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Embracing Islam in Switzerland: (Re-)Conversion Between Searching for the Meaning of Life and Social Ties

MICHAEL NOLLERT and **AMIR SHEIKHZADEGAN**

Abstract

The pioneer conversion model of Lofland and Stark suggests that people adopt a religion because experiences in their biography motivate them to seek answers regarding the purpose of life, and because they encounter followers of a religion that happens to provide them with convincing answers.[1] We draw on the Lofland-Stark model while considering Lofland's and Skonovd's concept of conversion motifs to gain a deeper insight into the convert's story of adopting a new faith.[2] Furthermore, we integrate Paloutzian's concept of spiritual transformation[3] into our theoretical framework to cover both conversion and reconversion (reversion). Against this conceptual background and applying a combination of narrative-autobiographical interviews with qualitative network analysis, we interviewed 24 converts and reconverts in Switzerland. Based on the findings, we propose a typology along the dimensions of "seeking answers" and "social contacts".

1. Introduction

Islam does not have a long tradition in Switzerland. The first mosque was opened in Zurich in 1963 by the Ahmadiyya community. Since the 1990s, waves of Muslim migrants, particularly triggered by the inter-ethnic wars in former Yugoslavia, increased the percentage of Muslims in Switzerland to 5.5% (approx. 391,700) in 2019. Although Switzerland is usually known for its high quality of life and good human rights record, its

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reputation has lost ground, especially in Islamic countries, since the 2009 vote to ban minarets in the country.[4] Despite this skepticism about Islam, this religion has surprisingly not lost its appeal to the Swiss people, and conversion to Islam has not faded away.

Why and how people convert to another religion is the subject of various disciplines. Being a topic of interest in Christian theology for centuries, at the end of the nineteenth century, psychologists sought the reasons for conversion in a "negative psychological state".[5] This approach was challenged in the second half of the twentieth century by a new paradigm which favored a sociological understanding of conversion.[6] Following the latter path, researchers have, among others, shown that the decision to convert can be traced back either to the life events of the convert—such as turning points that confront the individual with existential questions—or to convert's contacts with members of the new religious community, or to both of these factors combined.[7]

While conversion research was originally focused on Christian denominations or New Religious Movements in the Christian tradition, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in New York, conversion to Islam also entered into the spotlight of the sociology of religion. The present study contributes to the latter tradition by focusing on the Swiss context. Furthermore, by addressing the negligence of other forms of *spiritual transformation*[8] in the scholarship on conversion, it also includes *reconversion* or *reversion*, in the sense of the re-embracement of a neglected faith by the so-called *born-again* Muslims.[9]

In the following sections, we first outline the theoretical framework of our research. We then discuss the previous empirical research, describe our methodological approach and delineate a typology we have constructed based on the analysis of our data. We then exemplify the five types of our typology by selected portraits of our interviewees. Finally, we compare our typology with those proposed by other scholars followed by some concluding remarks.

2. Conversion Between Life Experiences and Social Ties

Generally speaking, the theoretical discourse on religious conversion has shifted from the classical passive paradigm to the modern active one.[10] The *passive* paradigm conceived conversion—similar to Saul's vision on the road to Damascus—as a sudden change of faith imposed on an individual by forces that lie outside of his/her influence—an irreversible event that radically changes the convert's worldview. Mostly shaped by psychology, this paradigm focuses on intra-individual psychological processes (such as acute mental crises). For instance, William James regarded conversion as the result of a "sick soul"[11]; and Sigmund Freud argued that "people accepted religion because of built-in human weaknesses".[12] Furthermore, this paradigm was based on the assumption that conversion arises from an emotional state of mind rather than from rational contemplations.

In the *modern* paradigm, converts are regarded as active individuals that voluntarily decide to adopt a new faith. Concerning the intra-individual factors, this perspective sees conversion as a gradual transformation consciously sought by the individual based on rational considerations, as a response to his/her unanswered questions of meaning and purpose of life.

Lofland and Stark[13] proposed a so-called *process model* according to which religious conversion goes through the following phases:

(1) Experiencing "enduring, acutely felt tensions";
(2) Believing that these tensions have a religious solution; a belief that leads the individual to define oneself as a "religious seeker";

(3) Encountering a religious community "at a turning point" of one's life;

(4) Forming an affective bond with one or more members of that community, while one's attachments outside that community are either absent or neutralized;

(5) Intensive interaction with the members of that community (to proceed from verbal to "total" conversion).[14]

Lofland's and Stark's process model has been an inspiration for similar theories.[15] Beyond the passive/active debate, some scholars have advocated a social constructivist approach to conversion accounts.[16]

Another strand of theory focused on the motifs of converts. Thus, Lofland and Skonovd proposed a typology of *conversion motifs*. Defining the latter as "salient thematic elements and key experiences combined with objective situations",[17] the authors took into account both the subjective experience of the convert and the situational factors of conversion. Therefore, "motif" means more than just the psychological *motive* for an action. It rather implies a short- to long-term experience that underlies the decision to convert: Thus, the authors speak of "motif experiences" as

> those aspects of a conversion which are most memorable and orienting to the person "doing" or "undergoing" personal transformation—aspects that provide a tone to the event, its pointedness in time, its positive or negative affective content, and the like.

The authors identified six motifs of conversion:

Intellectual, driven by questions about the ultimate sense of life: Individuals find their answers in a religious tradition.

Mystical, as a result of a sudden fascination

Experimental, in the sense of *trying* a new religion

Affectional, as a result of positive affective bonds to the members of the target religion

Revivalist, in the sense of becoming a fundamentalist in the same religious tradition

Coercive, as a result of becoming brainwashed.

The authors also assumed that the level of social pressure (to convert) respectively the lack of agency increases from the motif 1 to 6.

In a study that makes explicit reference to Muslim converts, Stefano Allievi[18] similarly distinguished between *rational* and *relational* conversions. While the former stem from an intellectual urge on the part of the convert, the latter are the result of social ties to Muslims. Allievi further divides rational conversions into *mystical*, *intellectual* and *political*, and relational conversions into *instrumental* and *non-instrumental*. Instrumental conversions are those that come about through marriage to a person of Muslim faith, and non-instrumental conversions refer to those that are stimulated by other forms of relationship with Muslims.

Combining Lofland's and Stark's motifs with the two dimensions of agency (*passive* versus *active*) and the level of analysis (*intra-individual* versus *inter-individual*), Kilbourne and Richardson proposed a matrix that assigns conversion motifs to four meta-theoretical approaches adopted in the studies of conversion:[19]

(1) The motif *intellectual* crosses the active and intra-individual dimensions and is anchored in what the authors call "some variant of *humanistic theory*";

(2) The motifs *mystical* and *affectional* cross the intra-individual and passive dimensions and underpin psychological determinism often illustrated by "Saul's conversion";

(3) The motif *experimental* crosses the active and inter-individual dimensions, reminding thus of sociological interactionism (role theory, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology);

(4) The *revivalist* and *coercive* motifs finally cross the inter-individual and passive dimensions and are characterized as "social-environmental determinism" (9) that includes socialization and deprivation theories as well as structural network models.[20]

Finally, some scholars have advocated a multi-level approach to conversion, which would go beyond the micro- and meso-levels to also consider the contextual factors at the societal level such as privatization of religion, postmodernity, etc.[21] In sum, the diverse theoretical debate suggests that to understand the reasons for religious conversion one should consider (a) critical biographical events, that prompt the search for the meaning and purpose of life, (b) social contacts of the converts with the members of the target, religious community, (c) the contextual factors, and (d) social constructivist effects.

3.   Research on Muslim (Re-)Converts' Life Experiences and Social Ties

The vast research on conversion cannot be reviewed here. We, therefore, sketch qualitative and quantitative studies that consider motifs of (re-)conversion to Islam as anchored in Muslim (re-)converts' life experiences and social ties. Köse and Loewenthal assessed in a study of conversion to Islam in the United Kingdom the distribution of Lofland's and Skonovd's motifs among Muslim converts.[22] The most frequent conversion motifs were *intellectual* (searching for a meaning of life), *experimental* (trying Muslim codes of practice), and *affectional* (positive feelings towards Muslims). Analyzing written accounts of conversion to Islam in the United States, Snook et al. concluded that becoming Muslim has predominantly intellectual motifs, as conversion follows a period of active search for the meaning and purpose of life.[23]

Inge emphasized rational choice as the reason for conversion to Islam.[24] In her ethnographic study of female convert Salafists in the U.K., Inge showed that her interlocutors embraced Salafist Islam after being *rationally* convinced that it would provide them with "a credible 'manual' for living that could 'guarantee' successful romantic relationships and, above all, an eternity of spiritual reward."[25]

Analyzing the conversion narratives of converts to Islam in Germany and the U.S.A. Wohlrab-Sahr concluded that conversion helped the converts to symbolically transform their crisis-ridden life experiences.[26] She identified three different functions of conversion to Islam: (a) conversion as implementation of gender honor; (b) conversion as methodization of life-conduct; and (c) conversion as symbolic emigration (Germany) or symbolic struggle (U.S.A.).

In a survey of converts to Islam in Australia, Mitchell and Rane showed that for more than a third of the interviewees the most important reasons of conversion were either a spiritual awakening, personal connections with Muslims, or the answers they found in Islam concerning the purpose of life.[27]

One of the few studies focussing on the networks of Muslim converts was provided by Erin.[28] Analyzing such networks in Michigan and Kentucky, he concluded that conversion happens either through weak social ties, where there is a Muslim community, or through strong ties, if no Muslim community is available. Also, Muslim identity is less

likely to succeed if the convert's network becomes fragmented by conversion and/or the convert faces a strong social resistance on the part of his/her preconversion social ties.

As to conversion to Islam in Switzerland, only few studies provide insights into its reasons. Based on her analysis of Islam discourse in Switzerland and her ethnographic work on Muslim organizations, Leuenberger addressed the macro- and micro-level processes that shape the "Muslim selves" of her interlocutors.[29] Similarly, Sheikhzadegan showed that the xenophobic Islam discourse in Switzerland and its resulting ban on minarets in 2009[30] were defining moments in the conversion accounts of the Muslim (re-)converts he portrayed.[31]

To sum up the state of the research, two main conclusions can be drawn: (a) concerning conversion motifs, the available empirical findings speak rather for affectional, experimental and intellectual motifs, with a stronger evidence for the latter; and (b) regarding life events and social contacts, studies deliver evidence for the relevance of both.

4.   The Applied Approach and the Resulting Typology

The methodological approach of the study was based on a combination of narrative-autobiographical interviews with qualitative social network analysis. The narrative-autobiographical interview was applied because the religious experience of adopting a new faith cannot be accessed immediately but only in retrospect and in the form of an account.[32] When analyzing the narratives, due attention was paid to the fact that there is a multi-level distance between the narration of an event and the event itself: The event itself; the way the narrator perceived and experienced the event at the time of the event; the narrator's memory of the event; and the way he/she selects from his/her memory to include in his/her narrative in the interview situation. Between these stages, a constructive act of access, selection, and transformation occurs.[33]

The qualitative social network analysis applied two ego-centric network maps, one to capture the social contacts of the interviewees before their (re-)conversion and another to document their contacts thereafter. Combining narrative-autobiographical interviews with network maps[34] has three advantages: (1) First, network maps go beyond a mere snapshot[35] to capture a diachronic perspective. (2) Second, such a combination yields in-depth insights into the quality of contacts, the mutual impact of spiritual transformation and the network change, and the embeddedness of these transformations in the life-history of the interviewees. (3) Third and most important, two network cards applied during the interviews have a narration-generating effect (*Erzählimpuls*), as they refresh the interviewees' memories and stimulate them to reflect on the dialectics of (re-)conversion, life-history, and social contacts.

Purposeful sampling was used to select 24 interviewees on a *maximum-variation* basis,[36] so that all of the following characteristics were represented: gender (11 females, 13 males), religious orientation (3 Shiite, 19 Sunni, and 2 Sufi), 16 converts versus 8 reconverts, and 10 interviewees from French-speaking Cantons versus 14 interviewees from German-speaking Cantons. Despite our endeavors, we were not able to include *jihadist* (re-)converts in our sample. All interviews were carried out between 2018 and 2019.

Based on our analysis of the retrieved data, we constructed a typology along the two dimensions of *seeking answers* and *social contacts,* with each of them showing three levels of relevance (*crucial, partial* and *negligible*) as presented in Table 1 below:

Regarding the "social contacts" dimension, the decisive issue was rather the relevance than the strength of contacts. What is important, then, is whether the relationship had an

Table 1. The two dimensions of comparison and the resulting types.

		Relevance of social contacts		
		Crucial	Partial	Negligible
Relevance of seeking answers	Crucial			*Introverted Seeker*
	Partial		*Assisted Seeking Convert* *Assisted Seeking Reconvert*	
	Negligible	*Networked Convert* *Networked Reconvert*		

impact on conversion, not whether it was strong or weak.[37] The biography dimension was labeled as "seeking answers" because the most relevant issue in the narrative was seeking answers to questions that arose from the religious uncertainties, psychological tensions, conflicts with peers, economic deprivations, dilemmas, etc. during their life course.[38] The different weights of both factors suggested a grouping of the 24 cases into five types of (re-)conversion motifs. The following number of cases per type could be identified: *introverted seeker* (6 cases), *assisted seeking convert* (7 cases), *networked convert* (3 cases), *assisted seeking reconvert* (5 cases), and *networked reconvert* (3 cases).

Type 1: Introverted Seeker

The *introverted seekers* are driven by questions about the sense and purpose of life for which they cannot find answers in their worldviews or faiths. They discover Islam as the ultimate wisdom without having any substantial contact with Muslims. They usually convert to Islam on their own and establish contacts with Muslims afterwards in order to learn how to practice their new faith properly.

Type 2: Assisted Seeking Convert

The *assisted seekers* also convert to Islam after looking for answers regarding the sense and purpose of life. However, their interest in and their journey to Islam is supported, accompanied, and even triggered by Muslims.

Type 3: Networked Convert

These converts are attracted to and fascinated by Islam only after coming in contact with Muslims.

Type 4: Assisted Seeking Reconvert

Assisted seeking reconverts are born Muslims who rediscover their faith after searching for answers regarding the purpose and sense of life. However, their renewed interest in Islam is reinforced, if not even triggered, by contacts to devout convert or born-again Muslims.

Type 5: Networked Reconvert

Networked reconverts are born Muslims that, after being detached from their parental faith, *re-discover* their old faith by getting in contact with devout convert or born-again Muslims.

5. Exemplification of the Types by Selected Cases

In the following section, the types of the afore-mentioned typology are illustrated by five selected cases.

5.1. *Robert: Introverted Seeker*

Robert (71) was born in a German-speaking city into an educated family, his mother being a French woman and his father a Swiss. He studied an engineering discipline that enabled him a remarkable professional career, first in a company, later on in an NGO. Robert had always believed in God and as a child he dreamed of becoming a Protestant priest. However, later on, he became very critical of the image of Jesus as depicted by the Christian churches. During the Hippie era, he quit the Protestant church, drifted away from Christianity and went through a long spiritual journey in which he came across different belief systems and practices including Buddhism, Hinduism and Yoga:

> And during that time I was searching. I realized that I didn't agree with what the church had made of Jesus, and I left the church. And then I nourished myself or looked for nourishment with what was popular at that time, what came from India, so Buddhism, Hinduism and yoga. I did a lot.

He also joined The *Theosophical Society* founded by Helena Blavatsky in the U.S. Islam was of no interest to him because it had a negative image. The first time he came in contact with Islam was when he was sent by his company for two years to Saudi Arabia. There he was fascinated by the friendliness and hospitality of the Saudis. Later on, he fell in love with a young Muslim woman from India. The woman's family did not require him to convert to Islam. However, he became curious about Islam and started to explore it. To his surprise, he found Islam to be very similar to Christianity while providing a more convincing image of Jesus. This affinity and this logical aspect of Islam fascinated him. Therefore, he converted to Islam and was glad to see that this decision made the family of his wife very happy. Two years later the marriage failed and they divorced. However, he continued his exploration of Islam and was gradually attracted to Sufism. Later on, he married a Christian woman who was not particularly attached to Christianity and showed rather an interest in his spiritual search.

Supported by his wife, Robert explored Sufism evermore. Once they invited a leading Sufi to hold a three-week course on Sufism in Switzerland. Thereafter, they founded a Sufi school and Robert assumed a leading responsibility in the school. He then decided to learn Persian to understand Rumi's[39] works in the original language. After the long spiritual journey, he turned into a devout Sufi ("And that was a process. It didn't happen in one fell swoop. It was real research work that I did").

5.2. *Claudia: Assisted Seeking Convert*

Claudia (56) was a child of a very large family, her father being an Italian immigrant and her mother a Swiss. Claudia was raised as a practicing Catholic:

> When I was a child, we went to church every Sunday. There were typical Italian procedures (she laughs): get up in the morning, get dressed, then the whole family goes to church together, you come home, then there is a huge meal, take a walk and then dessert.

However, she always had unanswered questions regarding Christian doctrines ("And I have always been very devout, even as a child, but I always had many doubts and questions. And these questions were never answered"). She used to be a primary school teacher. Even though she was naturalized in Switzerland already at the age of fourteen, she always felt to be an unwelcomed foreigner because in the conservative, German-

Speaking town she lived in, she was always regarded as "*Tschingg*"—the Swiss-German derogatory word for the Italian immigrants. Later on, she felt even more stigmatized after she married a migrant from an African country, because those days it was taboo to marry a "negro", and she was the first woman in the whole canton to do so.

As her husband died on their belated honeymoon trip to Africa, her difficulties grew because she now had to manage her two-child family alone. Unsatisfied with Christianity for not delivering answers to her doctrinal questions, she quit the Church and started traveling a lot and reading about different religions. One night, she dreamed that someone told her that her name was Fatima. Astonished by this dream, she started to learn Arabic and explore Islam. She then met a migrant Shi'ite Muslim man whom she married, thus getting confronted with new prejudices in her town. Her husband did not require her to convert to Islam. Nevertheless, her fascination for Islam grew steadily. Seeing her interest in Islam, her husband told her stories about Islam and also gave her a copy of the Qur'an:

> And then of course, I saw, watched, heard my husband. The first time I heard him reading the Qur'an, [he said] "Come. I want to show you something". Then we had known each other for maybe a month. "I would like to read you something, but you don't have to be amazed. For you, it may sound funny". And he read me a page from the Qur'an. And I just had tears running down my face, even though I didn't understand a word.

She then started to learn more about Islam. In this religion, she finally found answers to the questions she had had about Christianity almost her whole life. She was also fascinated to observe that her husband became very spiritual each time he did his daily prayers. One day she told him that she wanted to achieve the same spirituality and "radiation". So, she converted to Shi'ite Islam and started to practice this religion. Later on, she became seriously ill and had to start a therapy that she continued even at the time of the interview. As a reaction to her illness, she and her husband made a pilgrimage to Mecca and from then onwards she started wearing the *hijab*—at the cost of losing her job.

5.3.   *Pauline: Networked Convert*

Pauline (20) lives in a French-speaking city. She is a graduate of a vocational school and works in a company as a business assistant. She converted to Islam when she was eighteen. Before conversion, she had no attachment to any particular religion. However, she had always believed in God. As for her parents, her father is an atheist and her mother rather an agnostic while believing that there must be some kind of a higher power:

> I've always believed in God, not necessarily Islam but God in general. I was raised in a family that called itself Christian but that is not really practicing. My father is an atheist, he doesn't believe. And my mother believes that there is something.

Her interest in Islam originated from her interest in "Arab culture" and that is why she started to socialize with Arabic-speaking young people ("And also the Arab culture always interested me. [...] when I was about 15 years old I started to stay with Arab people"). Even though these friends were themselves hardly religious, their parents were practicing Muslims and she enjoyed visiting these families and watching them prac-

tice their religion. Shortly thereafter, she fell in love with a young Algerian man who lived in Marseille. Despite the geographic distance they managed to cherish their relationship:

> And when I was 16, I dated a friend of mine who is Algerian, who was not religious before I met him but we talked about religion. […] I really wanted to know more and more and so I ordered my first book on Islam.

Pauline's growing interest in Islam alarmed her mother ("my mother liked it less and less because she saw that I was getting closer to this religion, and she had prejudices because of what she saw in the media"). After long discussions, the mother mobilized a mediator ("So she suggested that I go and see a lady, a mediator, who had studied Islam all her life, […] After we did several sessions, my mother was reassured. And then she finally accepted my conversion, my father too"). After conversion, Pauline started to practice Islam including wearing the *hijab*.

5.4. *Ahmad: Assisted Seeking Reconvert*

Ahmad (57) is a migrant of Moroccan origin. He studied economics in France and then migrated to a French-speaking town in Switzerland. There, he married a Swiss woman whom he had met in France back in the late 1980s. In his teens, neither he nor his parents were practicing Muslims, and he regarded the dichotomy of *halal* (eligible) and *haram* (forbidden) as a black-and-white system and therefore too petty to follow. The early death of his father brought him unprecedented freedom that triggered his intellectual search:

> My father died when I was 14 years old. […] After his death, I had all the freedom to think as I wanted and to experiment as I wanted. And I was very much in search, you could say—without knowing it—but I was very much in search.

During his studies in France, Ahmed happened to learn about different ideologies and different schools of thought. Being confronted with these worldviews and feeling lonely in a new world that he did not properly understand, he started again to contemplate on existential questions ("Then questions started to invade me: 'who I am, how I am going to face this world which is so different, how I am going to be' and all that"). On one of those days, he came across a book by Rumi entitled *Fih ma Fih* ("In it is what's in it")[40]:

> It blew my mind. I didn't understand everything it said. […] At that time, I didn't know what spirituality meant. But it was about relationship, about being human, about God and all that, […] and it kind of set me back to an environment where I grew up, where religion was beautiful, was simple. […] And then I started to go to the mosque, to do the prayer, to do the Ramadan, little by little.

After migrating to Switzerland, Ahmad became increasingly interested in the political situation of Muslim countries and started to read about Islam and Muslim societies and to attend cultural events related to the Muslim world. In the course of these activities, he met a *Naqshbandi* Sufi group that organized *zikr*[41] sessions. Already fascinated by Sufism, Ahmad joined one of these sessions:

> I heard joy in my heart. I thought "Oh God! Let me meet them". Because I had always read a little bit about Sufism, about this spiritual path, and I had never

had the opportunity to meet someone who would say: "I am Sufi". It was really soul-stirring. That was it. […] And I can say that my journey into spirituality began there.[42]

One year, during Ramadan, he followed the Sufi group to meet their spiritual leader in London. As he attended one of these gatherings, there came to an encounter between him and the spiritual leader that had a lasting impact on him ("He looked at me, slowly, long and deeply. He looked at me, and I looked at him. For me, it was an exchange of looks that was beautiful. It was beautiful. […] So, I don't know. But let's say that's where it started."). Thus, he became a dedicated member of the Sufi order.

5.5.   *Gül: Networked Reconvert*

Gül (23) is the daughter of a blue-collar, Turkish migrant family in Germany. She is already a citizen of the European Union. After finishing high school, she migrated to Switzerland to start her studies in a major German-speaking city. Gül's parents were practicing Muslims and took her very often to the mosque when she was a young girl. In the mosque, she learned the basics of her faith. However, her parents were liberal enough to allow her not to practice Islam:

My parents are relatively religious. […] I had my first contact with the mosque when I was 5 or maybe 7 years old. […] My father always took me with him [to the mosque]. […] As far as the religious practice is concerned, […], I didn't pray at all; I never did the five prayers a day, almost until, I don't know, until I was 24 years old.

Gül's attitude towards Islam radically changed as she met, at the university, a European convert who taught, at the invitation of a group of Muslim students, the intellectual dimensions of Islam:

He was quite philosophical, and in the meeting with him, I realized that I actually knew nothing about Islam. […] [Normally] we read the Qur'an, but we don't know what it says, what the suras mean, or what our religious practice means at all, what fasting means, I mean its inner dimension. And then it shook me up a bit, […] and then I started to experience this inner dimension more.

Coming to believe that Islam was a sublime religion that went far beyond ritual traditions, she re-embraced Islam and started to practice it. At the university, she had also an opportunity to write a paper on Rumi and was deeply impressed that Islam had also a sophisticated, mystical dimension. Emboldened by her new knowledge about Islam she joined inter-faith dialog groups at the university to exchange with followers of other faiths about religions.

6.   Discussion

To begin with, in all our interviews either seeking answers regarding the meaning of life, social contacts with Muslims or a combination of these two issues were the dominant (re-)conversion motifs. Furthermore, the two dimensions are inversely related: When questions of meaning dominated ("introverted seeker"), social contacts were hardly relevant. In contrast, when social contacts were of a strong relevance, questions of meaning played almost no role (networked [re-]convert). Between these extreme types, there is the

"assisted seeking (re-)convert", who, while driven by the searching for answers, found support from Muslims he/she socialized with.

Comparing our typology with that of Lofland and Skonovd (intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive), it should be emphasized that in most conversion stories some kind of seeking answers could be identified.[43] Thus, the "introverted seeker" considerably corresponds to Lofland's and Skonovd's *intellectual* motif. These are people who, without any (substantial) contact with Muslims and without pressure on the part of their peers, look for answers to questions regarding the meaning of life: "Some individuals convert themselves in isolation from any actual interaction with devotees of the respective religion."[44] Nevertheless, even in the case of the "introverted seeker", joining Muslims in the aftermath of conversion was crucial in consolidating their new religious identity.

In contrast, the *networked convert* corresponds to what Lofland and Skonovd call *affectional* motif: "[…] personal attachments or strong liking for practicing believers is central to the conversion process."[45] However, in both cases the peer influence is far from the pressure associated with the revivalist and coercive motifs: "'Social pressure' is certainly present but exists and functions more as 'support' and attraction than as 'inducement' to convert."[46] We do not see any motif in the typology of Lofland and Skonovd that would closely match our "assisted seeker" type. The only options with some resemblance to this type are belief followed by participation (intellectual and mystical). Similarly, neither one of our both reconversion types ("assisted seeking reconvert" and "networked reconvert") find their perfect match in the Lofland-Skonovd typology. While some of our narratives resemble their *revivalist* type, others match either the *intellectual*, *mystical*, or *affectional* motifs of their typology.

In general, our choice for the above-mentioned terminology was based on the following considerations:

(a) We prefer networked to *affectional* because in the respective cases, social contacts were the decisive issue and not having affectional bonds.

(b) We prefer *seeker* over *intellectual* because looking for answers regarding metaphysics must not necessarily be an intellectual enterprise—at least not in its rationalist connotation.

(c) We avoid the term *revivalist* because of the fundamentalist connotation mentioned above. More specifically, none of the converts and reconverts in our study showed an affinity for a *jihadist* interpretation of Islam.

Concerning the typology proposed by Allievi,[47] the introverted seekers in our research largely correspond to his rational conversion, while our assisted seeking and networked types are very much similar to his relational conversion. Regarding the latter, both instrumental subtype (e. g. marriage) and the non-instrumental one—stimulated by other forms of relationship with Muslims—were recognizable in our interviews.

Finally, regarding the matrix proposed by Kilbourne and Richardson,[48] the conversion of the "introverted seeker" can be seen as a confirmation of what the authors call the modern paradigm anchored in a humanistic theoretical framework (namely the view that a convert is an active, uninfluenced, seeking person). In contrast, in the case of the "assisted seeker (re-)converts" inter-individual processes seem to play an important role in conversion. Therefore, it speaks for the interactionist approach. Finally, our "networked (re-)converts" very much correspond to what they call social-environmental determinism. In short: both the modern humanistic respectively interactionist approach

and the passive sociological one find partial confirmation in our study. However, we found no evidence for the approach that combines passive and intra-individual perspectives.

To sum it up, our typology underlines that conversion is a result of seeking answers to fundamental questions in life (be it concerning intellectual, mystical, or political issues), and/or contacts with Muslims. Also, our typology suggests that seeking answers and social ties are inversely related. Finally, our typology encompasses the theoretical spectrum from agency (introverted seeker) to social integration (strong and weak ties, be it in the sense of support or pressure).

7.   Conclusions and Outlook

Muslim converts are a minority within a minority in Switzerland. The ban on minarets in 2009 and the ban on Muslim women covering their faces in public in 2021, show that Islam is met with scepticism by the majority of the non-Muslim population in Switzerland. Despite this, or precisely because of it, people convert to Islam year after year in Switzerland. Based on our interviews with Muslim (re-)converts in Switzerland, we propose a typology along the dimensions of seeking answers and social ties. Common to all (re-)conversion stories were contacts with Muslims in the narratives of the studied (re-)converts. Even in the case of the "introverted seekers", namely converts who embraced Islam with the least contact with Muslims, networking with Muslims was instrumental to the consolidation of their new religious identity. Conversely, in the case of networked (re-)converts, whose (re-)embracing of Islam followed their contacts with Muslims, seeking answers to fundamental questions of life was not absent in their (re-)conversion narratives. Thus, our findings confirm both the relevance of the modern (active) paradigm—assuming conversion to be a result of an inner drive—and the sociological variant of the passive one—suggesting that conversion is the outcome of social encounters.

Our (re-)conversion narratives partly contradict conversion models that postulate a fixed order of conversion phases.[49] For instance, introverted seekers contacted Muslims after conversion or at least in an advanced stage of their conversion, while in the case of the networked converts, contacts to Muslims preceded their conversion. However, contacts to Muslim communities need to be qualified. In most cases we studied, (re-)conversion led to a distancing from ethnically oriented, habitual Islam. Many converts made a clear distinction between Islam and Muslims and, while glorifying the former, they criticized the latter for their "shortcomings", and even the "damage" they do to the image of Islam. Therefore, they preferred to socialize with like-minded (re-)converts than with the traditional Muslim communities. Some even emphasized their adherence to their non-Muslim, cultural heritage as well as citizenship.

As far as our conceptual framework is concerned, our study speaks for an integrative theoretical approach to spiritual transformation as follows:

(1) An adequate understanding of (re-)conversion requires that both life course and social networks of the individual are taken into account.

(2) As one of the reconverts referred to the "Guidance from God" (*hidaya*) as the main reason for his "re-discovery" of Islam—a well-known motif in the Islamic "conversion script"[50]—it also makes sense to integrate what Ines W. Jindra has called "strong social constructivism"[51] into the theoretical framework.

(3) Our approach goes beyond sociological perspective as it integrates insights from social psychology—to grasp the identity transformation of the (re-)converts—and Islamic sciences—to understand the Islamic concepts or references to the Islamic sources that came forth in the interviews we carried out or Islamic events we attended.

(4) Multi-level analyses deepen our understanding of this transformation.

To elaborate the latter, the micro-level perspective helped us understand the motivational and identity aspects of (re-)conversion, while the meso-level view shed light on the relevance of congregations and communities for the (re-)converts, be it through providing them with a sense of community and collective identity, or as a platform for learning and negotiating "Islamic normativity". As for the macro-level dynamics, Islambashing generally and the ban on minarets particularly strengthened the identification of some of our interviewees with Islam.[52] Furthermore, the orthodox Muslim organization, the Islamic Central Council of Switzerland (I.C.C.S.) (in German: *Islamischer Zentralrat der Schweiz* I.Z.R.S.), which some of our interviewees were active members of, came into existence as a reaction to the minaret ban. In one case, the Palestinian conflict was instrumental in triggering a growing interest in and finally conversion of the respective interviewee to Islam.

Further studies and comparative research are required regarding the target denominations (Sunni, Shi'ite, Sufi, Ahmadi, etc.) as well as different modes of spiritual transformations (conversion, reconversion, deconversion, etc.). Moreover, despite major advances in the qualitative network analysis, a refinement of this approach, particularly concerning the diachronic analysis, would deepen our understanding of the reciprocal impact of social networks and spiritual transformation. Finally, the differences between converts and reconverts deserve more scrutiny. Our interviews suggest that spiritual transformation is a much more demanding process for converts than for reconverts. Thus, many converts who are socialized in a non-Muslim milieu are confronted with doubts, disappointments, rejection by friends and relatives[53] and even break-up of their previous strong ties.

NOTES

1. John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 30, No. 6, 1965, pp. 862–875.

2. John Lofland and Normand Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 1981, pp. 373–385.

3. Raymond F. Paloutzian, "Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation", in *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, eds. Raymond F. Paloutzian and Charles L. Park, New York: Guilford Press, 2005, pp. 331–347.

4. A ban on minarets was adopted in 2009 per ballot and at the initiative of the far-right in Switzerland. See also Savannah Dodd, "The Structure of Islam in Switzerland and the Effects of the Swiss Minaret Ban", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2015, pp. 43–64; Dina Wyler, "The Swiss Minaret Ban Referendum and Switzerland's International Reputation: A Vote with an Impact", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2017, pp. 413–425.

5. Raymond F. Paloutzian, "Psychology of Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation", in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, eds. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles F. Farhadian, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 209–239, p. 212.

6. James Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 1985, pp. 163–179.

7. See, for instance, David A. Snow and Cynthia L. Phillips, "The Lofland-Stark Conversion Model: A Critical Reassessment", *Social Problems*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 1980, pp. 430–447; John Lofland and

Normand Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs", *op. cit.;* Stefano Allievi, *Les convertis à l'islam. Les nouveaux musulmans d'Europe,* Paris: Editions l'Harmattan, 1998; Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, *Konversion zum Islam in Deutschland und den USA,* Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1999; Karin van Nieuwkerk, "Biography and Choice: Female Converts to Islam in the Netherlands", *Islam and Christian—Muslim Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2008, pp. 431–447; Ines W. Jindra, *A New Model of Religious Conversion: Beyond Network Theory and Social Constructivism*, Leiden: Brill, 2014; Sakin Erin, "Egocentric Conversion Social Networks: Context, Process and Identity in Explaining Conversion to and Reversion from Islam in the United States", Ph.D. dissertation, Kentucky University, Lexington, U.S.A., 2015.

8. Raymond F. Paloutzian, "Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation", *op. cit.*
9. Olivier Roy, "Islamic Terrorist Radicalisation in Europe", in *European Islam. Challenges for Public Policy and Society*, eds. Samir Amghar, Amel Boubekeur and Michael Emerson, Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2007, pp. 52–60. See also Amir Sheikhzadegan, "From Rigid to Moderate Salafism: Paths of (Re-)Conversion to Islam among Activists of a Muslim Organisation in Switzerland", *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2020, Special Issue: Salafism in Europe. Empirical Approaches, eds. Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf and Mira Menzfeld, pp. 196–219.
10. James Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert", *op. cit.*
11. Raymond F. Paloutzian, "Psychology of Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation", *op. cit.,* p. 213.
12. Ibid., p. 214.
13. John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver", *op. cit.*
14. Ibid., p. 874.
15. See, Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. For a review of process models see, Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
16. See, James A. Beckford, "Accounting for Conversion", *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1978, pp. 249–262; Ulrike Popp-Baier, "Narrating Embodied Aims: Self-Transformation in Conversion Narratives. A Psychological Analysis", *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*, Vol. 2, No. 3. 2001. http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/911 (accessed 07.01.2022).
17. John Lofland and Normand Skonovd, "Conversion motifs", *op. cit.,* p. 374.
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19. Brock K. Kilbourne and James T. Richardson, "Paradigm Conflict, Types of Conversion, and Conversion Theories", *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 1989, pp. 1–21.
20. See, for example, Nan Lin, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
21. See, Ines W. Jindra, "Toward an Integrative Theory of Religious Conversion: A Review Essay", *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, eds. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles F. Farhadian, 2014: *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 2016, pp. 329–343; Fenggang Yang and Andrew S. Abel, "Sociology of Religious Conversion", in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, eds. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles F. Farhadian, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 140–163.
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24. Anabel Inge, *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman: Paths to Conversion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 223. See also Uriya Shavit and Fabian Spengler, "Converting to Salafiyya: Non-Muslims' Path to the 'Saved Sect'", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2021, pp. 337–354; p. 223.
26. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, *Konversion zum Islam in Deutschland und den U.S.A, op. cit.*
27. Paul Mitchell and Halim Rane, "Australian Converts to Islam: Findings from a National Survey of Muslim Australians", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2021, pp. 415–436.
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the Swiss Muslim Debate between 2008 and 2011." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Bern, Bern, Switzerland, 2013. See also Amir Sheikhzadegan, "From Rigid to Moderate Salafism", *op. cit.*

30. Swiss vote to ban construction of minarets on mosques. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/29/switzerland-bans-mosque-minarets. (accessed 04.03.2023).

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38. In the 1960s the concept "seeker" was very popular in conversion research. See, Roger A. Straus, "Religious Conversion as a Personal and Collective Accomplishment", *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 1979, pp. 158–165. See also Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, *op. cit.* Thus, as already shown, Lofland and Stark considered all converts as seekers. Later on, conversion researchers' interest in this concept faded away (see above, J. Lofland and R. Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver", *op. cit.*). This is presumably the reason why this term was absent in the typology of conversion motifs as proposed by Lofland and Skonovd (see John Lofland and Normand Skonovd, "Conversion motifs", *op. cit.*). Since the 2000s, however, this concept has re-emerged in conversion research. For instance, in a study of conversion to Bahaism, Warburg has shown that seekers, in contrast to non-seekers, were enthusiastic about foreign religions for a longer period and/or maintained contact with several religious groups. See, Margit Warburg, "Seeking and the Seekers in the Sociology of Religion", *Social Compass*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2001, pp. 91–101.

39. Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207–1273) is one of the Islamic world's most famous mystics and poets.

40. Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, *Fihe Ma Fih—Bilingual, Selected Teachings of Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, Persian Literature Treasures* (from Persian Garden Series). Farzaneh Farshad, (Editor, Translator) Paperback 2021.

41. Sufis' ritualistic repetition of some words in remembrance of God.

42. Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, *Fihe Ma Fih, op. cit.*

43. John Lofland and Normand Skonovd, "Conversion motifs", *op. cit.*, p. 376.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 376.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 380.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Stefano Allievi, *Les convertis à l'islam, op. cit.*

48. Brock Kilbourne and James T. Richardson, "Paradigm Conflict, Types of Conversion, and Conversion Theories", *op. cit.*

49. Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion, op. cit.*

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51. Ines W. Jindra, *A New Model of Religious Conversion, op. cit.*

52. Amir Sheikhzadegan, "'*Ich bin ein Produkt der Anti-Minarett-Initiative': Islam in der Schweiz vor dem Hintergrund identitärer Grenzziehungen*", *op. cit.*

53. See, Paul Mitchell and Halim Rane, "Australian Converts to Islam", *op. cit.*, p. 424.

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