed to rebuild to some extent his relationship with his parents. His father still tells him how he thinks he should live his life, such as to become a Catholic priest rather than an Anglican one, but the relationship has healed a little. His sisters remain important to him and he values his participation in the religious community. He has maintained a number of friendships with people in the United States of America, mainly in the Episcopal Church. Religion has returned to the centre of his life and he is back on track to fulfil his dream of serving God and helping people. He continues to have a fond attachment to the United States and describes himself as more of an Episcopalian than an Anglican. He is happy to have returned to Mexico, however, and intends to pursue his career there. Benedicto states that he has now arrived at a degree of self-

acceptance that he did not have before and he is happy in his life. He added, though, that he now has an innate negative reaction to practices that are overtly Catholic, as they remind him of an unhappy part of his life, so some popular religious practices, such as holding a service for the Day of the Dead, cause him problems.

The Day of the Dead, *el día de los muertos*, begins on 1 November and ends 2 November, thus marking the Catholic holidays of All Saints and All Souls. It is a Catholic absorption of indigenous offerings to ancestors, where a remembrance service is held in recollection of the departed and giving thanks for their lives. Local celebrations include the creation of private altars commemorating the lives of particular individuals, which are surrounded by their favourite former possessions, food and beverages and sometimes with skeletal reconstructions of the individuals in their former clothes, images or photographs of them and skulls to represent the deceased. Benedicto views this to be an indigenous festival, which is acceptable to him in terms of private commemoration. When it is incorporated within the activities of the church however, he sees it to be a Catholic and not an Anglican affair. This position is at odds with the practices of Anglican priests who conduct remembrance and thanksgiving services at local graveyards during these festivities, to which I bore witness.

There were quite clearly political dynamics to Benedicto's social relationships prior to his conversion. There was an identification of a judging and punishing God with a negative experience of his relationship with his father. The removal of the negative concept of God and belonging to a more accepting community, encouraging his own self-acceptance, seemed to permit Benedicto a more amiable relationship with his father, even if his father still attempted to exert influence over him. In fact, the former religion had been so forcefully and wholly rejected that practices in the new religious community that remind Benedicto of Catholic practices have become heavily criticized by him and participation in them is avoided completely. Interestingly, many of the people and places that were significant to Benedicto before conversion remained so afterwards. We might wonder, then, if this would leave him vulnerable to syncretism, but the assertiveness with which he has abandoned Catholicism leaves us

in reality quite clear that this is not that probable at all. By altering the political dynamics to his own relationship with God, Benedicto was able to achieve a greater sense of self-acceptance. It is apparent that he held a profound faith and love of God and he found a disjunction in that relationship problematic. Once his religious self was able to be understood in terms of a new religious field of discourse in which the sincerity of his faith would help him overcome his weaknesses, greater positivity all round ensued as a result. The politics to Benedicto's religious conversion however also ensues, since finding his spiritual home has resulted in a stark rejection of his former religion, which places him in new politically dynamic relationships with other Anglicans over the authenticity of their practices that he might hold to be more Catholic than Anglican.

Looking at the transformations in social relationships that were effected by the conversion of Hasan and Benedicto, we can see that there are definite changes to the dynamics of interpersonal relationships brought about by their change of religions. It is also clear in examining the nature of these changes that the situations the individuals are placed in, in terms of power dynamics, are altered by these transformations. As a result, the politics of their religious conversions becomes apparent. In the case of Benedicto, we learn that the transformation is so strong that he entirely rejects his former religion, which causes him to question how Anglican a particular practice is, since he does not want to participate in Catholic practices. This questioning of the authenticity of certain religious practices highlights another area in which there is a politics to religious conversion. We will now turn to consider such debates and also how they can impact on the experiences of a convert.

Chapter Five

Dar as Salam

As you pass around the road that circumnavigates Lake Tequesquitengo in Morelos, you cannot help but observe the scenery. Rolling mountains lie in the backdrop while the expansive lake sits below you to one side. Yet as you continue on your journey another structure calls upon your attention: A white tower reaching up to the sky: A decorative minaret marking the presence of Muslims in Mexico, making it evident you have arrived.

Dar as Salam (the domain of peace) is situated between the villages of Tequesquitengo and San José Vista Hermosa and occupies a hillside position set off the circulatory road that runs around Lake Tequesquitengo. The Hacienda of San José Vista Hermosa is the ancient seat of Hernán Cortés; a colonial mansion, now serving as a hotel, which draws tourists both from within Mexico and from abroad. Tequesquitengo is the home to a number of hotels and is a renowned centre for aquatic sports, such as water- and jet-skiing. The resort is a popular location for second homes and is a recipient of what Nuñez (1963) has famously called ‘el weekendismo’. Located nearby are the pyramids of Xochicalco, the caves of Cacahuamilpa and the mineral-rich water springs of Las Estacas. Beyond its sporting and sightseeing activities, the Tequesquitengo area also draws visitors due to its attractive climate, enjoying hot temperatures and an average of 360 days of sunshine a year. The area’s appeal as a tourist resort could not be clearer.

In January 2003 the Centro Cultural Islámico de México (CCIM), a business established to promote Islam in Mexico, officially opened Dar as Salam as a centre for education and worship for Mexican converts to Islam. The development project started in 2000 and the place was used as a meeting point for the convert community even

before its construction was completed. Speaking to an ethnohistorian in the context, Omar Weston (the Managing Director of CCIM) described Dar as Salam as a short-term residential school open to Muslims from all over the Mexican Republic with the aim that they may learn more about Islam, get to know other Muslims from other parts of the country and, afterwards, teach what they have learned to other Muslims when they return back home (Ismu Kusumo 2004).

The Tequesquitengo area has provided Mexican Muslims with a quiet retreat from the hustle and bustle of city life, in which most of the converts are ordinarily situated. At the time of my fieldwork, owing to a lack of funds amongst the new Muslims and foreign investors' reluctance to create a dependency on external aid, not all of the residential accommodation had been completed and the finished rooms had to be rented out to weekenders to generate income. As many of Mexico's Muslims do not have the resources to holiday here (although they have often been allowed to stay without charge), non-Muslims have been taken in as paying guests to allow for some flow of revenue. For some of the community, these visitors have not been their guests of choice, and the dynamic about what is or is not correct in Islam can be found mirrored in debates about the authenticity of religious conversion, which demonstrates the political nature of the same.

The Prayer Hall

Dar as Salam is accessed via the unpaved street Bajada Molachos, which runs off Tequesquitengo's circulatory road. After a small parking area, the most noticeable feature is the garden, which is lush and green, like a paradise in the midst of a desert. When I arrived at Dar as Salam in February 2006, the surrounding countryside had dried out and most of the grass was yellow or dead despite the area's lakeside situation. Yet in the midst of this dry landscape stood this colourful garden, withstanding Morelos's heat.

A small pathway through some foliage leads to a large, open plan space. The vast majority of the ground floor is open air, the prayer

hall itself being composed of almost a quarter of this surface area, separated from the rest only by curtains. The open plan nature of this floor echoes the fact that there are more male converts within this community than female, since there is no separate area sectioned off for women. At prayer times, women simply pray a small distance behind the men. On the far side there is a kitchen leading through to a small, yet resourceful library with office facilities and audio-visual equipment. A balcony off the library looks out over the rear garden on to the lake. Beside the kitchen there is a staircase up to the minaret tower and the main roof terrace, where there are two dormitories and a barbecue area. This level offers impressive and extensive views over the lake. An Arabian archway takes you from the ground floor down to the rear garden via a broad staircase, where we can find a washing area for carrying out wuduh, or ritual cleansing, a bathroom and a storage shed. This garden is split into two sections by a row of young bamboo plants and on the far side of these lies the accommodation of Hotel Oasis. A small division permits passage between the two sections and this row of young plants is the sole barrier separating the two different functions of the site: Prayer hall and hotel.

As Omar Weston explained in his interview with Fitra Ismu Kusumo (2004), Dar as Salam is open to Muslims from all over Mexico. In this sense it is the sole retreat to which all Mexican Muslims have access. Its comprehensive library provides Muslims with otherwise inaccessible material, owing to the cost of books and the paucity of literature available on Islam in Castilian. It contains a number of works in English that are not yet available in Spanish translation. The collection is not restricted to books, but also includes audio cassettes, videos and DVDs. A number are in Arabic. The Islamic theme to Dar as Salam does not end in its library. The prayer hall's residential accommodation provides the opportunity for Muslims to live together in unison, providing a sense of community, and the adhan (the call to prayer) is sung five times a day to draw residents to worship. When residential conferences have taken place, delegates have not had to pay for their stay.

The vast majority of converts to Islam live in cities, where the Muslim immigrant communities are larger but also where the pressures to stray from Islam can be the greatest. In a conversation with me, Omar Weston of the CCIM likened the opportunity to come to Tequesquitengo to the hijra, or exile, performed by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Omar explained:

In the year 622 CE, Muhammad and his followers regrouped in the city now known as Medina in exile from persecution under the Quraysh. It was from here that the Muslims then went on to conquer Mecca in 630 CE. The exile was an escape from idolaters and the conquest was a conquest over idolatry. The retreat to Tequesquitengo is an escape from the idolatry of the cities and an opportunity for Muslims to renew themselves with the message of tawhid, or the oneness of God.

While the original idea behind the hijra was migration from non-Muslim territory to Muslim territory, or from dar al-kufr to dar al-Islam, as Vukonić points out, 'For some people, hijra signifies the transition from poverty to a better life through affiliation with specific Islamic movements' (Vukonić 1996: 29). Also, the semi-rural location provides the opportunity for Muslims to work the land, which is a form of labour exalted by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in a hadith narrated by Al-Miqdam: 'Nobody has ever eaten a better meal than that which one has earned by working with one's own hands. The Prophet of Allah, David used to eat from the earnings of his manual labor' (USC-MSA 2007).

The Hotel

The name Hotel Oasis is apt owing to the vibrancy of the vegetation growing around the accommodation. During the first few months of my stay, daily deliveries of water used to feed through to hoses that kept the grounds of Dar as Salam in bloom even when the surrounding area was bereft of water.

Hotel Oasis consists of two blocks of ensuite accommodation. One block of three rooms lies beside the site's swimming pool and faces out onto the prayer hall Dar as Salam. Above it, a second level of two rooms was being constructed. There is a further block of five more rooms, which are split over two levels. At the time of my visit, the two first floor rooms of this second block were still under construction and the three ground floor rooms required fitting. These look out over open scrub land to the side of the site. There is a further barbecue area on their first-floor terrace, which is accessible from the garden and gives impressive views out onto the lake, in addition to some communal space for the hotel's visitors. Behind the swimming pool and the completed accommodation is a parking area, which has goalposts for football. There is another, smaller terrace beside the swimming pool, which provides a further communal space for hotel guests. The rooms are large and each has two double beds. The ensuite facilities have wash basins, lavatories and showers. Two of the three completed rooms have working air conditioning. The amenities are basic, however this is reflected in the hotel's very competitive pricing which places it among the cheapest of options in the area. It is understood that the related construction work has now been completed.

The competitive pricing, the spectacular scenery, the excellent climate and the good location all add to Hotel Oasis's appeal as a resort for weekend breaks. Until recently its accommodation had not been heavily publicized and the flow of business that had been coming was the product of drive-by enquiries, since the hotel's chief form of marketing was a large sign beside the main circulatory road advising there were rooms to rent. Tequesquitengo is popular as a weekend destination for people who live in Mexico City, as it is only a short drive away and it provides an escape from the stresses of the city.

Halal and Haram

The first comments I heard voiced about the operation of Dar as Salam were criticisms that came from a Kenyan Muslim visitor, who I shall call Isa, who was staying at the site while awaiting deportation

to his home country. Isa explained to me that what was happening was haram (forbidden) and that a Muslim must earn his living through halal, or permitted, means:

A Muslim should do business that is halal. He cannot earn from things that are haram. If people come here to do drinking or fornication or to listen to loud music, that is haram. Because this is a mosque, these people should not come.

Isa's comments reminded me of an evening just a few days before. Some guests were staying at Hotel Oasis and had gone for a swim in the pool on the site. They had left the doors of their car open in the car park behind the accommodation so that they could listen to their music, which was playing at a considerable volume. This helped me to understand Isa's perspective. Also, Isa considered Dar as Salam to be a mosque, as this – to him – was its function. The site was actually labelled a prayer hall within a hotel and conference centre owing to a Mexican law which makes wholly religious buildings state property. This meant that legally the property was not wholly religious, but Isa saw the situation differently, viewing it as dominated, if not wholly defined, by its sacred nature. Such a position was common to immigrants from Muslim majority countries.

Another Muslim from abroad, this time from Somalia, came and stayed at the site. Ahmad, as I will call him here, lived at the mosque for a number of months and arrived at having strong opinions about the visitors who came. In the absence of the resident caretaker, Ahmad spoke to a couple who turned up late one evening looking for a room. He told them that we had no space, even though – in fact – we did have one room available. Afterwards I asked him what had happened. He replied, "He was drunk. We don't want that type here. It is best they go."

During my six months at Dar as Salam, I witnessed a number of guests come and go. The site's caretaker of the time, a convert to Islam from Chile, allowed people to stay who often ended up drinking alcohol. It was not uncommon to find these people on the terrace by the poolside, listening to loud music and drinking beer. Such

behavioural patterns have been associated by Phyllis Passariello (1983) with Spanish and Indian cultural traditions and the liberation of the Mexican bourgeoisie from ‘Victorian-like’ social regulations. From such practices and from the perceptions of people such as Isa and Ahmad, I became aware of a conflict between the identities of the hotel and the prayer hall, which both occupy the same site. David Herbert succinctly sums up the nature of this social contest in the subtitle of his (now regrettably discontinued) Open University course: *Islam in the West: the politics of co-existence*. Dar as Salam had two contesting identities that were struggling to co-exist. It is this political tension about the nature of something, or someone, that is divided between different contexts that mirrors the politics of religious conversion, as I will later come to show. I put the issue of the combined hotel and prayer hall to a number of Mexican converts to the religion to hear their perspective.

Faisal, a Mexican convert to Islam in his early twenties, affirmed confidently that the place is an Islamic hotel, adding “Yes, I see it that way.” When I asked him if it was, then, compatible with non-Muslim visitors, he replied:

There’s no problem. For example, music is forbidden in Islam (haram), but when I went one time, a family had a stereo and they were playing music and nobody said anything to them. [...] It would be preferable if it were a hotel for Muslims, but that’s not possible, because the bad thing is that if we open it just to Muslims people won’t come. And it’s a good opportunity for the people who do come to get to know Islam.

Abul Khayr, a convert in his mid-twenties, explained about the problem of the perception of what Dar as Salam is doing:

The problem is that people in Mexico misunderstand the role of this mosque. All the world’s Muslims are accustomed to asking other Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, for money to build a mosque, but never do they realize how much upkeep a mosque is going to need. And it is a tidy sum! In just electricity and water, it’s a big upkeep. So what we are trying to do in Tequesquitengo is to run a business to generate

the upkeep needed for maintaining the mosque. And they look down on this. The people who don't agree with this perspective, they look down on it and criticize it, calling it haram.

One brother, Asif, in his late teens, exhibited a tolerant perspective, considering the hotel and the prayer hall as entirely distinct entities:

Well, I believe that, yes, you can't be responsible for the behaviour of others. Obviously, first of all they are separate, right? There's the hotel and there's the mosque. It might be the same piece of land, but nevertheless they are separate. And beyond this, you can't look at the behaviour of the people and pay too much attention to it, because this isn't right either. Simply because they're not Muslims, they can behave in a different way, right? You can hardly watch over them. To be honest, I've never had any problem with this. If it were possible to have it as a place just for Muslims, yes, of course I would like that, but in the situation that we're in, that's not possible. You have to be realistic too.

Husaam, a convert in his late-forties, explained how he had come to view Dar as Salam from his attendance at conferences. He saw the place as a model for Islamic behaviour and as an opportunity to call others to Islam:

When I go there, obviously I follow the rules of the place. This space is for praying. You can't drink there. You have to follow a dress code. I think they have the right to expect that the people who go there observe the rules of the place. All hotels have rules. If you accept the rules, on you go. If not, no. If you publish the rules, there's no problem. People will decide to go by whether or not they accept them, right? So if they say, no, it's not what I'm after, on they go. Carry on with their journey. And there is always the chance that if they say yes, they will ask questions and learn about the behaviour of others. And we can invite them to reflect on their beliefs and customs and to adopt Islam.

Abul Khayr gives an example of the kind of criticism he has heard said within the community:

They criticize the mosque, but it doesn't count as far as I'm concerned, as I've been there since the beginning and the majority of what they say is untrue; 99% of it. For example, they say that women go around naked there. And I've never seen that." He jokes, "If I'd seen it, I'd have come back!

The "They" who are doing the criticizing in this case are converts belonging to a competing Muslim group in Mexico City.

Ahmad once commented to me that a female guest "shouldn't walk around naked like that". He made this remark as she was wearing a very short skirt and a skimpy top. These differing views of what constitutes "naked", in one case being literally unclothed and in the other being inadequately dressed, provide the basis for the urban myth that has circulated amongst the convert community. This enables moral judgments to be given about the operation of the site. Isa, too, exhibited the same perspective as Ahmad, as he revealed when he described to me how he chose to whom to speak at an Immigrant Detention Centre in the United States:

I met a girl from Belize, who dreamed she was visited by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. She was at the Immigrant Detention Centre. I talked to her about Islam, which was a blessing because I helped her move closer to Islam. I thought it was alright to speak to her as she was properly dressed. There used to be other women wearing what I think they call bikinis. They used to stand at their doorways, but I looked away because they were naked.

Ahmad and Isa's views on clothing come from their past immersion in a culture following Islamic dress codes. That they come from this culture is seen to authenticate their views amongst converts, since they come from an authentic Islamic setting, confirming them as knowledgeable about Islam. Tina Gudrun Jensen (2006: 646) acknowledges 'a need for the convert to demarcate and affirm his or her new identity convincingly', which can include not only the emulation of a perceived authentic form of Islam, but its reapplication

critically against even those born Muslim. This position facilitates misunderstanding in relation to cross-cultural terms, such as ‘naked’, clarifying how rumours have started amongst Mexican converts as to “naked” people having been running around at Hotel Oasis, while in literal terms being quite untrue.

Contested Hermeneutics and Dynamics of Power

The use of the word ‘naked’ as it is understood in Islam, in not being properly dressed, rather than in its more literal meaning within Mexican culture, sets a convert aside from his or her contemporaries, situating him or her in a special position in terms of power relations with others. Here we see the true significance to the third dimension of power as espoused by Steven Lukes (1974), since it is the contextual significance of the word that brings the convert authority and empowers him or her to morally evaluate. As Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant (1992) suggest the body is established to do, the convert embodies the ideology thus exhibiting their absorption both of Islam and by Islam, putting them in a superior position to morally criticize from a Muslim point of view. By using the word in the Muslim way, the convert earns more respect amongst born-Muslims and other converts well versed in Islam than does a convert applying the word in a literal sense. So, similarly to how the concept of ‘kalstom’, or custom, is applied amongst the Tolai in East New Britain, Papua New Guinea (Martin 2006), ‘nakedness’ is best understood not as an idea with a fixed meaning, but rather as a socially and politically contested metaphor utilized for the moral evaluation of others. The terms ‘halal’ and ‘haram’ are also similarly employed.

Abdur Rehman Doi (1987: 43) informs us, ‘whatever is haram (forbidden) in Muslim states remains equally unlawful for Muslims in non-Muslim states’, before going on to explain that the only exception is in the ‘extreme’ circumstances when the rule of *darurah*, or necessity, is applicable. Yet, here is where the room for difference lies. Baber Johansen clarifies how ‘the closing of the gate of *ijtihad*’ relates solely to the modes of teaching and learning Islamic law,

rather than its application, explaining how the commentaries (suruh), legal rulings (fatawa) and treatises on particular points of law (rasa'il) each can offer 'new solutions' and particularly so 'in light of the conditions under which the commentators live and write' (Johansen 1999: 448). Clearly, what constitutes necessity may vary from jurist to jurist, which legal scholars are able to express through such rulings. Johansen's remarks presuppose the privileging of the fiqh method (Islamic jurisprudence) over its resultant conclusions, suggesting that it is the method that empowers, permitting diversity to the judgments. Accordingly, embodiment of this method empowers converts in their argumentation. Such judgments are voiced as being experienced by informants.

Muslimization

Faisal works in a shop that educates about Islam and carries out dawah (missionary) work in Mexico City. He explained how the shop has to work in a similar way to Dar as Salam:

The nargilahs are haram, but we need revenue. [...] I don't like to sell [them]. In fact, I don't smoke. I don't like smoking. I'd prefer that, instead of these, we sold other things, but they are what people want. What can we do? Some Mexican Muslims who come, say, "Haram! Haram! Haram!" I feel like saying, "So you're going to give us the money to run the office then, right?"

Jensen (2006) reports that converts to Islam in Denmark suffer from what is locally entitled 'convertitis'. She elucidates (Jensen 2006: 646):

The newly converted often exhibit a so-called fanaticism with their new religion, which is generally expressed with very ritualized behaviour, such as taking on the entire Islamic dress code and forming a preoccupation with Islamic rules of what is haram ("forbidden") and halal ("allowed"), of doing things "right." This often leads to ironic situations in which converts repudiate people who are born Muslim for not doing things

“the right way,” or for not living up to the “definition” of being “a Muslim.”

While ‘convertitis’ itself is not diagnosed in these terms within the Mexican community, a similar practice is indubitably present and is recognized by members of the community. One informant explained to me how some converts ‘Arabize’, by changing their names to Muslim names, by dressing in Arabic or Muslim clothes and by insisting on carrying out salat, or the five daily prayers, at the correct time wherever they may be. Indeed, one convert attending a competing community’s prayer hall I visited in Polanco, Mexico City, even dressed like the stereotypical presentation of a sheikh. As Jensen suggests, there is a clear sense in which the converts feel a need to authenticate their conversion. This is expressed in their personal Muslimization, as I see to be a more fitting term for this response. Since the suffix ‘-itis’ carries connotations of illness and disease, it does not seem to me to be a fitting term for a legitimate process by which converts establish their status. By Muslimization, then, I refer to the process through which a convert, or a born-Muslim, authenticates their position as a Muslim by embodying characteristically ritualistic Muslim traits pertaining to their particular community in order to earn the social acceptance of their peers. While this limits this term to the religion of Islam, it succinctly summarizes the empirical phenomenon. Through entering into other cultural spheres of discourse via such modified actions and the embodiment of a particular set of beliefs, a convert can legitimate his or her own conversion and the extent to which they are (perceivably) truly Muslim, thus demonstrating another domain of the politics of religious conversion. What is authentic Islam, then, becomes a response in relation to one’s communal affiliations and thus moral judgments become an expression of these.

Michael Cook (2003: 32) in his excellent *Forbidding Wrong in Islam*, for example, demonstrates how culture and community ties have impacted on the interpretation of what is haram:

We have taken for granted [...] that all liquor and all musical instruments in the hands of the Muslims were to be destroyed. This, however, is not quite right. Thus the Hanafis had a

category of licit liquor; under the doctrine that the duty had no application in matters over which the law-schools differed, this loophole had to be tolerated. Likewise many scholars made an exception for the tambourine, especially at weddings, where it performed the useful function of publicizing the marriage. Others, however, were virulently opposed to tambourines, even at weddings.

A similar diversity of positions can be seen in relation to what constitutes halal meat: In an ethnographic study of Maghrebi Muslims in France, Florence Bergeaud-Blackler (2004) reports three principal positions amongst her informants: that one may only buy meat certified as halal by exclusively halal butchers, that all (non-pork) meat is acceptable in a Christian country as Christians are 'People of the Book', or that the only safe way to eat meat is to slaughter it one's self. In such circumstances, what is halal or haram is not fixed, but is a socially and politically contested value which is context dependent. This gives Muslims the opportunity to attest to their religiosity by demarcating clear boundaries between their community and another through the adoption of one of these positions.

Sites of Social and Political Contests

Tourism sites that have a dual role, such as Hotel Oasis and Dar as Salam, can readily be understood to be 'contact zones', or as 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power' (Pratt 1991: 34). Yet these attributes are neither specific to contact zones nor tourism. Religious conversion is also a phenomenon in relation to which 'cultures, meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power'. In fact, the liminal, or ambiguous, position of the tourist, which is well documented in the literature (e.g. Nash 1989; Harrison 1992; Chambers 2000), can be seen in the convert too; the liminal being a state in which boundaries become blurred (Turner 1969). Those scholars who argue that religious conversion is a continuous process

will find support in this position, as such an interpretation places converts ambiguously between their former religion and the new and adopted religion – a status particular to converts that renders them subject to the scrutiny of those born-Muslim, or of people who have already converted, who may seek to challenge the authenticity of their conversion. However, with this said, through the process of Muslimization converts can re-appropriate the dialogue of what it is to be veritably Muslim by adopting behaviours and practices that pay testament to their religiosity, or even accentuate it.

In the context of tourism, it is understandable how social boundaries may become contested, for global tourism is – as Bryan Turner has pointed out – ‘a particularly potent force in the postmodern diversification of cultural experience’ (Turner 1994: 185). Furthermore, scholars have highlighted perceptions of an incompatibility between ‘hedonistic Westernized international tourism’ and ‘the Islamic religion and way of life’ (Burton 1995; Henderson 2003; Henderson 2006: 88). This incompatibility would seem even more pronounced when the role of the mosque is understood to be “keeping the community disciplined”, as one of Marta Bolognani’s informants words it (Bolognani 2006: 239). Hence the co-location of a mosque and hotel is likely to cause frustrations.

Debates about authenticity litter the tourism literature so profoundly that saturation and incommensurability have led to calls for the term to be abandoned (Reisinger & Steiner 2005). In the present case, the debate centres around what constitutes authentic Islam. The need for this social and political contest to be taken seriously, and thus for the perceptions of what is authentically Islamic to be explored, is exhibited in the discourse of these informants, whereby the whole legitimacy of someone or something’s status rests in dispute. The experience of this community usefully highlights that authenticity need not only be an issue in terms of the cultural interchange taking place between guests and hosts, or converts and the people they knew before conversion, which are both crucial to this part of this study, but also that authenticity is an issue internal to the ultimate religious community itself, whereby conceptual divisions between what is authentic and what is inauthentic are still drawn in relation to both

religious conversion and the tourism encounter from a religious point of view. It becomes clear that there is no one static model of what is authentic, but that authenticity is shaped and manipulated in order to create, reinforce and challenge boundaries to the social structure, which in this case are vocalized in terms of moral evaluations. This is clear evidence of the politics of religious conversion.

By denying the legitimacy of one group or thing, another group can seek to enhance the perceived authenticity of their own. As Mary Douglas (1966) points out, ideas of purity (or *halal*, the permitted) and pollution (or *haram*, the forbidden) maintain the social structure. Bolognani (2006: 156) similarly found that the use of the terms *halal* or *haram* is 'strictly linked to the preservation and well-being of the social structure' in that what supports the social structure would be considered *halal* and that which goes against it would be *haram* in relation to perceptions of youth crime amongst Bradford's Muslim community. It is through the rejection of the 'other' that the 'self' is affirmed, thus different usages of the label *haram* can manipulate one's social relations with others, whether the aim is to Islamize society, to express opposition to a competing group, or to voice dissatisfaction with economic inequalities. Should any practices of new converts be labelled *haram*, or should their conversion even be brought into question, they are brought into a fresh dialogue about authenticity and experience, where others act as gatekeepers. There is an economy of discourse (cf. Foucault 1980) in which the converts are now placed and only by engaging in the correct manoeuvres can they overcome any questions of authenticity that may be made, or indeed to pre-empt such an eventuality the converts could assert their new found religious identity in such a way so that its authenticity cannot be brought into question.

The politics of religious conversion is evidently at play when social and political contests bring identities into question. The nature of a contest is that there is a winner and a loser. In the current case, the winner is the individual who harnesses the expectations of this field of discourse and satisfies whatever may be expected of them.

Having seen in the last chapter that the politics of religious conversion is present in the changes to social relationships brought about by conversion, and in this present instance that issues of authenticity bring political questions to the fore, we are now ready to see how motivations for conversion themselves may well be political, as can the transformations be that take place in respect of other types of relationships in which the convert is placed, other than purely social relationships, such as in the ideological relationships between the individual and state-level entity-concepts (a term I will come to define), to which we will now turn our focus.

Chapter Six

From Orientalism to Occidentalism

In 1978 Edward Said published his seminal work *Orientalism*. Said (1978) explains how discourse surrounding notions of the ‘Orient’ has presumed the superiority of the external observer and has functioned to create a divide between Western and Eastern civilizations, such a divide being fruitful to the colonial ambitions of the countries engaged in that discourse. Said’s work itself has faced criticism for presupposing a homogenous Western outlook (cf. Irwin 2006), and other works have arisen which examine the inverse perspective: How ‘the West’ is viewed from outwith.

In *The Idea of the West*, Alastair Bonnett points out, ‘it has become conventional to define radical Islam by reference to the West’ (Bonnett 2004: 150). Youssef Choueiri, for instance, stresses radical Islam’s postulation of ‘a qualitative contradiction between Western civilization and the religion of Islam’ (Choueiri 1997: 123). Yet Bonnett (2004) reminds us, following Sayyid (1997), that the existence of Islamism has been facilitated by the decline of European influence around the globe. This significant reminder overlooks, however, the growing political and economic influence of the United States, as we witness embodied in the Washington Consensus, which has also been a trigger for Islamic ‘radicalism’, as Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit (2006: 107-107) acknowledge:

The West, in the Occidental view, worships matter; its religion is materialism, and matter in the Manichaeon view is evil. By worshipping the false god of matter, the West becomes the realm of evil, which spreads its poison by colonizing the realm of the good. That is why, in 1998, Osama bin Laden called upon Muslims to fight a holy war against “Satan’s US troops and the devil’s supporters allied with them.”

For Buruma and Margalit (2006: 5), ‘Occidentalism’ is this ‘dehumanizing picture of the West’.

Occidentalism in the West?

The love-hate relationship between Mexico and the United States is well documented in the literature: In a relatively recent survey of Mexican views of the US, for example, some animosity was suggested, on the one hand, by the majority of the respondents holding that the Southwest of the USA rightfully belongs to Mexico and that Mexicans should have the right to enter the United States without permission. Yet on the other hand the United States was still seen to be a better friend to Mexico than was Cuba (Zogby 2002). Furthermore, animosity towards the US was attested to by Merle Simmons, who points to corridos as the expression of a ‘profound dislike and even hatred’ as ‘the basic traditional attitude of the Mexican pueblo toward the United States and its people’ (Simmons 1953: 34). While such perceptions do fluctuate (as Simmons himself admitted), criticisms of North America and ‘the West’ now feature in the discourse of Mexican converts to Islam.

Natascha Garvin, an anthropologist from the University of Cologne, visited the Murabitun Sufi community near San Cristóbal de las Casas, remarking on their ‘closed nature’. She advises, ‘Murabitun discourse, especially that of the sheikh himself, is often marked by a rather aggressive critique of Western hegemony, positivist science, and capitalism, and contains overtly anti-Semitic expressions’ (Garvin 2005a: 18; see also Morquecho 2005). Broader criticisms of Western society were voiced to me by my informants also, whose names have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

I met a convert, whom I will call here Ali, in a chat room discussion about Islam in Mexico over the Internet in 2004. He explained his reasons for adopting Islam:

I first encountered Islam on September 11, 2001. I was a Communist before. I’ve been left-wing all my life. I

understand that Communism can't destroy the USA, but that Islam can. This is my reason for approaching Islam. I've found it very hard work to become a Muslim, as I cannot forget my old beliefs very easily. I am against America, but I'm not against all American people. The history between America and Mexico, and America and other countries, is tough.

Cahn (2003) and Womack (1999) confirm that religious identity is often used as a public mask for a private political identity in Mexico. This would appear to provide a framework for the situation described by Lewis Rambo (2003: 211), which I mentioned earlier, that Islam has 'captured the hearts and minds of many who desire to transform the world's economic and political realities -- especially those living in places around the globe encumbered by the legacies of Western colonial oppression, military domination, and economic exploitation.' Ali is not the only convert to turn to Islam and adopt it as a religion after the attacks on the World Trade Centre of 11 September 2001. A few informants gave this to me as a factor influencing their decision to adopt the religion. In this sense, there seems to be a catalyst functioning at a level above and beyond the religious level that draws and drives converts to want to join the new religious community, as we see operating in this instance. I call this type of conversion 'metareligious conversion'.

Metareligious conversion

Metareligious conversion is a phrase I employ here to describe religious conversion that appears to take place for reasons 'above' and 'beyond' intrinsically religious motivations themselves. Clearly this is a contentious suggestion, as it is implicitly stating that the convert is placing more focus on a non-religious factor, or a tenuously religious factor, than on perhaps real spiritual concerns. In this sense it is a conceptual tool that demonstrates the political dynamics to a scholar's interpretation of religious conversion, because at first glance this conceptual approach would seem to be questioning the religiosity of the informant. Such debates are the focus of the next chapter,

Chapter Seven, where I briefly consider the politics to scholars' examination of religious conversion.

It is, however, not my intention that the identification of religious conversion as a form of metareligious conversion necessarily or even implicitly denies the religiosity of the informant. It is highly likely and plausible that in addition to one overarching and enticing factor that has captivated the interest of the potential converts, there are many other elements of the religion that also appeal to them and that coincide with their views and interpretations of the world, some of which are quite likely going to be of a spiritual or religious nature. Metareligious conversion, then, is still a form of religious conversion, and we can see this because (1) a religious identity is ultimately assumed, and (2) there may well be other factors attracting the potential convert to the religion which are of a religious or spiritual nature; but for this kind of religious conversion to constitute metareligious conversion the chief and principal factor attracting the individual to the religion must be able to be construed as being mainly of a non-religious nature.

In Ali's case, clearly an argument can be made that it was elements of the religion, in terms of the interpretation of it, that drove those who flew into the twin towers to do so, thus causing the catastrophe that attracted Ali to the religion. This is true, just as there are arguments within the same religion that such an act goes against the very essence of that religion's teachings, so such a counterargument is not unproblematic. Ali's discussion with me revealed that it was not the religious basis for the attacks that drew him to Islam, but rather that he was attracted by the fact that there was another force in the world that could stand up to the superpower of the United States. This I thus interpreted to be an instance of metareligious conversion, since Ali did not require to explain his motivation to me in religious terms and also chose not to do so. There did not appear to be a religious element necessarily missing from this explanation he gave. We can see from this that when metareligious conversion occurs the field of discourse in which the motivation for conversion can be explained is not essentially religious. This is a defining feature. Yet, when the form of religious conversion that has taken place is metareligious

conversion, this is not to say that the influence of later belonging to the religion will not have a profoundly religious impact on the informant, as Ali himself illustrates.

I eventually met Ali during my fieldwork in 2006 and he told me then that his views had calmed down somewhat, owing to the influence of Islam. The more he had learned about the religion, the more he had learned about peace, he explained. He still resented the economic inequalities evident to him in Mexico and he felt the United States had a role to play in these, but he no longer felt the aggressive anger that he initially voiced, although he did admit that this perspective was central to his initial conversion.

Split moralities

In Ali's initial remarks is a notion of split moralities. For Ali, it was conceivable that not all Americans are bad people, as there is space for good individuals. "I'm not against all American people," he said. Yet at the same time, Ali recognizes a homogenous entity, labelled America, that he is able to be "against", and "against" this to the extent that the destruction of the twin towers motivated him to adopt Islam as his religion, because "Communism can't destroy the USA, but [...] Islam can." An attack against the collective entity called "America" was acceptable, however an attack against individual, good American citizens would not be. The World Trade Center, for Ali, was more emblematic of America as an entity than Americans as individuals, and – for him – in this the justification for the attacks lay. A number of converts listed the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as motivations for enmity, criticizing how America and Britain had been waging a war against Islam as a whole. Such language seemed to give these concepts physical agency, detached from their constituent peoples.

In Chapter Four, we met Hasan. If we look back at some of his comments, we can see a polarization between the Muslim world and the West. He stated:

In Islam, I see a world that I want my children to grow up in. I want to have a family one day and it is important to me the sort of society they are educated in. You hear about homosexual marriages, like Elton John's, about Germans doing 'watersports' and about people like Michael Jackson with children. That is not the sort of world I want to have children in. I like the idea of moving to a Muslim country, like Indonesia, where I can start a new life, living as a Muslim.

For Hasan, the non-Muslim world is associated with a liberality within which he does not want to live. He sees homosexuality, sexual permissiveness and rumours of child molestation as the epitome of the Western world and as things with which he does not want to surround his future family life. In a manner similar to that once documented by Norman Hayner, Hasan was somewhat of the view that 'all that Mexican women have learned from the USA is to drink cocktails, play cards, and gamble' (Hayner 1942: 493). He would also suggest some additions!

Interesting in the discourse of both Ali and Hasan is that the geographical terms that they applied in relation to the entities they hold to be morally corrupt also incorporate their own cultural homes in literal terms: Mexico is part of 'America', if not the United States of America, and it is also situated in the geographical 'West'. This double identity, of both being and not being the object in question, reflects the deep polarization of economic reality in Mexico. I have already mentioned Froehling's observation that in Chiapas there were 'no telephones or electricity at all in most of the rural areas' (Froehling 1997: 291), yet also the fact that the country is home to one of the very richest people in the world (Forbes 2010). Such economic injustices leave Mexico in the geographical West in addition to the economic South, meaning that the perspective from which you look at the country will determine how you evaluate it. Converts regularly criticize multinational corporations and 'Jewish financial capitalist power', one of Baruma and Margalit's (2004: 3) hallmarks of Occidentalism. Their quest for capital is seen as a depersonalized quest for profit before the welfare of individuals. For Hasan, even if in the economic South, Mexico is not just in the

geographical West, but in the (im-)moral West also, and for this reason he wishes to leave the country behind. Many converts distance themselves from wider Mexican culture for this reason.

Separation from wider Mexican society

Gaspar Morquecho (2005) explains how converts to Murabitun Sufism must ‘leave everything, break with the past, non-Muslim friends and relatives’ (abandonar todo, romper con el pasado, amigos y familiares no musulmanes), and having interviewed Chiapanec women converts, Juan María Ruiz Ortiz (2003) points to the breakdown of marriages as a consequence of conversion, where one partner has converted and the other has not followed. Garvin (2005a) reports, ‘After converting, the new members are said to be pressurized to really give up every aspect of their pre-Murabitun life, including contacts to non-Muslim family members, public school attendance of the children, and their Mayan culture in case of the indigenous community members.’ My informants to Sunni Islam never voiced any sense of being forced into separating from non-Muslims, but they did still distance themselves from their families to varying degrees and the idea of Muslim residential communes appealed to a number of them.

A convert in his early-20s, whom I shall call Mohammad, relayed how he came to spend less time with his family:

I wouldn’t spend either Christmas or New Year with my family, as Muslims don’t celebrate these things. It began by me spending more time with brothers than my family, getting to know them, what it was all about. I didn’t feel bad about it, in fact it was very good! I was spending time with good people, brothers, people I was getting to know. I didn’t want to go to family parties as people would drink and dance and do things that I couldn’t do.

Another convert, aged 26, described the reasons for reducing the frequency of contact with his relations:

I didn't tell my family I'd become a Muslim until 2 or 3 years later. One day, I picked up the home phone and accidentally said "Salam aliekum". My father said, "WHAATT??" My mother was okay about it, but my brother said nothing. As far as I'm concerned, the further away I am from my family the better. Yes, I visit my aunts and uncles. Occasionally I take them gifts or a bit of money to help them out, but they just joke with me about being a Muslim. It used to annoy me, but not now. If they attack me now, I can defend myself. My uncle is a Jehovah's Witness. He jokes with me and calls me crazy, but I know there's no foundation to what he says. He even prays to Jehovah for my forgiveness. I just laugh. He is ignorant about these things.

In the case of converts' own family members, the converts do not view their relatives as immoral, but rather see their actions as non-Islamic and refrain from participating in such activities, such as drinking and dancing, as Mohammad states. This discourages interaction with family members as a means of reducing temptation, since in Islam too the devil is seen to act to entice a person to sin.

Beyond the avoidance of non-Muslim praxis, some converts also assert their Islamic identity to a greater degree through a process I call Muslimization, as I outline in Chapter Five, which entails converts or born-Muslims authenticating their position as a Muslim by embodying characteristically ritualistic Muslim traits pertaining to their particular community in order to earn the social acceptance of their peers (Lindley-Highfield 2008). While almost all converts have adopted Islamic names, a number adopt Arabic or Muslim clothing and exhibit a fanaticism for their new religion, observing the five daily prayers rigidly, at the precise time, and also castigating existing Muslims for not living up to Islamic ideals. In Denmark, a similar phenomenon is noted amongst converts and is described locally as covertitis (Jensen 2006). This search for social acceptance takes place to varying degrees, yet it serves as testimony to the convert's migration from non-Muslim to Muslim behaviour. The significance of this to the politics of religious conversion is demonstrated clearly in Chapter Five.

Mohammad explained to me that he spent last New Year with his family. He didn't drink and dance, but he did spend his time with them. He said this was because he had learned how important family ties are in Islam. As Mohammad quoted to me, in the Holy Qur'an, Surah al-Isra states: 'Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him, and ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honour' (Ali (2000): Qur'an 17: 23). It is not for a convert to castigate her or his non-Muslim family, but to draw them to Islam through his or her good conduct.

Through the looking glass

In creating a distinction between the people of a nation and the concept of a nation, converts attribute a notion of agency to the concept. It is a shift, in terms of discourse, from people to ideology, and this depersonalization can make events like the attacks against the twin towers seem almost justifiable. This passing of responsibility and criticism onto an imaginary entity distracts the new Muslims from how the criticism relates in practice to those individuals who in reality constitute the nation in question. As Ali stated, he's "not against all American people", yet he was wholly "against America". I would suggest that processes of deradicalization would benefit from understanding fundamentalists' views from this perspective.

Entity-concepts

The converts' criticisms of the depersonalized quest for capital before the welfare of individuals and what they describe as the Anglo-American forces' war against Islam demonstrate a view that 'the West' is seeing Muslim society as a whole and ignoring its diverse component parts. Muslim society is, from this point of view, either a marketplace for making profit or an enemy for waging war against, whatever the circumstances and position of its members. Of course this is actually distant from reality, but the view is represented in the

discourse. Yet the converts are mirroring this process, with which they are unhappy, in their own evaluations of the West: Just as the concept of Muslim society is held to be homogeneous in the eyes of 'the West', from the point of view of the convert, the concept of 'the West' is similarly viewed as being homogenous by the convert his or her self.

Thus the discourse flows at two levels: One at which ideological disembodied concepts are seen to compete and contest, that have an agency of their own and can have agency acted out against them; and another at which people are individuals and may be distinct from the concepts held about their broader society. I would like to call these concepts entity-concepts, as they are ideas that are given an embodied status. This is similar phraseology to that used in relation to the 'business entity' concept in accounting (Kolitz et al. 2009), although not purposefully borrowed from this context. Nevertheless, there is a similarity to the extent that one thing is able to be seen in two distinct ways. In one way, people are treated as individuals, drawing their earnings from their own business to support themselves and their family. The other way is that in which sole traders are seen in a distinct capacity in terms of running the overarching business, as the business itself. These are two distinct entities for accounting purposes. We can relate this understanding to the present discussion in that individuals in America and the West can be seen as individual personalities on the one level, but on another level they are tied to a disembodied concept that has a separate status, that is seen in a different way and that attracts a different response. This is where my notion of entity-concepts differs from Benedict Anderson's (1991) equation of nation-states with 'imagined communities', since entity-concepts require there to be an equation of the individual with the entity-concept, even if different attitudes towards the individual can be held than those held against the entity-concept. The level at which people are seen to be distinct from entity-concepts is particularly evident in the case of the family. Converts maintain a connection with non-Muslim family members, even if through tenuous links, and this relationship is encouraged by the teachings of Islam. They also avoid judging family members morally and attribute their moral evaluations to the relations' behaviours, and as products of their

context, as distinct from the individuals themselves performing them. This justifies and facilitates the maintenance of social connections with non-Muslim family members, an issue relevant to the discussions in Chapter Four.

The end of a binary?

Mexican converts to Islam understand and engage with the concept of ‘the West’ in a manner not dissimilar to how they see Westerners as viewing Islam. Orientalism is returned with Occidentalism, although not quite how Buruma and Margalit (2004) have defined it. While ‘Occidentalism’ criticisms may extend to fundamentalist extremities, as Buruma and Margalit suggest, this should not be essential to any explication of the term. It is more helpful to understand both Occidentalism and Orientalism as discourses centred around entity-concepts, entity-concepts being ideas that are imagined to have an embodied status; ideas that can be criticized, confronted and even harmed.

The depersonalization of Muslim society, which is seen to be part of the Western perspective falling under the converts’ scrutiny, is echoed in converts’ own views of ‘the West’: Homogenous and without tangible concern for individuals. Yet living in a context geographically and morally in the West, even if in major part economically in the South, converts cannot tear themselves away from relationships with their kin, which they are taught to honour in Islam. This leaves the converts in an interesting predicament, as they share connections with people who are neither wholly ‘Western’, as they are not associated with the entity-concept that the converts reject, nor are they barely partially ‘Muslim’, for they behave differently and are yet to convert. This provides a challenge to the overarching entity-concepts, since society cannot be divided in a binary manner if an ambiguous grouping is also present. In this sense, Mexico provides a challenge to generalizations about ‘the West’, where family connections may lead to the development of a less binary expression of Islam within this context.

There can clearly be political elements to motivations for religious conversion, and these are perhaps nowhere more evident than they are in instances of metareligious conversion, where a new religion is adopted, but seemingly for reasons that transcend the religion itself. The politics of religious conversion operates in many ways and on many levels. So far we have seen how personal relationships can be subject to political dynamics around conversion, how the authenticity of conversion may be contested, and how the motivations for conversion themselves may have political overtones, but the relevance of politics to the study of religious conversion does not end there. As discussed on introducing the concept of metareligious conversion, it was pointed out how applying such a method of conceptualizing a certain type of religious conversion based on the motivations for the same could bring into question the religiosity, and perhaps even the integrity, of the person adopting the new religion. This reveals how embedded scholarly interpretation is in the politics of religious conversion, to which our attention will now turn.

Chapter Seven

Scholarly approaches to religious conversion

As Buckser and Glazier (2003: xii) point out, social scientists have been examining religious conversion for over a century. Psychologists were the first to dominate the subject, with authors such as Hall gauging conversion in terms of the Pauline Christian model in the early 1900s (Fisher 1925) – as a sudden and an emotional-intellectual realization. The vision of Paul having an epiphany on the road to Damascus is, despite its Christian provenance, of metaphoric use to analyses of conversion, as contemporary scholarly consensus has come to relate conversion itself to movement or a journey: a ‘turning from and to’, as Rambo (1993: 2-3) has defined it. Yet, this Christian theological understanding of conversion, to which the earliest, most-cited analyses of conversion subscribe (James 1902; Nock 1933), is itself seen by some recent writers as a problematic model (e.g. Anderson 2003; Coleman 2003; Glazier 2003), since many have discovered that conversion processes can be protracted and often involve no obvious, momentary inspiration. This criticism, expressed as an issue of Christianocentrism, whilst valid, omits to acknowledge the work of contemporary Christian theologians who share the same perspective (e.g. Chester 2003), thus these critics are not as detached from Christian models as, in their writings, they purport to be (Rambo [2003], however, is an exception). Furthermore, despite the contentment of some to subscribe to metaphors of travel or movement, those employing such terms remain vague about exactly where these journeys are to and from, whether they are ever ‘successful’ and if, indeed, there are any final destinations.

Austin-Broos, for example, informs us that conversion involves ‘arriving at a particular place’ (2003: 2), however states that ‘conversion is continuing’ (2003: 9), and implies that it is oscillatory,

in being ‘neither syncretism nor absolute breach’ (2003: 1). According to this view, once the destination of the converts is reached, they then sway between this place and where they came from, never really settling anywhere. Perhaps this is why Austin-Broos (2003: 2) sees conversion as a negotiation: ‘negotiat[ing] a place in the world’? Anderson (2003: 130) shares this stance, viewing conversion not as a swap of belief systems, but as a process whereby converts ‘differentiate or syncretize’ between their old religion and the new, subject to external constraints. Coleman (2003: 20), further, sees conversion as a ‘quality of action’, thus requiring that the particular quality persists for conversion to have taken place. This notion has some superficial support in the ethnographic literature. An American, called Sylvia, who converted from being a Jehovah’s Witness to a Benedictine nun via Catholicism, describes herself as in a process of ‘continuous conversion’ (Reidhead and Reidhead 2003), yet as Reidhead and Reidhead (2003: 193) admit, acceptance of being in a constant state of conversion is part of Benedictine doctrine, thus in admitting flux, the final destination is also reached. We should read this as a peculiarity, rather than as an example of continuous conversion having widespread ethnographic support. In fact, for Glazier (2003), the continuous nature of the conversion process can be no more than the need for interaction with a particular religious group without even having adopted their belief system, which clearly lacks any doctrinal element, upon which the Reidheads’ informant’s testimonial may have been contingent.

Brown (2003) posits that there is no point when conversion can be considered complete, based upon his research amongst spiritualist converts in the United States. He explains how the converts often only go back to meetings in order to try to see the proof that they presently believe to be lacking. He describes them as in as state of ‘ephemeral’ change, with their belief waxing and waning (Brown 2003: 136). What Brown overlooks is the fact that acceptance of the view that mediation can successfully and scientifically provide proof of the spirit realm, and thus the afterlife, is a key tenet of spiritualism, therefore the quest to see this proof is already an indication of acceptance of a premise upon which spiritualism is based and, thus, an internalization of their symbolic system of belief. These few

examples suggest that it is a matter of how we frame the desired outcome of conversion that determines whether or not conversion is seen to have any true, final destination, but notions of actually having arrived somewhere remain important to converts themselves. A convert from (nominal) Christianity to Sufism from the greater Boston area describes his arrival at the religion as something ‘more like home’ (Sachs Norris 2003: 172), and after having adopted the ideals of evangelical Christian missionaries in Peru, an Aguaruna convert began to view being in a state of failure as ‘lost for good’ (Priest 2003: 106), also suggesting that there is an actual place where he ought to have been. Accordingly, to deny the existence of an end destination is to abjure the validity of converts’ own accounts and, furthermore, it undermines the transformative nature of ritual events, such as rites of passage, which are foundational to conversion events and the theoretical grounding to the modern social anthropology of religion, as I hope in this chapter to show.

It may be said, then, that if there is a final destination for the convert, it must be possible for the convert’s journey to have been ‘successful’. Yet, even the best-willed of converts sometimes fail to maintain the standards of behaviour that their new religions demand of them and they may, perhaps, even find themselves disagreeing with one or two articles of belief. Robert Priest (2003: 107) provides a definition that can be used to gauge a successful conversion: the attainment of a fusion of ‘personal experience and religious symbols in a way that provides personal coherence and models the route to a new self’, adding that ‘Even when the new self remains unattained, the new symbols continue to exert influence and authority not easily ignored.’ This definition may appear to be saying that, for a conversion to have been successful, the convert may fail to meet the expectations of his or her adopted faith. This, to an extent, is true, but we must remember that the religions themselves are structured by people in such a way that they control for deviation from their expected norms, through such remedial channels as forgiveness, penitence, and self-flagellation, et cetera. The point is not whether or not the converts have erred from the anticipated path, but rather whether they have internalized the structure of the religion to the extent that they interpret their failings, and indeed the religion’s

failings, in the religion's terms. This enables conversion to be both 'a goal to work toward' (Rambo 2003) and a 'total transformation of the person' (Rambo 1993), without this needing to be inherently contradictory and with the success of conversion being able to be measured, which is why conversion is a 'turning from and to', rather than simply 'turning from and toward'. This said, I note Tooker's (1992) emphasis on context, to which I will return.

Nock (1933) draws a distinction between exclusive religions and those that do allow other religious practices contemporaneously. The former he identifies as the great world religions and views the adoption of them as 'conversion'. Belonging to the other traditions, thought at the time to be of a more primitive nature, is viewed to only constitute 'adhesion'. This distinction was intended to account for syncretistic practices. Glazier (2003: 154-5) critiques the boundary that Nock places around world religions by saying that belief and practice are practically inseparable, and since one must watch ritual before becoming a participant within it, there would always be some overlap while conversion takes place; or if the ritual enacts the conversion, but the convert-to-be must observe the ritual before taking part in it, then the individual has experienced something of the new religion before he or she has adopted it, therefore the adoption of a world religion cannot be as exclusive as Nock suggests. This criticism is partially true, in its criticism of Nock's false boundaries, however where it fails is in its necessitating the prior observation of ritual. The literature on freemasonry, for example, stipulates that its neophytes go through their rites of passage 'unseen' (e.g. Duncan 1965), however we may question the extent to which this constitutes a 'conversion'. Nevertheless, the issue that Nock's work does raise is how we should describe conversion that does not appear to have worked. Travisano (1970) provides the best foundation for overcoming this problem.

Travisano (1970) states that conversion takes place when the transformation is 'complete', or 'successful' in my terms above. For Travisano, anything else constitutes alternation, thus religious syncretism falls into this category. These categories are, then, qualitatively constructed, commenting on the efficacy of the

conversion, rather than attaching the strength of the conversion to the characteristics of particular types of religion, thus being more useful than the distinction made by Nock. So here scholars are subjecting the authenticity of conversion to the same degree of scrutiny as we witnessed in Chapter Five, the only difference being that this is within a scholarly, rather than religious, field of discourse. Nevertheless, even Travisano's categorization appears somewhat wanting, as there is quite some distance between syncretism and simply failing to internalize a religion. In this sense, it is perhaps more useful to break conversions down into four ideal types: 'conversion' as the successful model, 'lapsed conversion' as conversion that fails to hold, 'alternation' for conversion that oscillates between the old practices and the new, and 'syncretism' for two or more religious practices that have been integrated into what would appear to be a homogenized belief system, in the sense that the different 'religions' are integrated in practice.

In seeing successful conversion, then, as 'a fusion of personal experience and religious symbols in a way that provides personal coherence and models the route to a new self', I would appear to be subscribing to Hierich's (1977) view that conversion entails a complete shift in belief. This is described by Hefner (1993: 102) as 'intellectualism' and omits the importance of behaviour in addition to belief, but 'personal experience' is surely constructed of both experiential (thus empirical) and cognitive dimensions. In her study of conversion to Akha Zan, including the return to Akha Zan from Christianity, Tooker (1992) draws attention to converts' comprehension of religion in terms of practice rather than beliefs, suggesting that contextualization is required to determine whether beliefs or behaviour, or indeed both, are important for qualifying conversion in any given context. Smith (1979) has, in fact, argued persuasively that Christianity has been understood more in terms of demonstrated practice in its past than it is at present, and contends that the shift of emphasis to belief is a modern product. As Brown (2003) suggests, then, it is perhaps more constructive to understand conversion in terms of both behaviour and beliefs, realizing that one cultural context may emphasize one of these elements more than another. In empirical terms, we see in Islam in the shahadah, the

declaration of faith stated on conversion, that practice and belief are combined. A propositional statement is made and what is recited is testamentary; it has to be said before a witness, which renders it an embodied practical act. In Anglican Christianity, the creeds are a regular part of any service, where similarly they are stated, as are prayers, in unison, thus also demonstrating combined practical and intellectual elements. These examples support the notion that in my contexts both belief and practice are relevant, and Priest's and Rambo's remarks given earlier assist us in understanding the relationship between the two, since they teach us that when the practice is missing, the mind can partially compensate. Prayer's very purpose seems to be to bridge that gap.

I recall a particular instance from my fieldwork when one of my informants, who I shall call Said, returned to Dar as Salam one night after meeting up with some non-Muslim friends, having ended up drinking alcohol. Clearly this constitutes a breach from the expectations of his new religion. Were we to examine this in terms of practice, we might simply believe his conversion has been ineffectual (at worst) or (at best) that he has fallen to syncretistic tendencies, owing to repeating a pre-Muslim (and common, in Mexico, Catholic) practice. Yet, he actually spent the night barely sleeping in floods of tears as a result of his failing to meet the standards expected of him by his religion. Clearly this is an instance of 'the new symbols continu[ing] to exert influence and authority not easily ignored' (Priest 2003: 107), and it reveals the importance of considering both the intellectual and behavioural elements in this context.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that the human body is moulded to carry ideology. If this is correct, behaviour and beliefs are not entirely detachable, and behaviour must be considered as the embodiment of beliefs at least in part. This view receives much support in the anthropological literature (e.g. Durkheim 1995 [1912]; Malinowski 1922; Turner 1967), yet is seldom acknowledged by contemporary sociologists of conversion, and the significance of belief in the case of conversion has, in instances, been played down by the anthropologists Coleman (2003) and Glazier (2003). As Buckser and Glazier (2003) postulate, conversion is both an

individual and an irreducibly social act, so we have the problem of trying to explain conversion in both individual and social terms in relation to both behaviour and beliefs. An analysis of symbolism allows for such an examination.

Symbolism transcends the boundaries between belief and practice if both embodied and disembodied symbols are evaluated. Furthermore, symbolism may be studied from both idiosyncratic and communal perspectives. Lohmann illustrates the extent to which conversion relates to symbolic changes through reference to supernatural beings: 'True conversion means taking on a relationship with new supernatural beings and possibly (not necessarily) severing relationships with old ones' (Lohmann 2003: 117). In this sense, 'Belief [is] a contractual, kinship, or love relationship with imagined beings' (Lohmann 2003: 116) and conversion 'a global paradigm shift, or the transformation of relationships' (Lohmann 2003: 120). Such relationships can be with both real and imagined entities, and with objects, practices, ideologies and beliefs.

It is with Lohmann that my view of religious conversion is closest and why I call for a return to greater emphasis on the significance of conversion events in the process of religious conversion, as I too see religious conversion as a global paradigm shift (cf. Kuhn 1962) and I similarly focus on the symbolic significance of relationships. Sachs Norris (2003) rightly notes that symbols hold different meanings between practitioners and converts, as they are historically developed in particular contexts. Thus converts are 'adopting beliefs interpreted through an already existing meaning system' (Sachs Norris 2003: 172). Asad (1993) has made this same point with regard to the emotions. While this predicament may appear to be a threat to an analysis of symbolism, as it highlights the idiosyncratic nature to beliefs, denying any commonality, it is moreover just a point that must be conceded, as it may be addressed by taking into account the individual character of both converts' and existing practitioners' perspectives. Clearly, though, the extent to which scholars engage with local understanding will determine quite how representative such an approach would be, indicating the scholars' agency over

hermeneutics and thus their political influence over the interpretation of conversion stories, processes and events.

Cohen (1985: 118) explains that 'People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity.' If in constructing notions of community, people do evoke their identity, then it follows that people transferring between different communities will move to a community that mirrors their identity, as they perceive it. Accordingly, if one can locate those elements of individuals' identities that they see projected in the community they are joining, in terms of conversion, one has established the grounds for this change. Cohen's (1985) focus on the symbolic element to the construction of community is particularly pertinent to my own perspective, for I have identified symbolism as a means of addressing both the cognitive and behavioural dynamics to conversion, whilst addressing individual and social dimensions, therefore symbolism is affirmed as a means by which one can analyse relationships with groups and the transition between them.

These relatively recent anthropological studies of conversion, which have informed my preceding discussion, lead on from the general increase in the academic examination of religious conversion phenomena that began in the late 1960s, when a number of New Religious Movements started to develop in the United States. This field had moved by then to be, for the major part, the preserve of sociologists, although, as Steve Bruce (2004) also points out, they are focusing less on the subject at present. The sociological literature on conversion may be divided, broadly, into five categories: studies which describe the various stages of conversion; those that offer theoretical models of conversion; studies that identify ideal types prone to convert; texts which simply document the phenomenon or examine its effects; and those doing a combination of the above.

From a theoretical point of view, therefore, there is no one accepted explanation for religious conversion, nor any single model for its interpretation. This leaves scholars able to adopt approaches of their own preference, which may increase their ability to focus on issues that form part of their own agenda. There may well be no such an

explanatory framework because the reasons for religious conversion are completely idiosyncratic, but without research into, and an examination of, any commonality, this cannot be assumed to be the case.

Bruce (2004) reviews the literature on brainwashing as the catalyst for conversion, but dismisses it as a theoretical possibility as soon as it is introduced, since even the most extreme brainwashing programmes are held to result in no more than behavioural compliance owing to duress. Lofland and Stark (1965) concentrate on the importance of social life to conversion, with the underlying view that proselytizers encourage people to convert by manipulating social situations to meet with the neophyte's needs and inclinations. Certainly the literature supports the idea that incentives have an influence on conversion (e.g. Farhadian 2003; Mendoza 2003; Menon 2003), so this provides an explanatory model to test, but it is perhaps too narrow and excludes some potentialities. In contrast to Lofland and Stark's position, Bromley and Schupe (1979) advocate that conversion is an experimental process, where a new religion that is attractive will be experimented with and, then, if found suitable, it will be adopted more wholly as a totalizing belief system. The problem with assessing both of these models is that one becomes dependent upon conversion accounts, which may well be filtered when they are retold and could be narrated in terms that match the new identity, with things having been seen differently before the conversion event, however in the examination of religious conversion there is no simple way to avoid them.

Kidahl (1965) suggests that those prone to conversion may be characterized by impetuosity and a lower performance in intelligence tests. As part of my provisional research, I examined how long people had contemplated their decision to become Muslim and inquired about their educational levels (Highfield 2004). The majority of those sampled were educated to degree-level and only half held that they had not spent long to decide to convert, contradicting Kidahl's rather implausible view. Admittedly, the converts from Chiapas were excluded from this group, owing to isolation, and those interviewed were more likely to be well educated, being Internet users

(Wellman et al. 1996: 215-6), nevertheless, the director of the Muslim Center de Mexico has confirmed that most converts have approached them via this medium (Highfield 2004). Also categorizing the convert as a social type are Snow and Machalek (1983), who do this by elucidating four stages the type will go through. The converts then become identifiable by their thought processes and the language they use to explain their life stories. The question remains unanswered if Snow and Machalek have done no more than just describe the processes any convert goes through, rather than having identified a particular predisposed social type. The assessment of this model requires one to follow neophytes longitudinally through the conversion process, which is a task that could easily take the convert's (and the researcher's) lifetime and thus may not be practicable for research.

The major weaknesses of these sociological studies of conversion are their anti-intellectualism, in terms of prioritizing practice over belief, and their general omission to address symbolism (Wohlrab-Sahr [1999] is the notable exception). As Fernandez (1965) illustrates in respect of the Bwiti Fang Reformativ cult, social consensus can be privileged over symbolic consensus, but social consensus is achieved through an embodied representation of a symbolic consensus even if it is not actually present. In this sense, it can be said that symbolic consensus is itself pretended to in shared acts. This renders belief in the object of the negated symbolic consensus secondary to the practice of acting out, in behaviour, an imagined symbolic consensus, the purpose of which is the attainment of social cohesion; however, the epistemological significance of the need for symbolic consensus, and thus its subsequent acting out, provides evidence of the need for belief to be examined in addition to practice, even in contexts where belief is held to be secondary to behaviour. Furthermore, to fail to consider symbolism is a failure to gauge the relative significance of belief and practice as is manifest in both embodied and disembodied, or concrete and abstract, forms. This thinking echoes Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) view that the body is honed to take an ideology, even if, in this case, that ideology may be no more than the veneration of social cohesion. A further weakness of these sociological analyses is the comparative richness of their scope. Anthropological

ethnography generally has more breadth than a sociological study, which tends to isolate a single aspect of a multifaceted situation, thereby seeming more monochromatic in its nature. As Geertz (1973) would have it, with anthropology the description is sometimes thicker, meaning that a more holistic view of the conversion phenomena may be presented.

Also significant to a theoretical understanding of conversion in Mexico is the notion of forced conversion. Seeman (2003) illustrates how forced conversion can legitimate conversion, even if it is not the catalyst for it. In considering Felashmura Ethiopians, who were historically part of an exodus from Israel, he explains how reincorporation into Judaism is facilitated when the earlier conversion to Christianity of the would-be convert's forebears is understood to have been forced. While this position does not directly transpose to the Mexican situation, it does raise the issue of historical legitimation. If a Muslim proselytizer can convince a potential convert that their family's historical connection to Catholicism was forced, it will be easier to pry them away from that religion. As given earlier, David Martin (1978: 9) points to the common-sense nature of the dynamics that 'where religion is imposed from above by a conqueror it is thereby weakened, whereas when it is the focus of resistance to a conqueror it is thereby strengthened', although he raises the caveat that the latter will not apply if the conqueror disposes of a total monopoly over educational facilities, presumably as this would provide an outlet for the what would otherwise be repressed tension. Perhaps we would expect such tension to dissipate over time? However, as Menon (2003: 47-48) reminds us, in quoting Swedenberg (1995), a great deal has been written about collective memory's capacity to mobilize communities for collective action. In such terms, as Menon (2003: 51) points out, 'Conversion is not seen as simply an expression of faith but rather as a political choice that necessarily implicates questions of national allegiance, patriotism, and cultural determination.' This we see quite clearly in relation to my consideration of entity-concepts in Chapter Six. Also, if nation-states can be comprehended as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991), transnational communities, such as the notion of ummah in Islam, also contending from a political point of view, can prove engaging

modes of social re-identification for distancing oneself from the imposed national identity, such as the state co-opted mestizo construct in Mexico, which is also an imagined concept. In fact, Islam's ability to compete at this level of metadiscourse provides possible reasons for the adoption of the religion. We see here most clearly that the politics of religious conversion is thus an integral component for consideration in any academic study.

Identity is not only an issue significant to conversion, but also within Mexico itself, from both social and political points of view. As I discussed in Chapter Six, religion and political identity are often interrelated in this context, and a love-hate relationship exists between Mexico and the United States. While, as Karam (2004) contends, 'Radical Islamism [...] can be considered part of the blowback against the United States' for what is seen by some to be its enforced global domination, it can be understood why Mexicans may wish to absorb a Muslim identity; to move themselves from a group which appeared weak to a new group that seems strong, viewing themselves as joining a monolithic religion, in opposition to the US, similar to how Huntington (1993) would describe this relationship. While Huntington (1993) spouts Orientalist sentiments (Said 1978), the constructs of the Occident and the Orient seem appropriate to this issue, to the extent that these categories are operative locally, as the other contenders at this level of metadiscourse are also 'imagined communities'.

Geertz (1968) illustrates how, in the cases of Morocco and Indonesia, people's religious beliefs waxed and waned with their experience of reality; if life as experienced didn't authenticate their beliefs, their beliefs were difficult to retain. Such could be the experience of Catholicism from a political point of view in Mexico. If the Catholic state becomes all theatre, confidence in it may be lost. Travisano (1970: 601) posits that 'the ideal typical conversion can be thought of as the embracing of a negative identity. The person becomes something which was specifically prohibited.' If the old religion has come to be associated with a category that the convert wishes to reject, then the adoption of the opposite category is the most logical course of action. There is some sense here, and the issue displays

another sense in which religious conversion is political: When literally it is barred by the state. If we consider religious conversion in (1) a state with laws of apostasy, (2) a state with a dominant religion and a relatively intolerant climate, (3) a state with a dominant religion but with a relatively tolerant climate, or – for example – (4) a secularized state, we can imagine how this particular factor could contribute to the determination of how politicized religious conversion is. By association, religious conversion is highly political in a less tolerant culture; it is often an action against the state. In a more tolerant culture, religious conversion may still be political, but it may not be as visibly political unless carried out to the extreme. This latter window of opportunity highlights the relevance of the concept of Muslimization, since this refers to converts' tendency to accentuate their religious identity.

The politics of scholars' interpretations

We can see from the above that there are different ways in which religious conversion itself can be political. I now wish to assert the proposition, and a minor claim of this book, that scholars would do well to acknowledge the political implications of their treatment of their informants' experiences, and indeed those of other scholars, because our interpretations of religious conversion are equally politicized and that as a consequence we should attempt to narrate into our responses the political implications they invoke, simply as a mode of exhibiting transparency and so that other scholars who choose to do so may engage with our perspectives effectively and so that our informants can understand the approaches we have taken. This, for instance, I have done in relation to my suggestion of the utility of the concept of metareligious conversion. To illustrate my point, I will engage with arguments made for the continuity of conversion, an issue on which I touched earlier in this chapter. I particularly wish to engage with Brown's (2003) view that conversion can never be complete.

Implicit in the view that religious conversion is a continuous process is the denial of the efficacy of any rite of passage that is said to effect the conversion, such as the statement of the shahadah in front of witnesses in the case of Islam, and also a questioning of the genuineness of the informants' adoption of their new faith in the sense that they are held not yet to have arrived at their intended destination – as a full member of their new religious community.

Informants and their peers may evaluate post-conversion practices to gauge the authenticity of the conversion and thus similarly question whether conversion has taken place, as we witnessed in Chapter Five. Thus, when thinking about whether there is any such a thing as a 'complete conversion', we must be careful to consider what conversion means to the individuals converting, since abjuring the validity of their conversion accounts undermines the authenticity of the uniqueness of the converts' individual and personal experience, and even their faith.

Brown (2003) makes the argument, mentioned earlier, that there is no way in which conversion can be seen to be a completed act. This view is predicated on his fieldwork which revealed that converts to spiritualism continued to doubt mediums and were often not convinced by what they witnessed, yet they still continued to go. For Brown, this continuous doubt is evidence of the fact that there can be no completed act of conversion in this context, contributing to the view that by necessity conversion is continuous. As stated earlier, Brown is not on his own in viewing conversion as continuous (e.g. Anderson 2003; Austin-Broos 2003; Coleman 2003; Reidhead and Reidhead 2003), and indeed I accept that some sense of continuity is required for conversion to be maintained and not to lapse. What Brown overlooks in his own context, however, is that his informants had already internalized the belief system upon which spiritualism is based; they accepted that the existence of the spirit world can be proven, although they had doubts about individual mediums' authenticity and success at doing it.

Thinking about Rambo's calling (2003) conversion 'a goal to work toward', we can see that this occurs here, as the converts attempt to

gauge whether or not they have witnessed a genuine medium. A genuine medium would be one who makes a real connection with the spirit world, which the converts go there in hope to see. In a sense, this intellectual process has been omitted from his work, which adds a new dimension to considering what constitutes successful conversion in this context.

I have alluded to the political implications of scholars' analyses of conversion. I see the issue of continuous conversion as a perspective with such an implication. There is little mention of the ritual acts that effect conversion in the texts of the scholars I cite as supporting the view of continuous conversion. In electing whether or not to include this ritual event in their ethnography (if indeed a conscious choice is made), there is an implicit politicizing of their interpretation of what constitutes religious conversion. The omission, deliberate or otherwise, of the rites of passage through which conversion is effected also omits to identify a part of the conversion process. Furthermore, where this part of the conversion process is one that challenges the notion of continuous conversion, it is an omission that has implications of a political nature, relative to the informants and to other scholars.

Douglas's (1982b) work on Grid-Group relations reminds us that the contexts in which ritual events take place vary in their structural composition, and indeed these variations may well have implications for the poignancy of ritual events for converts. The higher the Grid and the Group, the more poignant we might expect an event to be, as the shift in status would be more pronounced in an environment with a strong sense of community and where the transition is greater. Perhaps this is why in the spiritualist context that Brown examined it did not appear notable, either to Brown or his converts, to discuss any process via which membership of the group is formed. Such a community is low in Grid and Group, as there are often new people coming along each week, rendering the Group low, and the structure is relatively low in terms of Grid. I attended a spiritualist church in Aberdeen where group membership was constituted purely by attendance and the payment of a one-pound contribution per week. I expect that despite the community's overall appearance of low Grid,

this is higher in terms of the mediums, where I imagine there is greater control by the Spiritualists' National Union. In such a context, we could equally imagine that a conversion event, if it is the paying of that first pound, would not be especially significant. This is why I emphasize the intellectual process that I point out in reference to spiritualism, as for me conversion here is complete when a visitor to a spiritualist church believes in the proposition that a connection with the spirit world can be made and that a spiritualist church is where this can happen. This mode of adherence (not used in Nock's sense), and manner of conversion, matches the low Grid-Group status of the group.

In the context of conversions to Islam and Anglican Christianity in Mexico, however, there are formalized acts which take place to effect conversion. As stated earlier, for Islam there is the recital of the shahadah in front of witnesses after a period of reflection, learning, and exploring the practices of the community. In Anglican Christianity, there is formal reception into the Church, or confirmation, for those who are already baptized, and baptism for those who are not. The relative elaborateness of these two events similarly matches their structures in terms of Grid and Group.

There is high Grid and Group in the Anglican Church, where many hierarchies exist but a strong sense of community prevails, to which Benedicto bore witness in Chapter Four. In Islam, interestingly Grid is lower in this particular community since hierarchies are less structured and more permeable; however Group is even stronger, owing to a strong sense of boundary between the categories of Muslim and non-Muslim, and this is also evident in the familial vocabulary used in calling one another 'brother' or 'sister' across hierarchies, versus the more restricted use in Anglican Christianity of familial forms for those holding formal offices in the religion, e.g. 'Father', 'Sister' and 'Brother'. Note that the capitalization is necessary in Anglicanism, whereas in Islam it is not, also being evidential to their relative Group dynamics. We saw evidence of the strong, almost familial bond between Muslims in the words of Mohammad in Chapter Six, who justified spending time away from

his sanguinal family, commenting, “It began by me spending more time with brothers than my family.”

Admittedly, the ritual for becoming a Muslim, reciting the shahadah, does not sound like a particularly elaborate event, however because it involves crossing the threshold between non-Muslim and Muslim and joining the convert’s new Muslim ‘family’, the event is significant; especially when those who witness this are the ones with whom the convert has built such close bonds. It is noteworthy that a brother or sister informs the convert at this point that his or her sins are now forgiven and that they are now a blank slate, a *tabula rasa* (Turner 1969), showing that a transformation has occurred. The brother or sister does not pardon these sins his or her self; the convert earns this forgiveness from God for turning to him in Islam, submission.

Reception or confirmation in the Anglican Church is a formal ritual ceremony in which the transformation is marked by a movement from the periphery (within the congregation) to the centre, up by the altar, where the convert is formally received into the Church. This is a poignant and memorable event for the convert, which is further complemented by festivities such as a drinks’ reception, buffet or meal that will often follow afterwards, affirming the convert’s membership of the group. We must remember, of course, that in both contexts Grid-Group dynamics vary between different sub-sections of the world’s religions in addition indeed to between individual communities within these sub-sections too. I simply employ the concepts of Grid and Group here not to examine their general merit or to scrutinize them, but rather to demonstrate the significance of ritual events in my fieldwork contexts. Having shown that there is significance to conversion events themselves, I will now turn to address the implications of this for the notion of continuous conversion.

Were we to ask, as I did, Hasan and Benedicto when they became Muslim and Anglican (or Episcopalian) respectively, they would be able to point to a particular event on a particular day, along the lines of those ritual events I have described above. That is then, in their terms, when they became Muslim or Anglican (Episcopalian).

Accordingly, this is surely when they converted to their new religion. From those dates onwards, expectations have been made of them, along the lines of those we considered in Chapter Five, where the authenticity of conversion comes into question. In Chapter Four, we considered the possible effects of retained social relationships and how these might perhaps lead to what we might call syncretism or alternation, although we saw Benedicto stand fast despite maintaining most of his old social associations; and we should remember Said, my Muslim informant who turned to alcohol, thus breaking a code of his religion, but then demonstrated how much he was immersed in his faith by the upset this caused him. What this suggests to me is that through a ritualized conversion event, where this exists, and of course this much is contextually dependent, a convert enters into a symbolic contract, or a new field of discourse as we saw in Chapter Five, where there are expectations of them intellectually and behaviourally as a consequence. For the conversion not to lapse, this symbolic contract has to be honoured; and when there is a lapse in either intellectual dedication or behaviour, this can be made up by future intellectual and/or behavioural responses in the religion's terms. This is the continuity I see there as being to conversion. In such a context, if conversion is continuous it is continuous because of and in light of the conversion event at the centre of that process.

The problem with omitting to consider the conversion event, where there is one, from a scholarly point of view, is that the scholar doing so is depriving us of this information and unintentionally, or perhaps even intentionally, deemphasizing the significance of ritual events (1) for converts themselves, and (2) as integral, and indeed in some cases fundamental, components of the conversion process. I see conversion as equivalent to a paradigm shift (cf. Kuhn 1962). We might not be able to pinpoint the exact moment when things began to change that lead to it, and we might not know for exactly how long it will endure, but it involves a radical change in the worldview and the way of life of the convert and it can be attributed, intellectually and imaginably – if not pragmatically, to a single seismic moment, if of course the religion concerned has a meaningful rite of passage that denotes this shift.

I refer to the politics to scholars' examination of religious conversion. This chapter of mine is in itself political; I write as a believer, who believes that religion is of value; I write believing in the fundamental significance of ritual events for converts in terms of the binding of the social structure, where such fundamental events exist. Such is the politics that I bring to this debate. I believe this transparency that I am exhibiting here is necessary for all scholars in their consideration of religious conversion, since the fields of discourse in which we frame our studies politicize our interpretations of conversion events and the conversion process. Indeed, in this economy of discourse, there are also different currencies. It may well be that my own is less current than most, but that is not to say that it has no value. All of us who treat the academic study of the subject are deeply embedded in the politics of religious conversion. By acknowledging our own place in this process, we make the whole thing more transparent and truly open up the debate.

Ritualized conversion events can have a fundamental role in the process of religious conversion, and may even establish the relationship through which continual expectations of the convert are established. Perhaps in our own work the politics of religious conversion is at its clearest.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

At the beginning of this work, I explained how I had certain ideas about which I had been thinking, which were based on preliminary research findings. It is little shock to me that it has been necessary to revise things along the way, especially the significance of those initial ideas I wanted to test. Yet, this journey has helped me come across some useful concepts for analysing religious conversion.

I have a great deal of respect for Lewis Rambo and believe he makes sensible calls of scholars for the study of religious conversion. In his 1993 work, *Understanding Religious Conversion* he suggests (Rambo, 2003: 7):

No model can encompass the whole of reality, but I submit that the study of conversion must include, at the very least, the following four components: cultural, social, personal, and religious systems. For conversion to be understood in all its richness and complexity, the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, and religious studies must all be taken into account. Considerations of politics, economics, biology, and so forth, should also be noted, but I shall focus mainly on the first four components, which I believe to be the most crucial to an understanding of conversion.

I am swayed by Rambo's thinking, and indeed my field notes and audio and visual data did address the cultural, social, personal, and religious systems at play. Yet, in reflecting on the experience of researching religious conversion, and having come so close to the same in my experience of interacting with a proselytizing community, I have come to believe that the politics of religious conversion is the fifth dimension and is worthy of examination in any scholarly piece of work researching the phenomenon.

In this book, I have argued my major claim that religious conversion is inherently a political act, if not by intentions, by its implications, and for this reason scholarly attention is warranted in this area of conversion phenomena. This we have seen from the consideration of four different areas in which the politics of religious conversion is manifest. These were in the transformations of social relationships surrounding conversion, when the authenticity of conversion is called into question, when motivations for religious conversion are themselves politicized or have political implications, and finally in the scholarly study of conversion. A consideration of these areas seems to suggest, on the evidence presented, that religious conversion is inherently political, although it also confirms that this is not always deliberately so.

If we return to my initial definition of ‘political’ as relating to power relations, we might well critique this by asking who exactly these relationships are with. To establish that these power dynamics have been relational in this sense, I shall consider each of the areas that have been addressed in this work from this perspective.

In terms of social relationships transformed by conversion, the power relations are those that the convert was subject to and became subject to either side of conversion, both positively and negatively construed. In the instance of Hasan, he was formerly subject to power relations as a member of a gang and this exerted pressure on him to commit crime. Even in this, his social conscience kicked in and dictated what he was and was not willing to do to an extent. After conversion however, he had a reason beyond himself for no longer belonging to the gang, which then enabled him to distance himself from it and literally wipe his slate clean. Benedicto was able to do so in terms of the impact his religious affiliation had on his self-esteem, moving from a church that was critical to one that was accepting, which enabled him ultimately to accept himself. In both cases, the converts were able to remove themselves from power relations that were problematic for them and place themselves in new fields of discourse, principally of their own narration.

Metaphorically speaking, although the converts had been able to write their own stories about who they had become and how and why, by resituating themselves in a new field of discourse, this was not a discourse over which they had full control. They placed themselves in a situation where the authenticity of their conversions was open to the scrutiny of more established converts and longstanding adherents, who subjected them to new power relations in terms of the issue of authenticity. Yet, even this discourse the converts to Islam attempted to own through the process I have called Muslimization, whereby they sought to reappropriate the discourse by adopting certain behaviours and practices to authenticate their conversions themselves. This can be seen echoed in Benedicto's criticisms of Anglican practices that he sees as 'too Catholic'.

Some of the motivations converts gave for their conversions involved reasons that could be said to be outside of the religious sphere, and I thus determined that their conversion was more appropriately termed metareligious conversion, as I outline in Chapter Six. The power relations they were subject to were those connected with their national or ethnic identity. Because an Islamic identity appears in debates at the same level in the discourse, converts were able to transform their power relations in this way, from moving – say – from being principally defined by their Mexican nationality to then being defined by their Muslim status. This has an impact on the perception of them by outsiders, such as for example by North Americans from the United States. There is a clear change in power relations here, for reasons I have already enumerated. Also, some motives for religious conversion were explicitly political in that they supported a deliberate move into a certain new power dynamic, such as being in opposition to the US. In addition, I flagged up how there were power relations in the perception of other people in terms of entity-concepts, where individuals are equated with values they do not necessarily hold, which also has a clear relation to power.

Then, in respect of the scholarly study of religious conversion, I have made the case that the field of discourse in which we place the conversion process will dictate how it is seen by its readers and also how appropriately it reflects the experience of the converts. I argue

that the chief power relation here is between the academic and the convert, in that we may reduce the convert's experience of conversion through our own focus. Also, a lack of transparency in being open about our own positions can make it harder for other scholars to scrutinize our work. There are clear power relations at play here and thus my minor claim that scholars should acknowledge the political implications of their own treatment of their informants' experiences, and indeed that of other scholars, would appear to be worthy of consideration. Collectively, then, there is a case for claiming that power relations have been shown to exist in each of the areas of religious conversion I have considered, thus demonstrating a political element to each.

Religious conversion is, according to this book, an inherently political act, if not by intentions, by its implications. Through the introduction of three new concepts in particular, namely the theoretical concept of 'Muslimization' and the descriptive concepts of 'entity-concepts' and 'metareligious conversion', I have revealed how the transformations effected by religious conversion can alter the political dynamics to the position of the convert. Considering interpersonal relationships, I have demonstrated how there are political implications to the changes brought about by conversion. I have then showed how issues about the authenticity of conversion also place the convert within fields of discourse where this authenticity can be politically affirmed or challenged. Subsequently, examining the relationship between the convert and what I call entity-concepts, I have clarified how the dynamics of the relationship between the individual and these ideological notions also experience a change as a consequence of conversion. Finally, I have considered how the approaches scholars take to the examination of religious conversion provide a political challenge as well, in terms of how scholars' explanations place conversion within other fields of discourse, which test and critique what is understood by religious conversion, which may either compliment or contradict the converts' own points of view.

This book and its arguments are by no means intended to be conclusive. What I hope to have achieved within them is to draw attention to areas of religious conversion that warrant further scrutiny

by scholars and to encourage a greater degree of reflexivity in our own work. For me, this is very much a starting point, rather than a conclusion, as I begin to explore these ideas further. I know that the ideas in this text have only just been introduced and are yet to be developed, but may this constitute a turning point, where I turn from never having used them before to finding fruitful ways to engage with them in the future. I hope that they may prove helpful to others too.

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