Conversion to Twelver Shi'ism among American and Canadian women

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Abstract: Little research has been done on Western women who convert to Shi'i Islam. To fill this gap, this study was conducted on American and Canadian women who have converted to Shi'i Islam. Most of the research subjects in this study reported a moderate to severe sense of social marginalization after conversion. This marginalization resulted from membership in multiple minority groups (Shi'i, Muslim, convert, and female); Black converts reported the most severe sense of marginalization due to the added pressure of being a racial minority in North America. Most of the research subjects also experienced a sense of social exclusion from other Shi'i Muslims. Therefore, the question arises as to why these women continued to adhere to Shi'i Islam despite these difficulties. This article will attempt to answer this question through an analysis of the data provided by the research subjects.

Résumé : Peu de recherches ont été effectuées sur les femmes occidentales qui se convertissent à l'Islam Chiite. Cette étude va donc permettre de combler cette lacune sur les femmes américaines et canadiennes qui se sont convertis à l'Islam Chiite. La plupart des sujets de cette recherche démontrent une marginalisation sociale modérée ou intense après la conversion. Cette marginalisation est causée par l'appartenance à de multiples groupes minoritaires (Chiite, Musulman, converti, et gente féminine) ; les Noirs convertis ressentent un plus profond sentiment de marginalisation dû par une pression supplémentaire d'appartenance à une minorité visible raciale en Amérique du Nord. La

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plupart des sujets de recherche ont porté leur expérimentation sur le sentiment d'exclusion sociale des autres groupes Musulmans Chiites. Par conséquent, la question se pose sur la raison pour laquelle ces femmes ont continué à adhérer à l'Islam Chiite en dépit de ces difficultés. Cet article tentera de répondre à cette question grâce à une analyse de données fournies à travers des sujets de recherche.

Introduction[1]

In the United States, at least a quarter of the Muslims are thought to be converts.[2] Nevertheless, conversion to Islam in North America only received substantial media and academic attention after the September 11th attacks. Studies of converts have focused almost exclusively on conversion to Sunni Islam (hereafter, Sunnism),[3] with converts to Shi'i Islam (hereafter, Shi'ism) left as little more than footnotes.[4] When the Shi'i community in North America is discussed, it is usually portrayed as an immigrant community despite the presence of indigenous North American Shi'is.[5] The rare discussions of North American Shi'i converts have focused on the male experience, leaving female Shi'i converts as a voiceless minority. Since male and female converts (to any religion) frequently report different experiences, it stands to reason that male and female converts to Shi'ism do not necessarily share the same experiences, particularly since Muslims traditionally emphasize gender segregation and gender roles.[6]

After the initial research on the experiences of female Shi'i converts in North America, it became clear that many female Shi'i converts experience a religio-social-racial and gendered sense of marginalization from the Shi'i community. This marginalization significantly impacts on their religious experience as well as other aspects of their lives; for instance, many subjects reported feeling unwelcome in places of worship, having difficulty learning more about Shi'ism, or being unable to marry within the Shi'i community. Therefore, further research was conducted to determine why these women choose to remain Shi'is. This paper will attempt to answer that question by exploring the women's motivations for conversion, the challenges they face, their coping strategies, and the benefits that these women feel that their faith offers them.

Demographics and Methodology

It is difficult to estimate how many women have converted to Shi'ism in North America. In particular, taking a census of Muslims in the United States has generally been a

challenge, since – given the political climate – many Muslims there are reluctant to answer questions about their faith, and most mosques do not keep records of attendance, nor do all Muslims affiliate themselves with mosques.[7] Although the size of the Muslim population has been estimated by counting how many people hold traditionally Muslim surnames, identifying converts can be more difficult because converts often do not have recognizably 'Muslim' names and may be indistinguishable from their neighbors.

The 2007 Pew Research Survey, hailed as the first dedicated attempt to obtain detailed statistics on Muslims in America, estimates that 1.4 million adult Muslims live in America, of whom 16% identify themselves as Shi'i.[8] The Pew Research Survey also estimates that 23% of Muslims in America are converts, and 6% of American converts are Shi'i (Pew Research Center, 2007: 3, 22). These rough figures produce an estimate of 19,320 to 96,600 Shi'i converts (both male and female) in America, or about 9% of the total Shi'i population. Since anecdotal evidence suggests that converts form far less of the Shi'i population (many women reported being the only convert in their locality), this figure is probably inflated. Although a reliable study on the composition of the Muslim population in Canada has not been conducted, it is likely that, in Canada, the percentage of converts to Shi'ism may be similar.

Since female Shi'i converts are not concentrated in any single region, it was not feasible to study them in-person at a particular mosque or in a particular city. Instead, this study was conducted via a voluntary survey distributed over the internet in two stages. The initial survey consisted of one page of open-ended questions regarding the respondents' reasons for converting to Shi'ism, their personal background, and their experiences as a Shi'i. Then, based on the narratives, a second survey was constructed to follow up on key issues. The second survey was six pages long and consisted of both qualitative and quantitative questions about the converts' personal background, conversion to Shi'ism, religious practice, affiliation with Shi'i groups, sense of belonging, and self-perception. The majority of the initial respondents completed the second survey (although several submitted complaints about the length of the survey). The surveys were e-mailed to Shi'i mosques in North America, posted on Shi'i websites, distributed on academic and faith-based e-mail lists focusing on Islam and Shi'ism, and circulated via Facebook.[9] All questions were voluntary, and some participants elected not to answer some questions.

Forty-six surveys with sufficient data to analyze were returned – 40 from the United States, four from Canada, and two from women who declined to state whether they lived in the United States or Canada. The women identified themselves as White (28), Black (6), Latina (5), mixed race (3), Asian-American (1), Native American (1), South Asian (1), and decline to state (1). Two women said that they had been born outside of North America. These figures roughly mimic the ethnic distribution of the United States and Canada, with a higher percentage of Blacks, probably due to the increased spread of Islam among Blacks. However, since – particularly in the United States – the majority of converts to Islam are Black, the percentage of Black respondents suggests a disproportionately low rate of conversion to Shi'ism (as compared with Sunnism) among Black women.

The respondents ranged between the ages of 20 and 60, with the youngest conversion occurring at the age of 12, and the oldest at the age of 59. Most were in their thirties and

had converted to Shi'ism in their twenties,[10] although 14 women had initially converted to Sunnism and, after a gap of two to five years, had subsequently converted to Shi'ism; 30 women had been practicing Shi'ism for more than five years, and six had been practicing for over 20 years. However, six women had also been practicing for less than one year and could be termed 'new converts.'

Most came from a Christian background. Although they were asked their prior religion, they were not asked their prior religious denomination. Nonetheless, 11 out of 31 volunteered that they had been raised Catholic.[11] This unusually high figure lends credence to the common speculation that Catholics are more attracted to Shi'ism than Sunnism due to similarities between Shi'ism and Catholicism, such as the veneration of holy personalities and a stronger religious hierarchy.[12] Equal thirds indicated that they had been very practicing, moderately practicing, and non-practicing Christians; and two mentioned that they had relatives who were priests. One woman also mentioned coming from a line of female preachers.[13] One formerly agnostic and one formerly Hindu woman also returned surveys. Most identified themselves as fully practicing Muslims, and only one said that she did not follow *shari'ah* teachings in her daily life.

Two tracks of conversion were represented in this study: conversion directly to Shi'ism (32 responses), and conversion first to Sunnism and then to Shi'ism (14 responses). The question arises as to whether migrating from one sect of Islam to another constitutes a true 'conversion' – and, in fact, two women said that they did not feel this was a 'conversion.' However, the women who had 'converted' from Sunnism to Shi'ism reported substantial adjustments in their theological, historical, and psychological outlooks, as well as in their patterns of worship and socialization. Therefore, the shift from Sunnism to Shi'ism can be viewed psychologically and socially as a form of conversion.

Why Convert?

Intellectual Conversion Narratives. The converts were asked to describe their conversion to Shi'ism in an open-ended manner. All but one of the respondents emphasized their intellectual acceptance of Shi'ism; they cited books they had read and said they had chosen Shi'ism because it 'made sense.' Converts from Sunnism to Shi'ism, in particular, discussed theological and historical differences between the two sects and cited pro-Shi'i polemical literature, such as the books by Muhammad al-Tijani al-Samawi,[14] which were mentioned by no less than four women. Respondents who had converted directly to Shi'ism also gave similar reasons for selecting Shi'ism over Sunnism. Two formerly Christian respondents said that they had converted to Shi'ism after engaging in missionary work to Shi'is, and several of the women said that they preferred Islam to Christianity because they felt that the Trinity was illogical. (A sample intellectual conversion narrative has been included in Appendix A.)

Intellectual conversion narratives are also common among converts to Sunnism and appear to be the preferred conversion narrative among Muslims in the West (Zebiri, 2008: 54–57; Van Nieuwkerk, 2006; Ezzati, 2002: 158–182). Therefore, some of the respondents may have highlighted the intellectual aspects of their conversion in response to expectations from the Muslim community. They may also have been demonstrating an internalization of the specifically Shi'i belief that the main tenets of the faith must be

arrived at individually through logic and reflection, and may not be followed blindly (Sobhani, 2001: 3).[15] However, regardless of whether or not the intellectual aspect of the conversion was truly the primary motivation, by providing intellectually oriented conversion narratives, these women showed that they are heavily invested in their belief on an intellectual level which is independent from their social experiences with other Shi'is. Therefore, this focus on independent intellectual conviction is likely to be a major factor in their retention in the faith.

Spirituality. Seven respondents also mentioned spiritual experiences (such as prayer, dreams, and miraculous signs) as a factor in their conversion, although they emphasized that their primary motivation for conversion was intellectual; one convert referred to her spiritual experiences as 'something of an icing on the intellectual cake.' Several who had converted from Sunnism to Shi'ism also said that their faith had become stronger after converting to Shi'ism or that they felt that Shi'ism offered them a greater sense of spirituality. Therefore, while not presented as the primary motivation for conversion, spiritual factors also appear to contribute to the women's retention in the faith.

Social Justice. Surprisingly, none of the respondents indicated (directly or indirectly) that a desire for social justice was influential in their conversion. This is unusual since many studies assert that the desire for social justice has been critical in the spread of Islam in North America, especially among Blacks and women (Curtis, 2009: 31–34).[16] In particular, it has been found that Black women have seen Islam as an alternative to the secular society which perpetuates their invisibility (Mendes, 2011: 53). Social justice would seem to be a more critical factor in conversion to Shi'ism since Shi'i devotional practice places a stronger emphasis on the value of social justice;[17] for instance, every year on 'Ashura, Husayn ibn 'Ali (the third Shi'i Imam) is commemorated for his willingness to sacrifice his life to stand up against an unjust tyrant. Nevertheless, the desire for social justice was not mentioned in any of the conversion narratives. Since most of the respondents (including all of the Black respondents) reported experiencing racial discrimination in the Shi'i community, and some reported experiencing sexism as well, it is possible that none of these women mentioned the desire for social justice as a factor in their conversion simply because – despite Shi'i ideals – they did not experience it among Shi'is.

Intermarriage. Among Shi'is, it is commonly assumed that women convert to Shi'ism because they are married to a Shi'i man.[18] However, in the initial survey, only one of the women said that she had converted because of marriage. To test this hypothesis, in the second survey, the women were asked specifically whether a Shi'i male partner had influenced their conversion, and 43% answered in the affirmative. Nevertheless, they emphasized that the decision to convert had been their own and that they had investigated Shi'ism independently prior to conversion. For instance, a common scenario was:

> The first Shi'i that I met and made friends with was my husband. He married me with the
> understanding that I was not Shi'i, but I was clear I was not Sunni either. After we were
> married for a little more than a year, I met one of his elder friends. We started talking

religion, and I could not get enough from him. His passion for what he was saying was genuine. This renewed my studies and direction of learning. (White, American, 30s)

Some women also warned that converting 'for the sake of a man,' rather than genuinely converting from within, would lead to de-conversion in the future. The de-emphasis on marriage as a factor in conversion suggests that these women viewed conversion due to marriage as an undesirable conversion narrative. Instead, they preferred to emphasize their own independent agency and ownership of their own faith. These respondents' perception of themselves as independent agents in their conversion may be one reason why they continued to practice Shiʿism after some of these marriages failed: 13 respondents (approximately one-fourth of the sample group) reported divorcing a Shiʿi husband. In addition, several respondents converted in spite of a man: one respondent became more religiously practicing than her nominally Shiʿi husband and ended up divorcing him; several others, who were married to Sunnis, reported marital problems due to their conversion.

It has been theorized that single women convert to Islam to increase their chances of finding a husband. Within the Sunni community, female converts appear to marry quickly and are sometimes viewed as more desirable spouses than non-converts (Zebiri, 2008: 224). However, the women in this study who were single at the time of conversion expressed severe difficulty in finding a Shiʿi husband. Respondents who had been involved in both the Shiʿi and Sunni communities attributed the difficulty to stronger taboos against intercultural marriage among Shiʿis as well as the smaller pool of available men. One woman graphically compared attitudes towards marrying convert women to attitudes during the North American slave trade:

> The slave masters in America would have their European wife at home. She was the mother of their children and the society wife. But, when the slave master wanted to have 'fun' or have 'a good time,' he would make his way down to the barracks and select one of the slave women to be his company for his desired time. Although, history does point to some slave masters who actually fell in love with a female slave and moved her up to the 'house' to be his permanent wife.

> This same ideology exists amongst many Muslim men, that a western Muslimah is 'Mrs Right Now' or is good for *muʿtah* [temporary marriage] but not for permanent marriage.[19] There is also a belief that Western women are loose, have an animalistic understanding of morality, can't be trusted, will return to their old ways and will not make good mothers.

> Not only do some men think like this, there are numerous females from different cultural backgrounds, who exhibit these same limited understandings of Western women. Some of them even encourage their sons who are studying overseas to seek companionship with a Western Muslimah, until they come back home and marry their cousin or whoever has been selected for them. (Black, Canadian, 40s)

These respondents' spinsterhood is ironic since Islamic teachings emphasize marriage as 'half of faith' and prohibit any type of physical relationship outside of marriage.[20] Nonetheless, it is indicative of the social challenges that these respondents faced after conversion.

After Conversion: The Challenges

Most of the respondents described a moderate to severe sense of exclusion from the Shi'i community for racial, cultural, and linguistic reasons. In addition to feeling socially excluded, some also experienced difficulty in learning more about the faith due to the infrequency of religious services in English. Respondents who had converted first to Sunnism and then to Shi'ism reported a much stronger sense of belonging among Sunnis, and so a discussion of their experiences in Sunnism is helpful in highlighting the specific challenges Shi'i converts face.

The Sunni versus the Shi'i Experience. Converts to Sunnism often describe the overwhelming sense of brotherhood and sisterhood they experience in the Sunni community as 'one big family' – so much so that it has been speculated that people convert to Sunnism to experience this sense of belonging (Haddad, 1991: 33). Female converts to Shi'ism do not appear to share the same experience. Respondents who had participated in both the Shi'i and Sunni religious communities concurred that they had felt much more welcomed and accepted among Sunnis, who had also provided material support to new converts, such as religious books and transport to the mosque. In contrast, they complained of racism in the Shi'i community and likened Shi'i mosques to 'cultural clubs' rather than houses of worship.

Because of this, one might expect that the converts would continue to associate with Sunnis. However, after their conversion, most experienced rejection from the Sunni community, such as losing friends or being asked to leave Sunni mosques. Additionally, the differences between Shi'i and Sunni religious practices impel converts to worship with Shi'i rather than Sunni Muslims. While the Sunni devotional calendar is typically limited to the Friday prayers and the two Eids, the Shi'i devotional calendar includes numerous days of observance, as well as specific prayers for certain days, such as Du'a Kumayl, which is recited in congregation on Thursday nights. While these extra observances are not religiously mandatory, they form the heart of Shi'i devotional practice, and so most practicing Shi'is – converts or otherwise – choose to participate in them. Therefore, converts must either join the local Shi'i community or worship alone, risking a sense of isolation. Due to geographic or social isolation, some of these converts were worshipping alone.

Since both Shi'is and Sunnis hail Islam as God's final revelation 'for all people of all times,' why do converts report such striking differences between the two communities? Why are many North American Sunni mosques and organizations (such as CAIR and ISNA)[21] seen as establishing an 'American Islam,' while Shi'i mosques are still viewed as immigrant-only zones? Demographics, history, and the role of language in popular Shi'i expression offer insight into this question. Sunnis come from a broad variety of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, and major Sunni mosques usually serve worshippers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, the Sunni community has a large number of North American adherents (converts or the descendants of converts), especially among African-Americans (only 2% of whom identified themselves as Shi'i in the Pew Survey) (Pew Research Center, 2007: 21).

In contrast, Shi'is have historically been concentrated in only a few regions worldwide, and so most Shi'i immigrants to North America are Iranian, South Asian, Iraqi,

or Lebanese.[22] Lack of resources and a dearth of leadership within the convert community have made many converts dependent on immigrant Shi'is, who have largely presented their own cultural understanding of Shi'ism in North America. Furthermore, due to centuries of persecution and a desire to maintain their distinct minority identities, Shi'i communities are generally inward rather than outward looking, more concerned with self-preservation rather than expansion; for instance, a 2009 study found that Shi'i mosques in America overwhelmingly dedicated their financial resources to communal activities rather than outreach efforts or serving the needs of converts (Takim, 2009: 186). Similarly, all the women (except for the two associated with Shi'i convert organizations) reported a complete lack of encouragement or support in becoming Shi'i. As a result, many women described being Shi'i *in spite* of the community rather than *because* of it.

The use of language also results in a crucial difference between the Shi'i and Sunni experience. While both Shi'i and Sunni Muslims recite the ritual prayers (*salat*) and the Qur'an in Arabic, the average Sunni convert can expect to obtain religious books, attend religious classes, and listen to religious sermons in English – and, indeed, many women mentioned that Sunni educational materials were far more available in English. However, Shi'i popular religious expression emphasizes non-liturgical texts such as poetry, elegies, eulogies, and sacred narratives; and most Shi'is – including some converts – find the English language ill-adapted to these forms. Primarily immigrants, Shi'i religious leaders are often selected on the basis of their ability to provide services in languages other than English and are typically not expected to preach fluently and convincingly in English, although some do. Therefore, Shi'i communities tend to segregate linguistically, and most women indicated that Shi'i religious services were partially or wholly unavailable in English in their localities. When English-language services were available, they did not necessarily meet the long-term educational or religious needs of converts, and were often directed at the youth (Takim, 2009: 85). For instance, one respondent said that the problem was not finding English-language sermons but rather finding sermons that didn't 'assume Anglophones have the religious proficiency of first graders.'

An Ethnic versus a Faith Community. The above comparison shows that female converts to Shi'ism are less likely to experience a feeling of belonging in Shi'i faith communities; for instance, one woman reported that she learned a derogatory Urdu word for 'foreigner' before she learned the word for 'fasting.' Notably, of the five women who said they did not experience prejudice, three could be classified as 'brown' (Asian and Hispanic), and the other two said that they resembled Arabs or Afghans and were not immediately identified as converts; this suggests that converts who physically 'blend in' are less likely to face prejudice.

The descriptions of prejudice were copious enough to fill a small book; in fact, one woman requested that her response be distributed as a pamphlet to Shi'i mosques to raise awareness of the problem of racism. Most descriptions of prejudice were shared among women from all ethnic backgrounds. Many reported social discomfort, such as being ignored, stared at, or treated rudely at the mosque. Women who had attended many different mosques had better experiences at some mosques than others. Although they disagreed

as to which ethnic group was the most welcoming, the women agreed that they felt most welcomed in multicultural mosques – oftentimes in rural areas – where 'diversity was favored rather than discouraged,' and in mosques where sermons were offered in English. One said she felt most comfortable at mosques where her fellow worshippers would talk to her.

Many women interviewed – even those who had been practicing for over a decade – also reported being treated as if they were ignorant of the fundamentals of the faith, or as if they were less intelligent – which led one to write that she wished non-converts would 'drop the patronizing attitude, please.' Other women reported frequent (and, as one put it, 'annoying') questions about their conversion, and being treated differently from non-convert women, such as being sent to the men's side of the mosque.

The women also faced a challenge unique to their gender – being subjected to the stereotypes of Western women as sexually adventurous and easily available. They complained of being the recipients of this stereotype from other women, who assumed they had a promiscuous past (one reported being publicly asked *three times* about her virginity). Others expressed some disillusionment about being approached by Shi'i men for relationships that would have been considered inappropriate for non-convert women, as alluded to in the above section on the difficulties they experienced in marrying within the Shi'i community. They also expressed frustration at the stereotype that they had converted for a man. A typical response read:

> There is the ever present perception that I'm a 'whitie' who converted 'cuz I met a Muslim man and married him and then converted for him . . . my already being Muslim tends to confound most of these people. (White, American, 30s)

Ironically, this respondent indicated elsewhere in her survey that most women convert for a man. She was not alone in both critiquing and assimilating this belief.

Racism. The above concerns were shared among ethnic groups. However, when asked about racial discrimination in the Shi'i community, most women concurred that Blacks received the worst treatment, particularly in social situations and when searching for a spouse. As one respondent wrote:

> The way that Black Muslims – whether they are Black Americans, Black English, or Black African – are sometimes treated by born Muslims is absolutely despicable. The racism that sometimes seethes from some born Muslims makes me physically ill. (White, American, 30s)

Black Shi'is have often reported being 'othered' – exhibiting that shared religiosity is simply not enough to draw Blacks into the realm of acceptability for immigrant Shi'is, who may prize ethnic-cohesion over universal brotherhood (Mendes, 2011: 46). However, racism did not only come from born Shi'is; a couple of women also mentioned racism among converts themselves.

White converts, on the other hand, reported a different type of discrimination – being the object of 'fawning' or being treated like a 'novelty.'[23] The tangible eagerness in the superficial embrace of White converts may reflect a third world 'inferiority complex'

which places whiteness on a pedestal as the 'ideal,' and, as a result, a White convert is seen as a compliment to Islam – but still as an outsider. While a couple of new converts presented this as positive rather than negative attention – for instance, saying that born Muslims would get 'happy and excited' at meeting a White convert, long-term converts (of all ethnic backgrounds) saw this as backhanded praise. For instance, one wrote:

> A sister asked me if I was a convert. 'Yes,' I said. Then I looked at her and asked the same question. She got all flustered, her cheeks turned a shade of red, and her eyebrows furled as she responded, 'Ohhhh, no! I'm not a convert. No, I'm a born Muslim, no! No! No!' All of a sudden it wasn't a good thing to be a convert. (Black, Canadian, 40s)

Overall, this racially based positive attention also made them feel different from the rest of the community.

Given that Islam – both Shi'i and Sunni – unequivocally condemns racism, why do Black and White female converts receive such different treatment? First, like other immigrants, immigrant Shi'is may try to 'become White' as a strategy to improve their socioeconomic status. In doing so, they may adopt North American racial stereotypes. This idea was supported by one respondent, who said that she felt that North American converts were treated according to the 'same racial hierarchy which permeates North America,' with 'White male converts at the top of the convert hierarchy.'[24] Second, global media present White culture as the sole legitimate culture of North America, and so immigrants come to America assuming they must conform to White cultural norms. Third, during the colonial era, many Muslims developed a sense of inferiority to the European colonialist powers, which were perceived as technologically, politically, and culturally dominant. This attitude still persists today, and two women specifically used the word 'post-colonial' to describe the marked difference in reactions to Black and White converts. Lastly, despite the Islamic taboo against racism and the close relationship between early Islam and Africa, stereotypes used against Africans in some historically Shi'i regions have pre-modern roots.[25]

Responses to the Challenges

Despite these negative experiences, these women continued to affiliate themselves with Shi'ism. A number of coping strategies were identified throughout the survey process and will be discussed below.

Cultural Assimilation. Most respondents reported adopting various aspects of 'traditional' Shi'i cultures, such as clothing, food, or language. A minority consciously felt that cultural assimilation was necessary and blamed converts who did not fit in for not trying hard enough. For instance, one wrote:

> I blend in with the community because I made myself a part of it. I took the time to learn the language . . . I've seen sisters who refused to learn Farsi or learn the customs after being married for over 20 years. They were stand-offish to people in the community, and then complained that people weren't as accepting of them. (White, American, 50s)

On the opposite end of the spectrum, one expressed resentment that she should have to assimilate and actively refused to do so. Respondents who had converted before the age of twenty described a more organic process of cultural assimilation due to social interaction. Women in intercultural marriages also said they had adopted cultural practices from their husband's culture for the sake of their marriage and to pass on the husband's cultural identity to their children; these responses suggest that, in marriages in the Shi'i community, the man's cultural identity is expected to dominate.

A surprising half of the women surveyed indicated they had learned at least some spoken Arabic, Persian, or Urdu (with the exception of merely learning to recite Arabic, which Muslims commonly learn in order to read the Qur'an). While some had taken classes, others learned through socializing with native speakers and asking what words meant or looking words up in a dictionary. Some had also learned through marriages with native speakers. All but one felt that learning these languages was extremely helpful for social integration, religious education, and participating in communal religious expression, to the degree that one convert said that classes in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu should be offered to new converts.

Women's Ceremonial Gatherings. The dynamics of cultural inclusion and exclusion figured significantly in the respondents' discussions of their experiences at female-only ceremonial gatherings (such as *majalis* and *sofrehs*).[26] These gatherings often provide the primary forum for religious expression among Shi'i women, who do not usually give public sermons or recitations at the mosque (Aghaie, 2005). However, because Shi'i law does not prescribe specific rituals for these gatherings, customs vary from culture to culture. Among immigrant Shi'is, these gatherings serve secondary purposes, such as reinforcing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in the cultural community; defining class and hierarchical relationships; and facilitating arranged marriages (Spellman, 2005: 81–84).

Perhaps due to these secondary purposes, the women had mixed feelings about attending these gatherings. About half reported being invited to and enjoying these gatherings. These women appreciated the spiritual and social aspects as well as the emotional intimacy found among women. As one wrote:

> I love being in the company of other Shi'a women, even ones who aren't as obviously observant as I am. I don't usually care that much if the gathering is in a language that I can understand. I think there is a bond we share, especially when we are out of the sight of men, which transcends language and culture. It's a bond of both faith and femininity. (Black, American, 30s)

Several women felt that attending these gatherings helped them integrate more into the Shi'i community despite ethnic differences, and that these gatherings were a more comfortable space for socialization than the mosque. Some women also hosted these gatherings, and two reported giving sermons and providing ritual recitations at them. For these women, participation in these gatherings offered a sense of inclusion in the community and a means of expressing their faith specifically as women.

However, other women experienced a sharp sense of cultural exclusion at these gatherings. For instance, one wrote:

> I had never been to a *majlis* ... Everyone was Pakistani but me. All the women started talk-
> ing in Urdu, which I do not speak. One of them turned to me and said, 'Sorry, we should be
> speaking English so you can understand.' She then turned back to her friends and continued
> speaking in Urdu. The whole *majlis* was conducted in Urdu. No one translated any of it to
> me, even after they were done ... I have never been back to any gathering and probably will
> not. (White, American, 30s)

Others expressed timidity, saying they would only go if another convert came with them.
When asked why they did not host these gatherings themselves instead, they indicated
that they 'lacked confidence' or 'didn't know what to do.' These responses point to a
larger problem in North American convert Shi'i expression: converts who do not want
to adopt the traditions of other Shi'i cultures have no North American Shi'i customs
to fall back on, and so they are left without a 'roadmap' explaining how they should com-
memorate Shi'i holidays in a manner which is true to their own culture. For these
women, participation in these gatherings resulted in a greater sense of cultural alienation.

A Convert Mosque? Given the sense of alienation and pressure to culturally assimilate that
most women reported, one might expect that they would prefer a convert-only Shi'i
mosque where they could create their own space to share the prejudicial treatment they
contend with in both the religious and secular-public spheres. However, while the
women agreed that existing mosques needed to do more to serve new converts, they were
split as to whether a convert-only mosque should actually be built: while 17 adamantly
supported the need for a convert-only mosque, 15 vehemently objected to the idea,
although many of them described positive experiences at female-only convert study cir-
cles. No difference was found in the responses between new and long-term converts.

The reasons why some would prefer a convert-only mosque should be self-evident.
Two women – both of whom expressed an atypically high sense of acceptance in the
Shi'i community – reported positive experiences with convert organizations: one, an
African-American Shi'i mosque; and the other, the Path of Light organization in
Canada. Many said they felt they would 'fit in' better in that type of environment, or
that converts understood each other better. Others pointed to the need for English-
language sermons and the need for scholars or speakers who understood their own
cultural backgrounds; they also added that they felt their type of religious center would
better serve the needs of the children of immigrants as well. In addition to the need to
provide support for new converts, one also mentioned the need to fulfill the long-term
educational and social needs of converts. Finally, one respondent said she wanted to
use the organizational experience she had gained as an active member of a church com-
munity in the Shi'i community but felt that she currently did not have the opportunity to
do so.

Why converts would oppose a convert-only mosque may seem less self-evident. Most
held that racial and cultural unity was a basic tenet of Islam, and that they should not
violate it (even if other Shi'i groups did). One asked rhetorically whether the Prophet
Muhammad had created separate mosques for the *muhajirin* and the *ansar* (the immi-
grants to and residents of Medina, the seat of the first Islamic community) and continued:

No, he made them observe a pact of Islamic brotherhood. Our job is to purify our hearts, homes and communities...Islamic communities can NEVER be successfully formed and sustained purely on the basis of racial or cultural segregation. (Black, American, 30s)

Upholding this ideal was difficult for one respondent, who had been told by a local Shi'i religious scholar that converts should start their own mosque rather than attend his mosque. Although deeply insulted and disillusioned, she retained her original belief that ethnic and cultural segregation are un-Islamic.

In addition to the desire for unity, some women said they would not want their own 'convert mosque' because they enjoyed cultural diversity. A few tactfully indicated that born Muslims could learn from convert Muslims. Three also volunteered that they had been practicing Islam so long that they no longer felt like converts, although they were still treated like converts. One said that she did not 'associate with people based on how they became Muslim,' and several felt that convert-only gatherings could turn into a 'destructive force' by 'feeding off of one another's anger [at rejection from the community] and supporting each other in judging a culture or religious element, rather than trying to help each other be more understanding, compassionate, and open-minded.' Five women also said that convert Muslims should learn from born Muslims (rather than the other way around), and others feared that converts would be more easily misguided or would make up their own rituals.

Therefore, while existing convert organizations (such as the Path of Light and female-only study circles) serve as a support network for Shi'i converts, and convert-only Shi'i mosques might provide a solution to the sense of social exclusion felt by many converts, not all Shi'i converts are in favor of that solution.

Perceptions of Religious Authority as Female Converts. The sharply differing responses regarding a convert-only community point to a broader divide in perceptions on converts' ability to take leadership roles in their adopted faith. Presumably, a convert who feels that she 'owns' her faith would be more likely to remain in the faith despite experiencing difficulties due to her conversion. Do female Shi'i converts perceive themselves as having the legitimacy to define their own religious experience? Or do they feel that religious leadership must be maintained by non-converts, or by men? These questions are by no means limited to Shi'i converts; rather, they are questions shared by women of all faiths, particularly in the present era.

Since most positions of Shi'i religious leadership are held by men, the gender aspect of this question cannot be ignored. A handful of North American male converts have attended Shi'i seminaries and graduated as religious scholars, wearing the traditional turban and robe.[27] Others have obtained academic degrees in Islamic studies. Therefore, it stands to reason that the question of authority is less pertinent to male converts, who appear to enter the faith with the expectation that they can and should train themselves to take on the same leadership roles as born Muslim men.

The few women who reported taking significant leadership roles in the Shi'i community, such as being a member of a mosque board or engaging in frequent public speaking, seemed more conscious of their position as women rather than as converts, and they described taking leadership roles as an 'uphill battle' due to their gender. This

is not surprising since Shi'i women, in general, are not encouraged to take public leadership roles; one respondent called the Muslim community a 'boy's club.' Additionally, women are expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over community service. Furthermore, traditional seminary education is gender-segregated, and women do not have the access to the same educational opportunities that men do. Nonetheless, two women reported studying overseas in traditional Islamic seminaries for women, and two other women (one of whom was a single parent) reported obtaining graduate degrees in religious studies, thus suggesting that a minority of women are able and willing to make the sacrifices to accomplish these goals.

Although only a few reported taking active leadership roles in the Shi'i community, about half reported making other contributions, such as teaching weekend school or writing articles. Although less visible, these contributions indicate that these women did feel a sense of ownership of the religion and saw themselves as having the right to define their religious experience and the religious experience of others. Therefore, despite the dual obstacles of being both converts and women, most of the respondents did contribute to shaping the Shi'i community around them, thereby reinforcing their personal connection with their faith.

Online Shi'i Communities. One additional area of contribution – other than the above – was in the online Shi'i community. For instance, four women administrated Shi'i chat boards or e-mail lists. About half of the women identified themselves as participants in these groups, with a quarter indicating that they participated in online Shi'i groups more than in-person Shi'i groups.[28] Some participated online to keep up with the latest religious rulings or for social support; in particular, one respondent identified the Revert Muslims Association as a 'place of support.'[29] Others participated online because they felt rejected by local Shi'is, or were geographically isolated from other Shi'is.

Several women who had once been active online participants reported making the conscious decision to terminate their participation because they felt that online Shi'i communities fostered negativity, which then had a deleterious effect on how they interacted with other Shi'is in real life. These responses suggest that while the internet may offer some support to new converts, it cannot substitute, in the long term, for participation in a real-life religious community. However, it does provide a special forum for Shi'i convert women to obtain religious knowledge and emotional support, and to contribute to and take leadership roles in the Shi'i community without facing resistance due to their gender or their status as converts.

Self-perceptions as Women. The women were asked whether their perceptions of themselves as women had improved, worsened, or stayed the same after conversion; and how. None of the women said their perceptions of themselves had worsened. Ten of the women specifically said that their self-perceptions as women had not changed, and about half said that their self-perceptions as women had improved. Four expressed a deeper appreciation for their own femininity and said that they now felt free to express themselves as women instead of feeling pressured to downplay their femininity to compete in a man's world. Some also said that they felt more empowered as Muslim

women in the face of the oversexualization of popular culture; one called wearing the *hijab* the 'most feminist' thing she could do.

These sentiments are common among both Sunni and Shi'i female converts and are probably a contributing factor to retention in Islam among convert women in general (Haddad, 1991: 35). However, several converts who had first practiced Sunnism said that they felt that women had a more favorable position in Shi'ism and among Shi'is. For instance, one woman who had lived abroad compared the much greater freedom she experienced living in Iran (a majority Shi'i country) as opposed to Saudi Arabia (a majority Sunni country); another described abuses towards women she had seen among Sunnis. The perception of Shi'ism as being more woman-friendly may reflect a more fundamental difference between Shi'ism and Sunnism, in that in Shi'i theology, Fatimah al-Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, is revered as sinless (Thurlkill, 2008). Shi'i marriage and inheritance law is also often described as being somewhat more advantageous to women than Sunni law (Takim, 2004). That being said, a few women did cite concerns with Shi'i law pertaining to women, such as the exclusion of women from the highest level of Shi'i scholarship, the *marja'iyyah* (a restriction which most but not all Shi'i scholars agree upon), as well as concerns over Shi'i family law pertaining to divorce, child custody, polygamy, and temporary marriage; these concerns are not limited to converts (Mir-Hosseini, 2000; Haeri, 1989)! Nevertheless, overall, the respondents expressed a positive view of women in Shi'ism as well as of themselves as Shi'i women.

Identity. Several women reported that the most profound effect of their conversion on their identity was a greater sense of marginalization. In particular, Black women spoke of the pressure of adjusting to a quadruple minority status, as a minority (Blacks) within a minority (converts) within a minority (Shi'is) within a minority (Muslims) in North America. In addition to experiencing prejudice as Muslims, such as difficulty finding a job or verbal harassment due to the *hijab* – many women also experienced prejudice from Sunnis. This multi-layered minority status was specifically identified as a major stressor.

Some women responded to this challenge by taking recourse in the suffering that the Shi'i Imams faced, and in the Shi'i teaching that true believers will undergo difficulty and trials in proportion to their level of faith.[30] For instance, one respondent wrote:

> I am African American, I am a Muslim, I am a Shi'a. That pushes me into ever smaller groups and that marginalization is difficult to bear. I take refuge in my faith, though. As this faith is filled with the promise that the believers will be isolated and marginalized and we should hold on to the *thaqalayn* [Qur'an and family of the Prophet Muhammad] through these *dunyawi* [worldly] trials. (Black, American, 30s)

The religious paradigm of suffering and trial appears to allow these women to transform the difficulties associated with their conversion into an act of faith. These types of responses also indicate that converts to Shi'ism (not unlike converts to Judaism) internalize an identity as a member of an oppressed minority, a prevalent feature of Shi'i identity. For them, the social exclusion they experience may paradoxically provide a

Table 1. Age and Conversion. Note that since some respondents elected not to answer certain questions, the number of respondents on whom there is no data varies from question to question.

	Number of respondents					
Age	0–20 years	21–30 years	31–40 years	41–50 years	Over 50 years	No data
When converted to Islam (Sunnism or Shi'ism)	15	24	5	0	1	1
When converted to Shi'ism	13	23	7	0	1	2
When surveyed	3	11	21	5	5	1

form of psychological inclusion by reinforcing their identity as a member of an oppressed minority community.

Faith and Well-being. Despite the social and identity challenges associated with conversion, twenty of the respondents said that after their conversion they experienced a greater sense of well-being; only two said or implied that their overall sense of well-being had worsened. The most common reason provided for this increased sense of well-being was faith. For instance, two women who openly discussed their social challenges as Shi'is nevertheless wrote:

> I feel I am a more stable person over-all and have found great solace and release from every-day woes (marriage difficulties, fears, depression, stress) in my faith and in my practice of my beliefs. (White, American, 30s)

> I feel better knowing I can be closer to God and that I strive for a nearness to Him. (American, Latina, 30s)

For these women, the spiritual and psychological benefits of adhering to Shi'ism appear to be significant enough to outweigh the challenges of conversion.

Conclusion

From this study, it can be concluded that American and Canadian women convert to Shi'ism from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds which roughly mimic the ethnic and religious composition of America and Canada. Upon conversion, they usually experience a sense of social exclusion from both Shi'i and Sunni Muslims, and often experience difficulty learning more about their faith. Unlike female converts to Sunnism, female converts to Shi'ism cope with a multiple minority status arising from membership in several minority groups; Black women express the severest sense of marginalization. Converts cope with these challenges through assimilation to traditionally Shi'i cultures (including the learning of languages other than English); participation in female devotional practices; attending religious meetings run by Shi'i converts; participating in online Shi'i groups; expressing ownership of their faith through contributing to the Shi'i community, including – in a minority of cases – taking on leadership roles; and viewing their struggles in the broader context of being members of a historically oppressed

religious community. Last but not least, while the most significant challenges to their faith come from within the Shi'i community itself, for many converts their faith gives them the strength and optimism to persevere.

Appendix A

Sample Intellectual Conversion Narrative

I was greatly influenced by first the Qur'an . . . I read *Nahj al-Balaghah*, and was absolutely stunned by the incredible wisdom and knowledge displayed by Imam 'Ali. I also knew a bit about Sunni Islam from reading Christian books attacking Islam, so I was aware of all the conflicting, illogical *hadith* contained in *[Sahih] al-Bukhari* and *[Sahih] Muslim*.[31] I did a bit more research into both the sects before making a final decision, but certainly the Qur'an and Imam 'Ali played the two major roles in my conversion decision.

   . . . I also wanted to explore the Sunni–Shi'a rift carefully to determine who had the most reasonable interpretation. One of the books that I read was *Then I was Guided* by al-Tijani, which I found to be very eye-opening and informative, especially since al-Tijani provided numerous references to support his conclusions. I decided at that point that Shi'a Islam seemed the most logical, the most fair, and the most respectful and moral interpretation of the two. Not long after that, I began reading a Qur'an with commentary by Shi'a scholars, and was amazed by the logic, consistency, and beautiful simplicity of the Qur'an itself and of the explanations. I also very surprisingly found my numerous questions regarding Christianity and God in general being answered – in the very first chapter no less. The commentary also brought up issues that I had not even thought of at that point, and it was then that I realized that the Qur'an was the truth – there was no denying that no one but God Himself could have written it.

   I was simply amazed at how Islam perfectly synthesized itself with logic and reasoning – in Christianity, relying on logic leads away from the religion, since so much is based on emotion and blind faith alone. In Christianity, one's mind and one's faith can never coexist – logic and intellect are seen as part of our sinful nature and our inability to understand God and the religion. It's difficult to describe the great feeling of relief that I had after discovering that in Islam, as God works with the human nature he gave us, not against it! I found it incredibly relieving to be able to fully use all the skills and abilities God has given me. (White, American, 20s)

Notes

1. The authors wish to acknowledge Diana Beatty for her efforts in distributing the surveys. The authors also wish to acknowledge Jennah al-Haydari at the Revert Muslims Association, Canada, for creating an anonymous internet form for the survey and posting it on the Revert Muslims Association website <http://www.revertmuslims.com>.

2. Although, within the Muslim community, it is common to refer to converts as 'reverts,' the word 'convert' has been used here for greater clarity. A reliable estimate of the number of Muslim converts in Canada is not available. However, the Pew Research Center study, 'Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream,' estimates that 20%–42% of Muslims in the United States are African-Americans (converts or the descendants of converts). Pew

Research Center, 'Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream', 22 May 2007, p. 28 <http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>.

3. The Sunni sect is the majority sect of Islam; approximately 10%–15% of Muslims worldwide are Shi'is. The central difference between Sunnism and Shi'ism is that Shi'is hold that the Prophet Muhammad was divinely instructed to appoint 'Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor. Although Sunnis and Shi'is share many beliefs and practices, there are also significant differences in beliefs, practices, and views of Islamic history. This study solely addresses female converts to the Twelver or Ithna 'Ashari sect of Shi'ism, which is the most prevalent sect of Shi'ism. No data was received from converts to other sects of Shi'ism.

4. For instance, in *Islamic Da'wah in the West*, the author limits his discussion of Shi'i movements to a two-page discussion of the 'quite small' Shi'i groups in Virginia and Georgia, otherwise dismissing Shi'is as 'not numerous' and not welcome in certain Islamic missionary movements. Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam*, pp. 20, 101, 108–9.

5. The *Washington Post* article 'US Shiites Tentatively Make a Home in America' is representative of portrayals of the North American Shi'i community; in this article, both Shi'i community leaders and the journalist discuss the Shi'i community solely as an immigrant community learning to adjust to life in America. Rachel Zoll, 'US Shiites Tentatively Make a Home in America.' *Washington Post*, 18 January 2010.

6. The necessity of studying male and female conversion experiences separately is discussed in 'Gender and the Experience of Conversion: The Case of "Returnees" to Modern Orthodox Judaism' (Davidman and Greil, 1993) and *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* (Van Nieuwkerk, 2006: 7–10).

7. This difficulty is discussed in the survey conducted by the Pew Research Center on Muslims, which resorted to paying $50 to Muslims who would respond to their telephone survey. Pew Research Center, 'Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream,' p. 61.

8. This estimate is definitely on the lower end, since other studies suggest a population of seven million Muslims in America, about a fifth of whom identify themselves as Shi'i (Takim, 2009: 23).

9. The primary advantages of this methodology were that it was possible to sample a regionally diverse group of converts, and that some respondents may have been more forthcoming in their responses due to the anonymity offered by the internet. However, the primary disadvantage was that it excluded potential research subjects who do not use the internet or who are not fluent in English; this may have resulted in a lesser representation of lower-income research subjects, elderly research subjects, and recent immigrants. The distribution method of the survey may also have resulted in a bias towards research subjects with a significant level of dedication to their faith (that is, who elect to affiliate themselves with Shi'i mosques and/or online groups).

10. This is slightly older than the typical age of conversion to Islam found by the Pew Research Center study, which found that conversion to Islam was most common before the age of twenty-one (Pew Research Center, 2007: 22). This suggests that the theoretical explanation of religious conversion as an adolescent phenomenon cannot generally be used to model the phenomenon of conversion to Shi'ism among North American women. Similarly, Ali Köse explores and refutes this theory in detail with regards to British converts to Islam (Köse, 1996: 46–66).

11. All of the respondents who identified themselves as Catholic came from the United States, and only 10% of Muslim converts in the United States are thought to come from Catholic backgrounds (Pew Research Center, 2007).

12. However, two previously Catholic women also expressed concerns with Shi'i practices, such as seeking intercession from holy personalities, which could be seen as having parallels in Catholicism. For a greater exploration of the apparent similarities between Shi'ism and Catholicism, see James Bill and John Williams (2002); Shomali (2004); Thurlkill (2007).

13. This is in contrast to European converts to Islam, who rarely report coming from practicing Christian backgrounds (Zebiri, 2008: 44).

14. Muhammad al-Tijani al-Samawi (b. 1943) is a Tunisian Islamic scholar and enthusiastic convert from Sunnism to Shi'ism. He has penned numerous books arguing that the Shi'i sect of Islam represents the original teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Four of his books have been translated into English and have been published as *Then I was Guided*, *Ask those who Know*, *To Be with the Truthful*, and *The Shi'ah are the (Real) Ahl al-Sunnah*.

15. The main tenets of Shi'ism are referred to as the *usul al-din* and encompass belief in monotheism, divine justice, the prophets, the Imams, and life after death (Sobhani, 2001). Note that while this book has been published by the Institute of Isma'ili Studies, the book discusses Twelver Shi'ism, and the author is a well-known Twelver Shi'i scholar.

16. For a historical discussion of social justice and the spread of Islam, see Ezzati (2002: 21, 158).

17. For instance, George Jordac, an Arab Christian, wrote a book about 'Ali ibn Abi Talib called *The Voice of Human Justice* (1984).

18. Several of the respondents indicated that they held this belief as well, even though they emphasized that their own conversion was not for the sake of marriage.

19. A temporary marriage is a marriage which is contracted for a fixed period of time (for instance, a week or a year). It is considered religiously permissible in Shi'ism but not in Sunnism. However, in most Shi'i cultures, temporary marriage is looked down upon as not respectable, particularly for women. For a discussion of social attitudes towards temporary marriage, see Shahla Haeri (2002).

20. The expression that marriage is 'half of faith' is a common narration attributed to the Prophet Muhammad in numerous sources.

21. While CAIR, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and ISNA, the Islamic Society of North America, are officially non-denominational, they are essentially affiliated with the Sunni community.

22. Although, according to the Pew Research Center survey, most Shi'is in North America are of Iranian origin, twice as many respondents reported participating in predominantly Arab or South Asian rather than Iranian mosques.

23. Zebiri discusses this phenomenon in *British Muslim Converts* (Zebiri, 2008: 61).

24. For instance, an African-American Shi'i convert, Ali Abu-Talib, discusses how immigrant Shi'is opt for White rather than Black neighborhoods both as residences and for their religious work, in 'Cultural Arrogance and Ethnic Pride' (2008).

25. Hamid Dabashi discusses the influence of European colonialism on racism against Blacks in Iran, in *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: The New Press, 2008). Texts attributed to the first four centuries of Islam suggest that negative attitudes towards Africans (who, along with other peoples, were imported as slaves) were prevalent in Abbasid Iraq, which was the center of Shi'ism up until the modern era. For an example of these texts, see A. Shahrudi, *Mustadrak Safinat al-Bihar* (1405 AH, vol. 1, p. 319).

26. A *majlis* is a gathering to commemorate the martyrdom of a religious figure, usually one of the twelve Imams or Fatimah al-Zahra. A *sofreh* is an Iranian ceremony which involves reciting

prayers and sharing food (hence the name *sofreh*, meaning a tablecloth which is spread on the floor).

27. Male convert clerics who frequently provide religious services in North America and are publicly known include Shaykh Usama 'Abd al-Ghani and Shaykh Ahmad Hanif; several others are personally known to the authors. Takim discusses one of the male converts who obtained a traditional clerical education in Iran, in *Shi'ism in America* (2009: 207).

28. These figures should be viewed with some caution given that the survey was distributed online and hence more likely to reach converts active in the online Shi'i community.

29. The Revert Muslims Association, founded in Canada, is an online organization that offers emotional and material support to converts to Islam and organizes an annual in-person conference. Although it offers services to Shi'i and Sunni converts, the primary ideological focus is on Shi'ism. More information can be found at the Association's website, <http://www.revert muslims.com>. The role of the internet in Shi'i–Sunni sectarian issues is discussed in Takim, *Shi'ism in America* (2009: 120).

30. For instance, a common *hadith* (narration from the Prophet Muhammad or the Imams) attributed to the sixth Shi'i Imam, Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, reads: 'Verily, it is mentioned in the Book of 'Ali that of all mankind the prophets undergo the severest of trials, and after them the *awsiya'* [the Prophets' successors], and after them the elect to the extent of their nobility. Indeed, the believer undergoes trial in proportion to his good deeds. So one whose faith is sound and whose deeds are good, his trials are also more severe. That is indeed because God Almighty did not make this world a place for rewarding the believer and punishing the unbeliever. And one whose faith is feeble and whose (good) deeds are few faces fewer tribulations. Verily, tribulations hasten towards the believer with greater speed than rainwater towards the earth's depths.' For a discussion of this *hadith* and this idea in general, see the discussion of the sixteenth *hadith* in Imam Ruhullah al-Musawi al-Khumayni, *Forty Hadith: An Exposition on 40 Ahadith Narrated through the Prophet[s] and his* Ahl al-Bayt*[s]*, trans. M. Qara'i and A. Qara'i (n.d.).

31. *Nahj al-Balaghah* (lit. *The Peak of Eloquence*) is a 10th-century collection of speeches, letters, and sayings attributed to Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Shi'i Imam and the fourth of the Sunni 'rightly guided caliphs.' *Sahih Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim* are the two most prominent Sunni collections of the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad.

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