Merging Islamic Piety and 'Modernity': A Case Study of Female Converts to Islam in Colorado

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1 Introduction

The spread of conversion to Islam in the U.S. is a phenomenon of the late twentieth century and has continued rapidly to the present with women constituting the largest number of converts (Badran 2006, Nieuwkerk 2006, inter alia). Furthermore, researchers argue that conversion to Islam in the U.S. has risen significantly after the events of September 11, 2001 (Jansen 2006, Wohlrab-Sahr 2006, Nieuwkerk 2006), despite a political climate of increasing suspicion and hostility towards Muslims among sections of the Western, non-Muslim population and the U.S. news media (Said 1997, Karim 2003, Asad 1993, inter alia). This paper is inspired by these claims and is part of my larger research on how the discourse practices of female converts to Islam in the Muslim Student Association[1] (MSA henceforth) at the University of Colorado at Boulder shed light on this phenomenon. Norms of discourse in this community of practice provide an alternative view to what is presented in the media and arise in tandem and in opposition to negative media portrayals of Muslims in the U.S..

The discourse of the MSA is positioned within larger and apparent contradictory discourses in the U.S. media: (1) promotion of a 'secular,' 'modern,' and 'feminist' ideology; (2) criticism of a political or patriarchic Islam that denies rights to women; (3)

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[1] The MSA is the largest and most influential Islamic student organization in the U.S. and Canada. It was established in 1963 at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and currently has 600 chapters on university campuses throughout the U.S. and Canada. The individual university chapters have a loose connection and the policies of each organization may differ from others, depending on the religious and political views of the officers. An overarching common goal of the chapters is to educate the members about practicing Islam as a way of life (http://www.msanational.org/).

heightened hostility towards Islam in the wake of September 11, 2001, culminating in negative media stereotypes of Muslims; and (4) affirmation of Islam as a legitimate way of life in the U.S. on part of Muslim organizations, such as the MSA. The goal of the MSA is to fight negative media stereotypes about Muslims and to counter discrimination. The members criticize associations of the umbrella term 'Islam' with militancy or terrorism, and of 'Muslim woman' with passivity, submission, and patriarchic oppression. The women and the group seek to strengthen relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims and rely on the Qur'an, the holy book of Muslims, and the Hadith, the sayings of the prophet Muhammad, for resources to show an amiable and peaceful image of Islamic practice in the U.S..

This paper is a small excursion into how these political tensions emerge in the discourse of two recent converts to Islam, Tamara and Kathryn[2], who are both Caucasian Americans in their early 20s and active members of the MSA. I present excerpts of narratives I collected from them in personal interviews and in the weekly general meetings of the MSA[3]. In chapter two of the paper I analyze how the women construct Islamic piety through utilizing religious language and codeswitching to Arabic, which displays a tight ideological connection to the Qur'an and to Islam, as well as to other Muslims. I examine the discursive functions of *insha'Allah*[4] "if God wills", *masha'Allah*[5] "as God has willed", and *alhamdulillah*[6] "all praise be to God". I specifically focus on *insha'allah* as an index of Islamic piety, as a communicative strategy, as a bearer of language ideologies, and as a community-building linguistic tool. These phrases gain currency through their Qur'anic reference and usage within the group. They are part of constructing the women's identity as pious Muslims.

In chapter three of the paper I show how the women reframe this Islamic piety metacommunicatively by presenting their interpretation of Islam as 'modern' and 'progressive'. This discursive tactic delegitimizes negative media stereotypes of Islam as 'backwards' and 'oppressive'. The women authorize Islam as rational and practical, which is in line with secular Western values. Consequently, the women's identity formation as Muslim women and their piety are not straightforward alignments to a specific Islamic orientation or to an embracing of 'traditional Islam': the narratives are the sites of negotiating tensions between 'secularism' and 'religion', and between 'modernity' and 'tradition' as projected by the media. This negotiation constitutes a multilayered,

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[2] The names have changed to protect their anonymity

[3] These meetings are the central collective event for members of the MSA and visitors. The meetings usually start and end with prayer. The members welcome newcomers and introduce them to the repertoire of Islamic social practices. They discuss events and issues centered on the Islamic world.

[4] *Insha'allah*, "if God wills," is listed in the Surat Al Kahf 18: 24 of the Qur'an and is defined as "determining to do something in the future should always be attributed to the Will of Allah, Who is the Knower of the Unseen and Who Alone Knows what was and what is yet to happen and what is not to be" (http://www.ahya.org/amm/modules.php?name=Sections&op=viewarticle&artid=149)

[5] *Masha'allah*, "as God has willed," is listed in the Surat Al Kahf 18: 39, and is defined as "used when admiring or praising something or someone, in recognition that all good things come from God and are blessings from Him" (http://islam.about.com/od/glossary/g/mashallah.htm)

[6] *Alhamdulillah,* "all praise be to God," is listed in Surat Ibrahim 14:7 and Surat al-Zumar 39:75, and is defined as "all thanks are due purely to Allah, alone, not any of the objects that are being worshipped instead of Him, nor any of His creation" (http://www.tafsir.com/default.asp?sid=1&tid=305).

continuous process where a shared Islamic and U.S. culture emerges. Thus, religious language gains currency not only through indexing the Qur'an, but also through interpreting these values as compatible with or even superior to U.S. secular social values.

2 Constructing Islamic Piety through Religious Language

2.1 The Functions of "Religious Language"

Researchers have long pointed to difficulties in defining the functions of religious language in an analytically coherent or universal way (Asad 1993, Keane 1997, inter alia) and stress that religious language has to be analyzed contextually and historically. Using religious language involves "tensions between transcendence and the situated nature of practices, with implications for the nature of agency and belief" (Keane 1997: 47). According to Csordas (1997), who investigates ritual and charisma in religious movements, each religious group resolves these tensions differently and has a paradigm for an ideal communicative relationship among the participants and God in ritual performance, which finds its meaning in repetition. The members of the MSA establish a relationship with God through religious language in group prayer, amongst others. God is spoken to as an intangible participant and experienced concretely. The *du'a* "supplication, prayer", for instance, is conducted at the beginning of the meeting and believers ask for God's blessings. The converts are participants of these prayers and learn 'proper' verbal accounts of Islamic practice in the group.

In addition, using religious language often "shifts control over speech from the individual speaker, who is bodily present at the moment of speaking, to some spatially or temporally more distant agent (Csordas 1997, Keane 1997). Keane (1997) in his synthesis on research on religious language argues that there appears to be a "personal volition disclaimer" (51), which implies that speakers apparently give up individual agency in favor of obeying God. Furthermore, "by restricting imputed intentionality to only one component of the communicative event, divination allows people to avoid responsibility for what is said" (Keane 1997: 57). However, in what follows I show that the women access various ideologies to lend strength to their usage of religious language and to their argument in general. I show how religious language transcends the boundaries of ritual events like prayers and, as Csordas (1998) shows, bleeds over into the sphere of everyday conversations and functions as a communicative resource.

2.2 Religious Language as a Communicative Strategy

In everyday discourse religious language exhibits a specialized and highly marked vocabulary, which contrasts with the vocabulary of conversational English (Keane 1997). In general, the textual features include "the use of a ritual register (different lexical items for the same words in colloquial and ritual speech), archaistic elements (including words and grammatical forms that speakers believe to be archaic), elements borrowed from other languages, …" (51-2). As seen below in excerpt one, the Arabic words *alhamdulliah, masha'allah,* and *insha'allah* are used as a ritual register since they constitute an abrupt shift from the conversational American-English register to Arabic religious language rooted the Qur'an. Kathryn praises the MSA Westzone conference in Utah she visited with her friends. She sees it as blessing that she was able to go (lines 2-4) and praises God for having a good time (5). She repeatedly emphasizes that she was inspired (5-9), which she

supports repeatedly by the emphatic 'really' (4-9). This strengthens the truth of her message. Kathryn also uses *alhamdulliah* (1 and 5) indicating that it was God's will that Kathryn and her friends went to the conference in Utah. In similar vein, *masha'allah* (8) indicates praise and emphases the truth and validity of the statement's message. The term *insha'allah* (11) is used to indicate that God is in control for the outcome of future actions: Kathryn wishes that the MSA in Colorado would hold a conference like the one held in Utah (10-12).

> (1) Kathryn describes the MSA Westzone conference in Utah:
> 1 me: ↑, and Tamara, and Ayman, ***alhamdulillah***,
> 2 we had the opportunity to go to the: Westzone conference↑
> 3 over spring break↑
> 4 and I <u>rea:lly</u> wish ( ) > the whole MSA was there and been blessed <
> 5 cause it was a rea:lly, like, a <u>rea:lly</u> nice time, ***alhamdulillah***,
> 6 and the Muslim community there is a <u>rea::lly</u>, like, inspiring community,
> 7 they are really nice.
>   …
> 8 and they put on < a <u>REA:::</u>lly great conference, ***masha'allah***,>
> 9 and, ahm, <u>WE</u> were like <u>rea:</u>lly inspired by it
> 10 and we're thinking that, you know, maybe,
> 11 that in the future, ***insha'allah***,
> 12 the MSA could put on something like this, it was rea:lly great↓.

In expert two, Kathryn continues her praise of the conference and describes how she learned that good intentions are an essential condition for profitable outcomes (13-17). She conveys the benefit and urgency of this realization to her friends in the MSA in Colorado (18-20) and tries to inspire them, with God's help (21), to pass this purity of intentions on to other people (21-24).

> (2) Kathryn talks about *ichlas* "sincerity in your intentions":
> 13 if you don't have any good intentions↑
> 14 it's like > it's not gonna to <u>pro</u>fit you at all <
> 15 you are gonna, you're gonna be POOR
> 16 you're not going do anything,
> 17 <u>any</u>thing to show for yourself
> 18 so, I just wanted to en<u>cour</u>age everybody
> 19 I just wanted to say what, what was given to me
> 20 at that conference and <u>give</u> it to everybody else (1.0)
> 21 and ***insha'allah***, I hope that all of you guys
> 22 <u>give</u> it to somebody else
> 23 and if anything I hope that everybody tries to
> 24 have that <u>***ICH***</u>*las* that purity of intention.

Both occurrences of *insha'allah* above show that the meaning of the term in discourse is more extensive than indexing the Qur'an. The terms exhibit Islamic piety and a Muslim identity that extends to the group level: the Arabic terms are understood by the audience, which helps Kathryn in persuading the audience about the messages she tries to convey. Nazzal (2005), who investigates the usage of *insha'allah* in various conversations of

Muslims in the U.S. and in Egypt, points to a plethora of motivations for Muslims to recite Qur'anic verses in ordinary discourse. *Insha'allah*, he writes, can have diverse pragmatic functions, such as mitigating one's commitments for carrying out a future action, a confirmation of the participants' religious, cultural, and linguistic identities, or a "rhetorical strategy for indirect persuasion to lend credibility to the claims they wish their prospective audiences to act upon" (251). As shown above, the latter two are true for this data set. The phrases achieve their transformative effect through the communicative competence of all the participants, which are aware of the discursive goals of the speakers.

I now show how this communicative competence is achieved through a shared knowledge about ideologies associated with the phrases.

2.3 Religious Language and Language Ideologies

In general, language ideologies are culturally specific assumptions about the relations between language form and function (Woolard 1998), which produce communicate effects in its own right (Keane 1997). Qur'anic Arabic is ideologically associated with purity since it is considered the sacred code of the Qur'an and since the Qur'an is believed to be the literal word of God, recorded by the prophet Muhammad (Suleiman 2003, Haeri 2003, inter alia). This claim to original prophecy has great weight since the prophet's words "bear divine authority as utterances of God's appointed" (Keane 1997: 61). Both Tamara and Kathryn on several occasions stated that speaking Arabic and reading the Qur'an in Arabic are some of their highest goals in becoming Muslims. Arabic expresses 'genuine' religious belonging.

Consequently, the women *authenticate*, to use Bucholtz & Hall's (2005) term, Islam as 'real' and 'true': they access the symbolic power that rests in this connection to the Qur'an and to God and give God all the credit for successful outcomes. At the same time, they *denaturalize* (ibid.) a secular interpretation of events that stresses the outcome as an individual's achievement. A*uthentication* and *denaturalization* (ibid.) then have moral consequences: those who customarily use religious language "may themselves be credited with essential qualities of refinement or sacredness" (Keane 1997: 53). Irvine and Gal (2000) point to the semiotic process of *iconization*, through which language ideologies perform cultural work. In iconization, the ideological ties between form and social meaning are seen as a reflection of the essential characteristics of its users. For both Kathryn and Tamara, acquiring God's instructions on believers and the characteristics of the prophet Muhammad is desirable and only possible through reading the Qur'an in Arabic.

I now turn to the effects of using religious language on the community. As Bauman and Briggs (1990) write, the effects of switching languages "can heighten attention to competing languages and varieties to such an extent that identities, social relations, and the constitution of the community itself become open to negotiation" (63). The dynamic relationship between Arabic and conversational English, and their ideological implications, circulates through the community and brings about transformation in religious identities on a group level (Rambo 1999).

2.4 Building Community

The Qur'anic phrases gain communicative competence in context, since they are repeatedly *entextualized* and *contextualized* (Bauman & Briggs 1990). Although

originating in the Qur'an, they are extractable, which means that they are repeatedly lifted out of interactional settings to be entextualized in new ones, carrying with them associated, historical meanings (Bakhtin 1981, Bauman and Briggs 1990, inter alia). These historical meanings are shaped both through ideologies rooted in the Qur'an and through everyday usage in the MSA. As Bauman and Briggs (1990) write, "contextualization involves an active process of negotiation in which participants reflexively examine the discourse as it is emerging, embedding assessments of its structure and significance in the speech itself (69).

This is categorized by Bakhtin (1981) as reported speech, which is an appropriation of another's words and a transformation of the original act. Bakhtin (1981) claims that "one may bring about fundamental changes even in another's utterance accurately quoted" (340). Fragments of discourse are never fully authored by the speaker. Instead, each fragment has its own social history, whose meanings are created and changed in relation to speakers' voices in previous dialogues. The Qur'anic verses are picked up from larger structures of discourse that circulates within the group and each transformation adds or subtracts meaning from the previous, depending on the intentions of the speaker. Consequently, as Nazzal (2005) claims, religious language acts as a social conduit "to exert some influence on each other's attitude and behavior" (259-260). Members of the MSA understand every subtle difference of how and to what end the Qur'anic verses are used and consequently they accept the type of discursive action carried out. The usage of these phrases builds group specific norms in terms of religious performance in the community. As Mannheim & Tedlock (1995) illustrate both language and culture, as shared systems, become emergent properties of dialogues at a specific social, political, and historical moment.

There is "an interpretive frame within which messages being communicated are to be understood" (Bauman 1975: 292). This interpretative frame assigns new meanings to familiar elements depending on context and on how the function of a text in a particular situation is recognized by the audience. In what follows I show how interpretative frames are shaped by broader forces, namely by general ideologies of how Islam should be practiced and how it should be presented to a non-Muslim audience. The women reshape the backdrop for the Islamic ideology indexed by the religious language. Bauman & Briggs (1990) call this process of reshaping *framing*, which is "the metacommunicative management of the recontextualized text" (75).

3 Reshaping the Conception of Islamic Ritual

The construction of Islamic piety through employing religious language, or religious rituals in general, does not render the rituals as an a priori fixed representation of a religious practice or a past tradition. In her discussion on ritual behavior of new pious Muslim women movements in Egypt, Mahmood (2004) claims that past rituals are not an "unchanging set of cultural prescriptions that stand in contrast to what is changing, contemporary, or modern" (115-6). Instead, the women take up norms imposed by the contemporary media and oppose them. They exchange the de-humanized picture of the oppressed woman without any rights with a liberated version of Islamic womanhood. Tamara, for instance, defends Islam by overturning negative media images of Islam as being aggressive to women by pointing to the caring Islamic community within the MSA and to superior Islamic family values. This fact that Muslim women often base their identity on Islamic community and family values seems to contrast "with dominant

'modern values' such as individual performance, and personal perseverance" (Nieuwkerk 2006: 9). However, Kathryn stresses individuality and autonomy by emphasizing that Muslim women choose to veil because they wish to obey God, and not men. On various points during an interview, she explains that Islam opens possibilities for her because, as she claims, the Qur'an is practical and rational, and "God only wants what is good for you."

In excerpt three below Kathryn diffuses the stereotype that women are oppressed or ashamed by veiling and that they are controlled by their husbands. She delegitimizes criticism by Western women who do not veil, implying that their lack of experience in veiling makes them ignorant (lines 1-7). With that discursive tactic, she dissimilates herself from her interpretation of 'Western women.' She relates the neglect to acknowledge piety as incentive for veiling to cultural misunderstandings (5). Furthermore, she opposes various stereotypes about veiling to show that Muslim women are not ashamed of themselves (8) and they do not veil only to please their husbands (9). Her choice of language is a repetitive parallel structure (8-12), pointing to her discontent for the content expressed.

(3) Kathryn opposes oppression through Islam:
1   We:ll↑, I <u>think</u> that (1.0) a lot of W-Western women, maybe,
2   ahm, >for example like my mom< ((laughs))
3   I think that they sometimes they don't <u>understa::nd</u>
4   WHY:: Muslim women veil.
5   And I think the <u>bi::ggest</u> misunderstanding is
6   that a lot of women who, you know, <u>don't </u>cover their hair
7   think that, that <u>Muslim</u> women do it
8   because they are <u>ashamed</u>↑
9   or because they are forced to by their <u>husband</u>↑
10   or because they are subservient to <u>men</u>↑
11   or because men can't control <u>themselves</u>↑ ((smiles))
12   or things <u>like</u> this.

Kathryn legitimizes Islamic piety by appropriating the ritual of veiling to a new situation. She uses the symbols projected as oppressive in the media, such as veiling or submission of a woman to her husband and authorizes them as liberating. By adamantly asserting her autonomy, she opposes the assigned symbolic value of oppression. This serves as a form of resistance to the dominant authority on their representations – the media.

Similarly, Tamara emphasizes that being Muslims and being veiled gives her and her friends great happiness (lines 1 and 2, except 4). She points out that America is an ideal place to wear the hijab (4-6), so aligning herself with claims to freedom and autonomy. She also refers to the 'right' reasons for wearing the hijab (7), which is that you do it for yourself (11), which points to individuality and is compatible with liberal U.S. values. Like Kathryn, Tamara repeats the stereotypes of oppression (8-10), and overtly negates them by repeating her claim of being happy (12). She also imitates and ridicules imaginary Western women in quoted speech, who might claim that Muslim women miss "letting sun into their hair" (14-16).

(4) Tamara argues for wearing the hijab for the right reasons:
1   I would say "we are <u>happy</u>,
2   we are <u>so::</u> <u>ha:ppy</u>, ((smiles))
3   we are <u>doing</u> what we <u>want</u> to do".
4   I <u>think</u>↑ America is one of the <u>be:st</u> places
5   that you <u>ca::n</u> be a Muslim
6   and you <u>ca:n</u> wear the hijab↑
7   because (1.0) you (1.0) **do it for the right reasons**.
8   You are not doing it because you're like forced to
9   or because, you know, it's like the tradition
10   or family or something,
11   you do it for yourself, ( )
12   so, I think, I you say that we are happy,
13   we are not oppressed,
14   we are not like going "ohhh", you know,
15   "I wish I could let the <u>su:n</u> in my <u>hai:r</u>
16   and blah blah blah", and like

Both women constructs the ritual of veiling within realms of rightness and high virtue, which gives them the moral ground to inspire both Muslims and non-Muslims. Both Kathryn and Tamara claim moral authority over their present lives as Muslims. According to Ochs & Capp (2001), "tellers strive to represent themselves as decent, ethical persons who pursue the moral high road in contrast to other protagonists in their narratives" (284). Since moral judgments are open to moral accountability and evaluation, the women appeal to a common understanding about the values and freedom they associate with Islam. In that sense, identity politics cannot be analyzed "outside of the ethical and political conditions within which such acts acquire their particular meaning" (Mahmood 2004:9).

4 Discussion

In sum, both women establish a frame of indexical connections that range from small-scale, religious references, such as the usage of *alhamdulliah*, *masha'allah,* and *insha'allah,* to national issues on stereotyping Muslims. The media stereotypes about Muslim women establish a discursive field, which involves both the Islamic 'Other' in the form of oppressed Muslim women and the panacea to the women's apparent oppression: the 'modern' and 'progressive' U.S. way of life, at service to rescue and liberate the 'Muslim woman.' However, the women show that their version of Islamic piety is compatible with both Islamic orthodoxy and progressive secular and liberal principles. They construct the Qur'an as rational, helpful, sufficient, and empowering, in short, as a vehicle for liberty and freedom, which are terms that gain currency in secular discourse in the U.S. This discursive move is, as Nieuwkerk (2006) notes, a "modernist interpretation of Islam, with a message of rationality…" (6).

Furthermore, applying scriptures in everyday life is not a straightforward recontextualization of the old into the new. Instead, as Ayubi (1991) observes, these applications of scriptures are "in reality new improvised formulations" (156) and "even when the original 'scripture' is invoked and when the old jurists are quoted, the methodology applied is highly selective, and the concepts assembled are then radically reconstructed" (156). Hirschkind (1997) in his research on 'political' Islam shows that

"the success of even a conservative project to preserve a traditional form of personal piety will depend on its ability to engage with the legal, bureaucratic, disciplinary and technological resources of modern power that shape contemporary societies" (15). This traditional form of piety is shaped in the discourse of the MSA and, since it embodies a defense to negative media stereotypes, provides the women with a suitable discourse on Islam and on gender. The women use this framework to criticize media conceptions about them. They reassign values to Islamic rituals that speak to contemporary events and preconceptions. Autonomy and self-expression, thus, take a different turn: the women embrace their freedom of choice in accordance with the liberal U.S. framework, but they use Islamic ritual to establish it.

The outcome is a hybrid discourse, or a U.S.-Islamic discourse, that allows converts to reconcile these apparent conflicting societal demands regarding their religion. With this reference to U.S. values they also tap into the power held by politically dominant groups to claim some of the status associated with the West. In that sense, there is not a straightforward categorization of Islam versus modernity. Claims to 'modernity' and 'religious tradition', in Nieuwkerk's (2006) words, need to be analyzed as intertwined and not as binaries on opposite poles. Mahmood (2004) writes that "viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility [of pious Muslim women] from a progressive point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment (15). What I have shown is not so much the nature of the religious versus the secular, but how elements of both, Islamic religious language and appeals to secular Western values, are constructed and employed for communicative effectiveness in a specific cultural context, the MSA meetings. The women use both piety and rationality to conquer the hegemony they experience through negative stereotypes in the media. In that sense, it is a non-'liberal' movement that nevertheless uses the 'liberal' framework to construct autonomy.

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Transcription Conventions

↑	up arrow indicates rising intonation
:::	colons indicate stretching of the preceding sound
> <	talk between the "greater than" and "less than" symbol is faster
< >	this stretch of talk is slower
(1.5)	number in parentheses indicate silence in estimated seconds
(( ))	conversational information
wo<u>rd</u>	underlining indicates stress or emphasis on a word or parts of a word
WORD	upper case letters indicate loudness
word	my emphasis in the transcript
word	Arabic word

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