



Coping with a New Liminal Life: White Converts to Islam.

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Abstract

This paper investigates the post-conversion coping strategies of ten White converts to Islam in a predominantly Canadian context. The participants were interviewed in 2023 using a semi-structured interview guide. There are very few studies of Canadian converts to Islam, and none that look at coping strategies. Following Pargament, I do a thematic analysis of the data and investigate the participants' religious and non-religious coping strategies of the stressors resulting from their conversion to Islam. White converts sit at an illuminating nexus of "race" and religion in Canada – their whiteness makes them part of the dominant majority, but their Muslimness excludes them. White converts, especially women who wear hijab, experience racialisation and discrimination after conversion. They are both welcomed and distrusted by a Muslim community that, due to their experiences of European colonisation, laud and dislikes Whiteness. The main coping strategies mentioned by the participants are religious, advocacy, and avoidance. A typical strategy of social support was less commonly mentioned due to their post-conversion experiences of being estranged from their family and friends and difficulties settling into Muslim communities.

Bio:

Dr. Katherine Bullock is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto at Mississauga. Her teaching focus is political Islam from a global perspective, and her research focuses on Muslims in Canada, their history, contemporary lived experiences, Islamophobia, political and civic engagement, debates on the veil, media representations of Islam and Muslims, and Muslim perspectives on zakat and Basic Income.

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Keywords:

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1. Introduction

For a country whose first officially recorded Muslims were most likely converts from Scotland (Hamdani 1997), there is surprisingly little scholarly work on Canadian converts to Islam.¹ (“Officially recorded” because before that there is not much documentation of the African Muslims trafficked to Canada in the slave trade (Jackson-Best 2019).) There are a handful of published studies, some of which are graduate theses, and all published after 2010. Scholarship on Muslims in Canada is disproportionately focused on contemporary questions of immigration, integration/assimilation, Islamophobia, women’s dress, and radicalisation (Barras, Selby and Adrian 2022, 13). The miniscule academic literature on Canadian converts has similar foci: investigating Muslim converts who become violent extremists (converts are disturbingly overrepresented in this (Flower 2013, Flower and Birkett 2014; Schuurman, Grol and Flower 2016; Sulijica and Wilner 2021)); questions related to Muslim women’s identity vis-à-vis the West (Mossiere 2016) or hijab (Mossière 2019). Two master’s theses look at why women convert to Islam (Hemlow 2011; Sentse 2012). One PhD investigates converts’ use of information in the pre- and post-conversion journey (Guzik 2017).

¹ Note that while some in the Muslim community argue that the proper term is “revert” not convert, based on the notion that all human beings are born Muslim (*fitra*), most of the interviewees either did not have a strong opinion, or preferred the standard English word to describe changing religions, “convert.”

This article explores the post-conversion coping strategies of White² converts to Islam in a predominantly Canadian context. The post 9/11 era launched the so-called “War on Terror” that singled out Muslims as a security threat. It has been well documented that after 9/11, Muslims in Canada (and other Western countries) experienced anti-Muslim racism in all arenas: rising hate crimes and hate incidents, harassment in public places, discrimination at school, work and healthcare settings, and bias in media and political discourse (Zine 2022). In fact, such anti-Muslim prejudice in Canada pre-dates 9/11. Immigrants from the Ottoman empire, arriving at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were considered “Asiatics” and restricted under the Whites-only Canada immigration policies that lasted until the 1960s (Asal 2020). Turks were labelled in World War One “enemy aliens” and shipped to internment camps in Ontario (Asal 2020, 20). Asal (2020, 78) documents the early activism of Christian and Muslim Arabs fighting these discriminatory policies.

Converts to Islam come from all ethnic and religious backgrounds; I have met atheist, agnostic, Black, Chinese, Christian Arab, Hindu, Indigenous, Japanese and Sikh converts to Islam. I am interested in this study in White converts because they sit at an illuminating nexus of “race” and religion in post-Christian, multicultural Canada. White converts have a unique position in Canadian society, which in spite of multi-ethnic diversity, is still a White-dominant society (Statistics Canada 2022). White converts’ “White” classification makes them part of the majority, but after conversion they are often racialised and experience anti-Muslim discrimination (Alam 2018; Casey 2021a; Franks 2000; Moosavi 2015). Some are called a “race traitor” (Guimond 2017; Jakku 2018; Zebiri 2011).

² I capitalise White, as we capitalise other ethnic or national groups, to signal White as an ethnic group and not a norm, which is the implication of ‘white’ in lowercase letters.

On the other hand, Muslim communities often celebrate White converts (and not Black converts who must deal with anti-Black racism from fellow Muslims)³ (Moosavi 2015). Whiteness is lauded, in part because Muslims have internalised colonial racial hierarchies that viewed the White European as superior (Moosavi 2015). But due to this same colonial experience, Muslims also look upon Whites, including White converts, with distrust, even hate (Casey 2021b; Galonnier 2015b; Moosavi 2015). Post 9/11 security agencies' infiltration of communities by alleged White converts to Islam have ravaged communities and made White people claiming to be Muslim converts suspect. So, White converts to Islam lead an Islamic lifestyle on the edges of both being Muslim and being White.

Many Westerners are baffled when someone converts to Islam. Yet, in this paper, I do not focus on explaining *why* people convert to Islam; there are many such studies, even if next to nothing for Canada (van Nieuwkerk 2006). I am interested in *what* that choice has meant for them. And more specifically, how they cope with what comes at them because of their choice. Coping is a word with specific meanings, which I will explain in Section Two, where I go over the conceptual framework for this study. Suffice it to say here that there are very few studies that include coping strategies as part of an inquiry into Western converts' experiences (Galonnier 2015b; Guimond 2017).

This, then, is a pioneering inquiry that brings together the sociology and psychology of being a White Muslim convert. My research is based on qualitative interviews that explore how White converts cope with reactions to their conversion from their families,

³ The Muslim world has its own pre-European history of anti-Black prejudice. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) spoke out against his companions when they discriminated against their fellow Black Muslims (Brown 2024).

friends, workplace and the wider society, and their positive or negative coping strategies. Qualitative interviews are never meant to stand in as a representative sample of a group. Similar to, yet distinct from, autobiography, biography, oral history and memoir, qualitative interviews bring the human experience to life. They allow us to glimpse the variety and nuances of being human from the point of view of the group of interest: in this case, White converts to Islam.

I begin with a brief look at the concept of coping, followed by a description of my research method. I move to a brief exposition of reactions to their conversion, from family, friends, the workplace, wider society, and subsequent Muslim community pressures. Section 5 considers their coping strategies to what the foregoing reveals.

2. Conceptual Framework: Coping

While in everyday language we use the word “cope” or “coping” to mean how someone handled something difficult, the term “coping” is used in the mental health profession with domain-specific meanings that are connected to patient diagnosis and treatment. The American Psychological Association defines coping as: “the use of cognitive and behavioral strategies to manage the demands of a situation when these are appraised as taxing or exceeding one’s resources or to reduce the negative emotions and conflict caused by stress” (APA 2018).

Algorani and Gupta (2023) point out that “coping” actions are conscious strategies, distinguished from subconscious or unconscious responses. Coping strategies can be positive (comfort from family/friends, solace from religiosity, asserting one’s identity, increased civic or political engagement), or negative (isolating, hiding one’s identity). Medical research establishes that positive coping strategies are connected to mental and physical well-being;

negative coping strategies are connected to the opposite – poor mental and physical well-being (Algorani and Gupta 2023).

While some might say that there are as many coping strategies as there are people, in fact, across people there are similar strategies to stressors, and it is possible to group them thematically. I come at this, not as a medical professional, but as a scholar who has learnt the importance of thinking about coping. I do not use psychological medical assessment scales, nor examine “coping” from the same point of view as a mental health expert. I use “coping,” albeit in a non-technical way, to talk about how my participants coped with the irritants that came to them due to their becoming Muslim. I ask how it made a person think and feel, and what they did or did not do in response.

The Qur’an, Sunnah, ahadith and Muslim intellectual inquiry all have important teachings about coping. Verses in the Qur’an instruct Muslims what to say when they feel overcome by tragedy (2:156), dispirited (94:5-6) or overwhelmed (2:286). One verse teaches: “The true servants of the Most Compassionate are those who walk on the earth humbly, and when the foolish address them improperly, they only respond with peace (25:63).” The Sunnah and hadith guide Muslims on what to do or say when they feel stressed, distressed, angry, jealous, sad, even happy (e.g. sit down when you feel angry; no matter what happens, good or bad, say “*Alhamdulillah ala kulli haal* - All praise and thanks are for Allah in all circumstances.”) Jurists dissect the diseases of the heart, such as pride or arrogance, and give guidance drawn from the Qur’an and Sunnah on how to cope with such feelings. Muslims rely on these verses, sunnahs, ahadith and scholarly wisdoms to counsel each other through hardship. The totality of this gives us an Islamic religion that, while theologically centred around the worship of the One Creator, in human relationships is centred around coping: how to think, speak and behave as a person of piety, while managing

the world that is full of trials and tribulations. As Gai Eaton, a British diplomat and writer who had converted to Islam in 1951 (Telegraph 2010), wrote:

The tense and delicate balance between the glory of Muhammad's prophethood, his closeness to God and his visionary gifts, the Herculean tasks he undertook and accomplished in the world, and the warmth and liveliness of his household is at the heart of the Muslim view of life; if this is understood, Islam is understood (Eaton 1985, 123).

Because of Islam's traditions around coping, I borrow a conceptual framework to study people's coping strategies from psychologist of religion, Kenneth Pargament. Pargament developed a concept called "religious coping" based on research that showed that religion "represents a significant dimension of life that stands on its own ground" (Pargament and Abu Raiya, 758). While Western psychology, as a discipline with roots in a secular and non-religious worldview (Haque 2024), had often overlooked religious coping, or explained it away as involving "more basic processes" (Pargament and Abu Raiya, 758), Pargament and others found that "[r]eligious beliefs, attitudes and practices are essential ingredients of the daily functioning of many individuals" (Pargament and Abu Raiya, 745). These scholars have concluded that there is both positive and negative religious coping (seeking spiritual support vs God punishing). Connections to mental health outcomes are complicated and vary between different religions (Pargament and Abu Raiya, 175). Some studies show a clear connection between positive religious coping and mental health, others not (Pargament and Abu Raiya, 748). All this turns on the concept of God and how the person utilises religion as a coping response. In addition, research into coping shows responses that are defined as "non-religious" coping. These would include, in a non-exhaustive list: avoidance, civic and political activism, comedy, professional help, rationalization, resignation and social support systems (Abu-Ras and Abu-Bader, 2008; Abu-Raiya, Pargament and Mahoney, 2011;

Balaghi, Oka, and Andrews 2021). Obviously, these too can have positive and negative mental health outcomes.

Investigating Muslims and Islamic religious coping is a nascent field, with only a handful of such studies, especially in Canada (Abu Khalaf et al, 2023; Abu-Raiya, Pargament and Mahoney, 2011; Adam and Ward, 2016, Elkassem et al, 2018.) Many of these scholars are connected to psychology. Their work is linked to mental health outcomes, and they are interested in proposing better therapies based on their research. This study, of coping strategies of White converts to Islam, must stop before that. My aim here is to find out in narrative format how my participants said they coped with the strains that were related to their conversion. Mental health professionals can use this qualitative work to inform the development of diagnosis and therapy. My contribution is to acknowledge how crucial this topic is and to make a small input through qualitative interviews.

White converts have unique challenges that are similar to, but distinct from, those born Muslim and growing up in a Western country. In the Canadian context, the greater percentage of Muslims are immigrants, or the children of immigrants (Statistics Canada 2022b), who experience immigration related stressors, such as language and employment barriers, culture shock and adaptation, and Islamophobia. Inter-ethnic marriages are difficult at any time, but inter-ethnic marriages between a born Muslim and a White convert have an added layer of strain. Many White Muslims report their “Muslimness” is never fully accepted in Muslim communities (Casey 2021b; Moosavi 2015).

Not all converts face migration-related irritants. But all Muslims, White or not, convert or not, experience Islamophobia, and must cope with it. All converts face Islamophobia from their families and the wider society; after their conversion White converts experience racism for the first time in their life. There is a consensus in the scholarly literature, especially from the medical sector, that “experiencing [racism] is associated with

negative health outcomes such as depression, anxiety and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder” (Abu-Ras and Suarez 2009, 48). Islamophobia is a form of racism. From a literature review on Islamophobia and coping we can see the traumatic emotional impact Muslims, convert or not, experience when managing racist experiences. An incomplete list includes: anxiety; anger; avoidance; burden of representation; depression; exhaustion; fear; hide identity; isolation; low self-esteem; sadness; and shame (Bullock 2023).

3. Method

This research is based on qualitative interviews with 10 White converts to Islam. I aimed for five male and five female participants. In keeping with the statistics that suggest more women than men convert to Islam, it was harder to find male interviewees (van Nieuwkerk 2006). I ended up with six female and four male interviewees. The call for participants was circulated to my Muslim contacts and found its way to WhatsApp groups. My initial aim was to interview Canadian converts, as there is little published on that population. Responses to the call for participation included those who had some ties to Canada, but live in the US, or who had grown up overseas and now live in Canada, or who had grown up in Canada but spent time abroad where they became interested in Islam. I expanded my scope to include their voices. Worldwide research on post-conversion racialised experiences for White converts demonstrate similarities in spite of country-context that supports my expanded scope (Alam 2018; Galonnier 2015a; Jakku 2018; Górak-Sosnowska et al 2023). All but one of the participants now lives in Canada. They came from a variety of religious and non-religious heritages, including atheism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Asian religious traditions. They come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds: English, Irish, Italian, French, Pennsylvania Dutch (German) and Scottish.

The interviews were held via Zoom, based on a semi-structured interview prompt guide that allowed me to ask similar questions to the participants. They lasted between one to two hours. Even though my focus was not on why they had converted to Islam, we began with that story. We moved into questions about how they had told their family, friends and workplaces, and what the reactions were from those groups. We talked about lifestyle changes becoming Muslim had brought. We covered reactions from the Muslim community. I asked questions about their sense of identity in relation to being Canadian. We explored their thoughts on being White and what role they thought it played (if any) in reactions to their conversion both from the non-Muslim and Muslim communities. We talked about how they coped or not with the multitude of reactions, if they had specific coping strategies or not. I asked them for advice for Muslim communities on how to help converts. I spoke to the interviewees between July and September 2023, just before the Hamas attack on Israel that led to Israel's destruction of Gaza. (Some interviewees responded to a follow-up email sharing the extent to which the conflict had affected family, friend and workplace relations.) The interviews were transcribed and coded thematically in three initial rounds that each time allowed more and more granular understanding. The writing process and simultaneous reading of relevant literature allowed for more reflection and analysis.

I was able to establish good rapport and trust with my interviewees. As a hijab-wearing White convert to Islam myself, I was able to connect to their experiences, even though we are all unique and have different life trajectories. I was able to ask follow-up questions and prompts based on my experiences with the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. I believe my insider positionality helped establish trust. (I have been a research assistant on a study of converts run by a non-Muslim and found it hard to sign people up.) I aimed to establish a non-judgemental space of respect. Many times the interviewees found themselves telling me things they perhaps had not planned to. They

would say “I hope this is anonymous” or “I don’t know why I am telling you this” or remark how the interview felt like a good therapy session. I am honoured by their trust and indebted to their generosity in sharing their stories. The participants are de-identified as much as possible; the names used in this study are pseudonyms. Sometimes the date they converted follows their name in brackets, to place them in socio-political context, even though the era they converted does not seem to have made much difference to how people around them reacted. The quotations from the interviews have been left verbatim apart from some minor edits now and then to remove duplicate or filler words that are part of normal everyday speech.

4. Becoming Muslim and the Aftermath

Space does not permit a fulsome explication of the participants’ conversion journeys and the post-conversion reactions of family, friends, workplace and wider society. In brief, all the study’s participants were convinced by Islam and adopted its practices as a way of life. They found, in Callum’s (1956) words, Islam “appealed to me...I liked [its] approach.” Becoming Muslim was not done on a whim, but after careful study; they all spent time studying Islam before making their decision: Aaron (2021) spent about one year, Liam (1992) five, and Mary (2019), though she was married to a Muslim, ten.

Conversion is, obviously, a life changing event. White converts to Islam cope with stressors from multiple fronts related to their conversion. In the North American context, Islam is considered the antithesis of Western values, a foreign religion in which the men oppress women and are violent and anti-Western. In such a milieu, telling family and friends that you have become Muslim is not easy. While some report “accepting” or “supportive” families, friends and workplace, others report negative reactions. They have unexpected difficulties with family, from unspoken tensions to being disowned by some family members.

Traditional family celebrations around Christmas and Easter become awkward if they want to go, but exchange gifts on a different day, not go at all, or go, but not eat because the day falls in the middle of Ramadan. They have been dropped by many friends.

Becoming Muslim “confiscates” their Whiteness (Moosavi 2015, 1921). Many experience discrimination, usually for the first time in their lives. This racialisation pushes them out of a community they were once part of. They experience a shift at work and in society, from friendly to unfriendly atmospheres, from chatting with strangers to being ignored or yelled at. This is especially so for the women who adopt the hijab. Of the women interviewed, five of the six now wear hijab. They all recount stories of suddenly experiencing street harassment, such as nasty looks or verbal abuse, being ignored by workers in government offices, banks and grocery stores, and poor treatment from clients. They talk about being seen as a foreigner, as permanent residents and not citizens, with people assuming they do not speak English or understand Canadian society, or that their husbands treat them poorly. All this is in line with the experiences of other Muslim women in Canada (Kennedy-Turner et al 2023). A unique racism the participants have to cope with is accusations of being a “race traitor” (Zara (1983), Sofia (1994) and Viviana (2010)).

There is always a difference between Text (what scripture says) and Context (what people do). The Qur’an itself instructs that converts should be integrated immediately as full members: “The believers are but brothers, so make settlement between your brothers. (49:10).” Yet, White converts are celebrated but not necessarily integrated into Muslim communities (Alam 2018; Franks 2000; Galonnier 2015b). Guzik (2017, 137) recounts from one of her interviewees: “The popular saying among converts is, ‘Thank God I met Islam before I met Muslims.’” Rowena and Liam echoed this when talking about positive and negative reactions from Muslims. White converts struggle to fit into cultural traditions, cooking, dress and habits. Some are pressured to change their names. Their White skin

makes them stick out in many Muslim communities, including those they marry into. Many drew attention to this sense of not fitting in properly anywhere, “I feel like I’m on the edge of everything (Mary 2019).” Rowena and her convert friends used to sit together and wonder about which country they could move to where they would “fit in” as White Muslims – a liminal life, as Zara called it.

5. Coping With a Liminal Life

We all face stressors throughout the day. Sometimes we do not cope with everything that comes at us: emotional responses to an incident end with crying, feeling depressed, demoralized and the like, with no follow-up coping strategy. We just move on and live our lives, these negative encounters trembling beneath the surface. One participant talked about having an emotional breakdown from all the new stressors since becoming Muslim. Another reflected how there was no support for converts, constantly feeling alone and overwhelmed, “I don’t really know that I had any strategies. I don’t even know how I got through those days half the time.” Another said simply, “time heals all wounds, they say, so I mean [the nasty incident] was 20 years ago.”

Sometimes we do have strategies. We draw on a range of responses that are both negative or positive in contributing to our wellbeing. When I asked, “how did you cope with that?” participants shared a variety of responses. Not everyone had necessarily reflected so explicitly on how they “cope.” Callum responded when I asked if he had any specific coping mechanisms, “[mechanism] is kind of formalized...”

Following Pargament and Abu Raiya (2007), I have divided the participants’ responses into religious and non-religious coping. Non-religious coping is further subdivided into (in rough order of descending mentions): Advocacy; Avoidance; Social Support; and Other. This is surely an incomplete list. We cannot suppose that in a short interview, focused on a topic they had not necessarily reflected deeply on, they mentioned everything.

People never use only one strategy for all circumstances, so depending on the situation, the respondents used several of the below strategies. We have to separate their narratives into these categories to make it easier to understand, but they are not always so separate in reality.

5.1 Religious Coping

Not surprisingly, for ten people who became Muslim out of conviction, one of the most common coping strategies mentioned was a turn to faith. Anna (2020) mentioned reciting specific scriptural verses to help her process an event or negative feelings. Liam (1992) said he remembers that if you walk one step to God, He walks ten steps to you. Viviana (2010) shared that she cannot emphasise enough “the degree to which the Qur’an has been a coping tool.” She says “the Qur’an is like everything for me, you know. It brings me back to my purpose, my understanding...a place where I’m radically seen,” the Qur’an is a “total solace” and “soothes” her.

Aaron (2021) counsels patience in the face of tribulations. He self-reflects on his own faults to try and improve. He recalls God’s omnipotence, the Disposer of all Affairs, telling himself that the incident is part of God’s plan for him, which he tries to accept as what is best for him at that moment in time.

[after an unpleasant incident] I just love myself, you know. I’ll cry. I’ll have a good cry...and then it’s okay, you know, because it’s like, not a leaf falls but that He knows of it...I believe that everything is exactly where He wills it to be. (Aaron 2021)

Aaron’s eyes watered up with tears at one point in the interview. He was explaining that growing up he had not had many good male role models and how emotional it has been for him to feel camaraderie with Muslim men: “I have never experienced the love and the kindness that I experience from Muslim men.” He was moved to see his male Muslim teacher once shed a tear when the teacher spoke of his own teacher. We talked about how

unusual it is in North American culture for men to be open about crying, how crying is usually seen as a sign of male weakness. Aaron commented that men crying is “part of the Sunnah” and one of the things he loves about “our tradition.”

Callum (1956) and Zakaria (1971) connected coping strategies to their sense of self as a Muslim.

[I have] always insisted on being who I am. And people need to know that, if it’s gonna be issue. So...I’ll be who I am.” (Callum 1956)

“I don’t know how to answer that question. Well. Mentally. I identified so much as Muslim, and I was so engaged in Muslim affairs.” (Zakaria 1971)

Psychologists of religion who study religious coping have found mixed results for its positive effects on psychological symptoms. Yet they conclude that over the long term, religious coping is a positive coping strategy because it is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction (Adam and Ward 2016). My interviews confirm what has been mentioned above, that religion is an important dimension of some people’s lives. There is a timeless aspect here too: from Callum in 1956 to Aaron in 2021, faith appeals to people as a coping strategy, and Islam provides guidance for such coping.

5.2 Non-Religious Coping

5.2.1 Advocacy

Three different forms of coping responses were common amongst these participants that I consider to be part of the concept of advocacy: self-advocacy; pre-emptive talk; and activism. Self-advocacy means to stand up for oneself. Many participants shared stories of speaking back when encountering anti-Muslim racism. Pre-emptive talk describes situations,

where based on experience, the convert knows what is going to come up, and speaks out to stop or deflect it. Activism is to attempt to bring social or political change. Many participants were involved in efforts to create projects to aid Muslims or to counter negative stereotypes. Activism encompasses self-advocacy and pre-emptive talk too. This is especially so for the women in hijab, who retort when insulted in public, as way to stop the perpetrator from abusing another Muslim woman after her.

One female participant shared, “Sometimes you’ll answer back just to see their reaction. Especially back home like you, you react and tell them, if they tell you to go back to your own sodding country, and then you reply in your best accent, This is my sodding country.” Callum remembered scolding a taxi driver who had made racist comments about a bi-racial couple he saw on the street, without looking to see who was sitting in his back seat. “I got out, and I said, the next time you kind of say that kind of thing you should look around to see who your passengers are. Cause [my South Asian wife] was wearing a sari...I don’t know what he said, but I tried to teach him a lesson in a sense, and say, pay attention, you know. Don’t be like that. And I don’t know whether that worked or not.”

Sofia wore niqab for over twenty years and experienced a lot of verbal abuse in public places. When she was verbally abused in public, she used to return like for like.

At the moment I would get angry, and I would go at them verbally, and I would be more abusive than they were with me...And my arguments were sound, but I knew that the only language they would listen to is the Canadian voice. So, as they would swear at me, I would swear at them, and I would put them in their place and say stupid things like, my family immigrated in 1812, when did yours immigrate? You’re from Poland, I’m from Scotland, I think I’m whiter than you, like, What is your problem?

Sofia spoke up partly out of concern for immigrant Muslim women who might not have the same courage to speak out:

My point of being aggressive and abusive was next time they see a Muslim woman, they're not going to come at her, or because they had to deal with a biting wolverine right? And I didn't want them to do that to an immigrant woman who would take that to heart, and it would really hurt her and shock her. (Sofia)

Likewise, Rowena remembers a conversation she had with another Muslim woman who suggested she should not answer back to street harassment because of a common Muslim community interpretation that modesty for women (covering their *awrah*) included not speaking in front of men. Rowena disputed that, "No, I told my friend, you can't allow people to step on you...[If you do not defend yourself now] you're paving the road for [him to get away with it for] the next Muslim woman...One day it's going to be our daughters." Sofia and Rowena's self-advocacy blurred into activism for Muslim women, Rowena particularly concerned for the future of her four daughters.

Blending self-advocacy and faith, Sofia narrates an interesting switch in strategy, perhaps adapting to the point of view mentioned by Rowena's friend above. After three years, she decided her abusive retorts were actually damaging her faith, her *haya* (modest character) and soft speech. She thought she was leaving herself open to violent reactions, especially from men (who were the ones she would "go at" if they swore at her or called her names, not women). She did not want her children "to go through the trauma of watching their mother get beat up." So, she decided to be "quiet." She decided to leave punishment in the hands of God: "Allah will deal with them...[let the] angels deal with them."

Viviana also blended self-advocacy and faith. She mentioned how she reflected on her intentions in talking back, to make sure they were for the sake of God, and nothing else. She wanted to be talking "from a Dawa perspective" not a "defensive perspective." She was

concerned to show that she was not a “victim,” and that Islam confers honour and dignity on a human being:

This isn't about protecting myself. It's about helping that person understand the *izza* [honour] that comes from Islam. They're in need of something. I'm not a victim. I wanted them to know that that it isn't something I'm like enduring or bearing. It's something I'm dignified by.

Pre-emptive speech was common, especially for the hijab wearing converts. People assume they are foreign, do not speak or understand English or are uneducated. The participants found themselves recognising behaviours and trying to cut them off by speaking first, or by sharing information about themselves to show they were not like what their interlocutor assumed. Rowena describes how she jumps in quickly before things “escalated” to let the person know she understand and is “Canadian... I just throw out the information just to shut them down as fast as possible.”

Mary (2019) recalls being forced into pre-emptive behaviour at work, which was hard for her because she is “a very quiet, introverted person.” She had not told anyone she had become Muslim (and was not wearing hijab then). A colleague saw her making *wudu* (ablution for prayer) in the bathroom. Mary overheard that colleague tell someone that Mary was doing “something weird in the bathroom.” She felt obliged to tell them, and then walk around and tell others in the company, even though she was not ready to, that she had become Muslim. When she did start wearing hijab, she also “did a walk through the office. Just so if people saw me and had any questions, I just wanted to get it out.” In retrospect, she is not sure why she did that. “Nobody said anything ... I mean, honestly, I don't quite understand why I did it, because if I was questioned, I don't know how I would have answered...because even now I struggle to answer.”

Civic and political engagement is a common coping response (Balaghi et al 2021). Several converts mentioned such activities. Callum and Sofia talked about using their Whiteness as a useful bridge to the (typically majority White) audience in information sessions about Islam and Muslims. They believed that whereas the audience might not respond to an immigrant Muslim's discourse about Islam, thinking it was something connected to foreigners, people would listen more attentively to them as a White Canadian convert. Callum, Liam and Viviana talked about using writing, be it newspaper articles, books, or social media posts as tools for correcting negative stereotypes of Islam.

Some aspects of Viviana and Sofia's activism can be also seen as a form of religious coping. They discussed how they consciously try to help other women converts through the difficult post-conversion journey by creating or being part of religious study circles. Sofia attends *halaqas* (study circles) intended for converts, "to be a support for the new ones." Viviana tries to create safe spaces, be it personal or educational, where attendees can be "unapologetically" Muslim. She says having such spaces where she can "at home in my Islam" have been a crucial part of her own coping and she works so that other Muslim women can have the same "safety...solace, and that connection, particularly with the Qur'an, as their own kind of coping tool."

Another coping strategy is self-education, which is part of both pre-emptive talk and activism: participants educated themselves about Islam, so they could understand it better, but also, to answer common questions their families, friends or work colleagues. Rowena sent books to her parents and found that it helped soften her parent's negative reactions over time. Yet, Zakaria says trying to engage his parents in conversation about Islam led nowhere, "they never listened." Viviana spent time researching answers to common stereotypical answers about Islam and how to reply. Participants have used multiple advocacy strategies, many of which evolved over the course of their post-conversion life.

5.3 Avoidance

Avoidance is a common coping response (Bullock 2024). I use it here as a broad category to capture three distinct coping styles: avoid, as in keep away from; assimilation, as in, avoid conflict with majority norms; and not take things personally, as in purposely refrain from responding. Sometimes people engage and speak back. Other times they avoid. As Zara, who sometimes speaks back to people, said, “most of the time I just want to hide, and I’d be like, why can’t people leave me to go about my business? You know. Why? Why does it matter what I look like [in hijab]?”

Rowena talked about how over the last twenty years she has tried many strategies, few of which have brought peace. She is now fed up with “trying to open up people’s eyes, making people realize you can be White and Muslim,” and “pull[s] back into her cocoon.” She analyses people she spends time with. If they make her “feel good...inspired,” she will see them again. And if they do not, she does not.

Callum did something similar after an ideological falling out with his regular mosque that led to him leaving a meeting in tears and not returning for “many, many years.” Viviana left her sports team before telling them that she had become Muslim because the team members were “openly hateful and racist sometimes;” she was “hesitant to tell them so I...just left the team instead.” Liam left his (non-Muslim) workplace after experiencing a covert anti-Muslim environment and worked in Muslim organisations for a time. He later had to struggle to return to a non-Muslim workplace after an ideological falling out with his Muslim workplace that left him very bitter with the Muslim community, “it was terrible. And to think that Muslims had done this to me.” He now steers clear of Muslim workplaces.

Avoidance includes more involved coping responses, such as moving countries. Zara (1983) left her country and moved to Canada to avoid the hate she was experiencing in her town. And Aaron (2021) plans to move to Muslim country to avoid dealing with anti-

Muslim issues he expects to face; he had not yet told his workplace he had become Muslim, because he “does not want to deal with” what he expects to be a covert anti-Muslim response.

5.3.1. Assimilation

Assimilation is to pre-empt anticipated negative reactions from the wider society by adopting majority customs or habits. It could be put above under pre-emptive strategy, but it belongs under the heading of avoidance, because it is a kind of forestalling that entails actively negating (avoiding) oneself, as a form of coping. Muslim women especially often feel that they have to represent Islam well in public, so they discipline themselves in speech, behaviour and dress. That is, they avoid showing their true selves. They are careful not to get angry in public, always to be polite “super patient...not reactive” (Viviana), and to assimilate in clothing as best they can. Other scholars call this coping response overcompensation (Khan 2021), the burden of representation (Zine 2022), the management of the self (Mason-Bish and Zempi 2018), or reactive identity formation (Nagra 2017). It is a form of avoidance that applies more to the women in hijab than the others (woman not in hijab or male). The women in hijab will choose dominant Canadian clothing styles and add a headscarf. They are careful in fabric and colour choice, avoid “ethnic clothing” and dark colours, opting for light colours, pastels, and pretty prints (Bullock 2024). This is a common coping strategy for Muslim women across Western countries and applies to my interviewees as well.

Some scholars argue the face itself is a mask (Edkins 2016), and it can be said that all members of society constrain themselves in specific ways in public: control one’s temper at work or wear certain attire, and the like. The difference here is that while non-compliance to majoritarian norms might bring a stain to one’s reputation, it will not cast one out from the right to be “Canadian.” Whereas non-compliance from Muslims will. The same dynamic

affects Black women who must straighten their natural hair to be considered “professional” (Ball (n.d.)).

Mary, a recent convert (2019), carefully chooses her outfits, emphasising a “nice, professional” colour coordinated look that avoids “dark colours.” Rowena (1983) talked about how she had become used to wearing skirts, dresses and *abayas* but thought the harassment she was experiencing would go away if she could “assimilate somehow” her clothing. She decided to try wearing pants: “I believed that wearing pants I would fit in somehow... I thought if I dressed more Canadian with my hijab on, I would feel better.” But the hijab itself is a mark of being foreign, so she learnt that wearing pants “didn’t change anything.” Fitting in is more than dress. This was confirmed when she attended her grandfather’s funeral and, to the family’s consternation, refused to drink alcohol at the wake. Now she says she does not care about people’s reactions anymore and goes swimming in a burkini even if people are staring at her. Yet she still feels that she must be “a really good representation of Islam to them.” She still feels that she “purposely must promote a certain image to make them allow me into their space because I’m Muslim,” but she chooses behaviour and speech management over dress. She is “friendly,” “cordial” and aims to make them “smile within a couple of seconds” of talking to them. “It’s very purposeful...I break down those borders really fast... to make people...drop down their scaredness...I break down those walls.” She says if she cannot get them to smile within the first few seconds, “It’s them. It’s not me.”

The men spoke less about this kind of assimilative behaviour. None of my male interviewees made a habit of wearing “ethnic” clothing, such as a thobe, kufi or shalwar kameez in public, though they might at home or for special occasions like Eid. As White men wearing “typical” Canadian clothing, then, there is nothing to mark them as Muslim, unless they themselves spoke about it, or did something visible, like pray. The same applies

to the one female convert who was not wearing hijab. She herself recognised that she might be avoiding wearing hijab out of fear of the negative reactions. She knew as a White woman, “I’m not visible...I can sneak around, but wearing the hijab, you’re giving up a little bit of that [privilege].” This, obviously, is not an option for non-White Muslims; here is an instance of a White convert leaning into their privilege as an avoidant coping response (Moosavi 2015).

5.3.2. Not Taking Things Personally

Not taking things personally, either because they really do not care, or they school themselves not to, was another common form of coping. Some people have a character that is less easy to offend, but it can be an avoidance strategy – choosing not to engage. Several participants mentioned being “easy going,” not taking things “personally” or “ignoring” verbal insults or rude behaviour. Zara says she ignores it when her brother tries to “wind [her] up” by eating bacon in front of her and “telling me how yummy it is.” If it is someone from outside the family, she tells herself to “ignore it, and you just think, oh, God! That person’s a jerk! But you try not to let it get to you.” Rowena notes that she wants her children to see her handle racism well, otherwise “why are your children going to choose that life?” Liam says he deals with covert racism by “persevering and not doing anything in retribution.” Sofia uses a strategy she developed in grade school: “disarming” those who insult her with laughter. She explains that laughter makes that person “weaponless.”

[Laughter] leaves a deeper wound than anger or hurt...when they use their weapon against me. And I just laughed. What are they going to do next? The only step they have left is violence. And violence is fine. That’s where they want to go, because now, with violence there’s a chargeable offense.”

She says that her laughter is real, “a belly laugh,” because she finds it “hilarious that what they think is important at this moment is to try to hurt me.”

Aaron connects not taking things personally with his spiritual life. He says he “came to the religion with a very intimate experience of God,” (he was already 33 years old) so “external” experiences do not shake him. He relied on this capability to overlook an incident in which while taking his shoes off in a mosque, a congregant lunged at Aaron, thinking he had a gun. He apologised and Aaron “laughed it off.” Similarly, Callum overlooks and accept jokes from his friends when they ask him if he “has a bomb” with him. He tells them to “go to hell, or something like that, or some other useful words men use among their friends. And there’s no problem.” We can linger here for a moment to reflect that Callum became Muslim in 1956, and even then, Canadians were mocking about Muslim men carrying bombs.

Overlooking, ignoring, being easy going and not taking things personally as a form of avoidance can be a positive coping strategy, especially if personal safety is involved. But if avoidance involves repressing emotions, not dealing with the emotions or the situation, or being passively resigned, it can become a negative coping strategy (Balaghi et al 2021, 10).

5. 4 Social Support

Turning to family and friends for emotional support and guidance are usually important coping strategies (Adam and Ward 2016). As we have seen above, the participants in this study experienced difficulties with family and long-time friends after becoming Muslim. What do you do when there are tensions at home, and your friend circle is gone?

Some participants were fortunate to find other convert groups or fellow Muslims who welcomed accepted them into their circles. In the middle of telling me how he coped, Aaron suddenly grinned and said: “mashallah, my wife just walked by and gave me a big smile. I really, that’s how I cope.” Mary also mentioned talking with her husband was one of her

important ways to cope. But she, like many others, also remarked how hard it has been for her to find Muslim women friends, or a support system for converts in her local mosque or community. She turned instead to online groups tailored for converts for her social support.

Some interviewees pointed out that being new to the faith, they felt shy going to the mosque, uncertain of how one should behave there, or unsure about how to perform prayer or wear hijab. And feeling abandoned by Muslims after the initial celebration is a common complaint amongst converts. As Zara said,

Everybody's happy...[when you convert]. The after-sale service sucks...They would invite me places...And then you'd sit there for 3 hours [while they spoke in their language], and apart from "Salam alaikum, how are you?" nobody would say a darn word to you. (Zara 1983)

Aaron (2021) who emphasised that "most brothers [Muslim men in the community] are incredibly sweet and kind;" and tried to "make 72 excuses," and self-reflect "maybe that is my Caucasian like sensitivities," yet he narrated difficulties in feeling welcomed in some mosques and feeling abandoned after he converted, "it felt like once I became Muslim they lost interest, but they were just like, Oh, our job is done...Figure the rest out. Google it, you know."

More than thirty years span the responses of Zara and Aaron. It is clear that while some masjids in big cities might have a "new Muslim care" programme, in general converts are still left to their own devices to struggle through the lifestyle changes and tensions becoming Muslim brings. This contributes to their sense of living on the "edge" of the non-Muslim and Muslim communities.

5.5 Other

Faith, different types of advocacy and avoidance were the most frequently mentioned coping strategies in my interviews with these ten converts. There were idiosyncratic mentions of hobbies, such as watching old episodes of the US sitcom “Everybody Loves Raymond” (“I’ll just laugh [the racist incident] off”), or conducting Chinese Kung Fu tea ceremonies (“my happy place.”) Surely other participants have such hobbies, they just did not think to mention them. Only one person mention seeking professional therapy as a coping tool, and it is possible that others do also but did not say out of the stigma often attached to seeking mental health counselling. Two participants mentioned reporting a neighbour’s aggressive anti-Muslim racism to the police, but both said it had not helped much. One participant had reported a colleague to their boss, although the boss promised to talk to the perpetrator, there were “no consequences.” One participant had reported their employer for anti-Muslim discrimination to the province’s Human Rights Commission but found it “was crazy place to deal with...I didn’t think they were very good at all the way they I had to deal with them.” Being disappointed with an ineffective reporting process for addressing anti-Muslim racism at work and in society is a complaint captured in other studies that look at Muslims and Islamophobia (Bullock 2024).

6. Conclusion

This paper has been a pioneering examination of the coping strategies of ten converts to Islam in a predominantly Canadian context. While mental health professionals work with therapies to assist those who come to them cope with life’s stressors, a new field connecting coping to religious strategies has emerged in the last couple of decades. The field is now moving to include non-Christian experiences. My research has introduced the narratives of six women and four men, who embraced Islam in the years between 1956 and 2021. We looked briefly as their conversion process, the reactions from family, friends and wider

society, and then at Muslim community pressures. The interviews show that while converts face Islamophobia as does any other Muslim, White converts experience this as a new strain in their life. Converting to Islam racialises them. The paper focused on religious coping and non-religious strategies, where we learnt how important their faith is to them in navigating post-conversion life. We found out that they turn to common coping strategies, such as faith, advocacy and avoidance. We saw that a common recourse of turning to friends and family is harder for them, given the loss for many of them of close bonds with family and friends, and a Muslim community uneven in its welcome. This push-push experience led many to feel they lived on the edges of both communities.

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