
Learning Faith and Facing Race: White Converts to Islam in France and the United States

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Résumé

Victoria is a 29 year-old white woman who works as a nanny in the city of Saint-Louis. Raised in a strict Protestant household, she decided to convert to Islam six years ago as a result of a long spiritual quest. Victoria now wears the headscarf and describes herself as a "happy Muslim woman." She acknowledges, however, that her racial status has changed upon her conversion. In the week preceding our interview, someone on the street called her a "sand nigger," a racial slur that, as a white person, she had previously little been exposed to. In general, she explains being perceived as an anomalous person, whose racial and religious identities are deemed discordant. She says: *"It's funny when people try to figure me out. Because they want to put me in a nice neat little box, like 'oh, you are Arab. You are an Arab Muslim.'* So when people do find out that I am just a white American, they can't quite grasp that. They are like "well... are you sure???" Victoria, therefore, does not fit into most people's mental frames, who associate Islam with certain ethno-racial features.

The present paper focuses on white converts to Islam as anomalous individuals in a world where race and faith have become closely intertwined. While Islam is primarily a religious identity, it has become associated with race over the centuries. Apart from being perceived as a violent and oppressive religion, it has also been constructed as a Brown, foreign and non-Western faith, as religious hostility progressively mapped onto racial differences. Thus, the figure of the "Muslim" combines a number of characteristics that admittedly include belief, but also national origin, ethnicity, culture and skin color. White converts to Islam, however, do not fit into common-sense expectations about Islam. They break the association between "Muslimness" and "foreignness." I consider that, by breaching ethno-religious expectations, converts actually shed light on their normative meaning and enduring character.

Thus, white converts offer a "perspective by incongruity" that is particularly useful to investigate the conundrum of race and faith. Using in-depth interviewing and ethnography, I analyze how white converts to Islam relate to their dissonant religious and racial identities in national contexts (France and the United States) where Islam has been racialized. Taking seriously their stories and narratives, I examine white converts' experiences of racialization and try to understand how they face race while learning faith. I also explore the strategies they use to maneuver racial assignments and defuse racial tensions. The methodical comparison of the rhetorical devices used by converts to make sense of their anomalous identity enables me to shed light on the different textures and contents of Islam's racialization in France and the United States. These two countries are particularly interesting to compare since they

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both have a troubled relationship with Islam and are host to a fast-growing number of Muslim converts, yet they also offer two distinct models of secularism and are characterized by different racial stratification systems. This paper demonstrates that the different historical paths the racialization of Islam has taken in the two countries differently effect the way white Muslim converts relate to their new religious identity.

Mots-Clés: converts, Islam, racialization, whiteness, international comparison, France, United States