Uncovering Habitus in Life Stories of Muslim Converts

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This paper examines the life stories of two Danish Muslim converts in order to study how their previous habitus affects their new religious life and their perception of Islam. Throughout the writing of this paper and the analysis of the stories, a supplementary point of interest emerged, namely that there seems to be a rather dominant discourse among the converts of why they converted or found interest in Islam in the first place. I believe this discourse can be explained by considering the work of previous researchers on religious conversion. Therefore this paper also briefly examines the historical influence of psychology in conversion research.

I was inspired by the works of mainly two researchers with regards to how previous habitus influences on converts religious life. The first is Dr. Yafa Shanneik, University of South Wales, who in 2011 wrote an article based on her findings in narratives of 21 females converted from Catholicism to Islam. She took a Bourdieusian approach and looked at the role Catholicism played in their lives before the conversion. She found that they all had what could be described as catholic-habitus*[[1]](#footnote-1)*, and the influence of this particular habitus was what drew the converts towards the religious strand of Salafi Islam, which is known to be a particularly strict and dogmatic with regards to scriptures (Shanneik, 2011). The other is the French political scientist Olivier Roy, who has specialized in the role of Islam in modern societies. He looks at how radical Protestants also seem to be drawn to Salafi Islam when they choose to convert to Islam. He states, in line with Yafa Shanneik, that the radicalization, which is often linked to Salafi Islam, should not be seen as a sudden shift in the convert’s world view, but as continuation of their previous religious habitus (Roy, 2004).

According to Roy and Shanneik there seems to be a connection between having a previously strict dogmatic religious habitus, whether Protestant or Catholic, and being drawn towards Salafi Islam. I will follow their analytical path but in a slightly different way, namely by imposing a Bourdieusian approach to previously not religious converts in order to study their perception of Islam and whether they exchange capitals and transfer habitus as seen in the examples of Protestants and Catholics.

I found two Danish converts who weren’t previously religious, and in the following part you will hear their stories. You will find that I use some literary devices in Laura’s story, which I have emphasized in bold font, and which are used to underline an important point relating to the conference theme *Discourses we live by*. You might guess it along the way. If not, I will explain it in a later paragraph.

# Aisha’s and Laura’s stories

Aisha

Aisha is a 27-year old Danish woman. She grew up in a nuclear family as the oldest of three siblings. Her mother works as a self-employed alternative practitioner and her father was a photographer. They lived in a single-family house in a Copenhagen suburb, where Aisha lived until she moved away from home. Aisha has a small family. Her grandparents died early and it means a lot to Aisha’s family to have a strong bond and stick together. Aisha describes her upbringing as alternative, creative and different. The family was vegetarians, or at least almost, sometimes they ate lamb because it was her father’s favorite food, but they never ate pork or beef. Aisha remembers how her friends in school stared at her packed lunch because it was full of tofu and other meat substitutes, and when she ate at her friends’, they found it very odd that she did not eat meat. She attended a Rudolf Steiner school until 9th grade, and she describes it as a cultural shock to be facing the non-Rudolf Steiner educational system as she attended HF[[2]](#footnote-2). When it comes to religion, Aisha describes her family as cultural Christians. They celebrated Christmas, as most Danish families do, and they had a creative Easter tradition, where they painted eggs and decorated an Easter tree. The traditions centered around one thing: being together as a family and having a good time together. Her parents were baptized, confirmed[[3]](#footnote-3) and married in the church, but neither Aisha nor her siblings were baptized or confirmed. They always said ‘… that they would not make that choice for us and that the most important thing is to be a good person and to be good to the people and things around you.’ Aisha believes that her parents have some kind of faith and she knows that her mother believes in angels and some kind of spirituality. Her father was ill most of Aisha’s life and died when Aisha was 22. He was in and out of hospital most of her life and therefore she learned at an early stage to take responsibility for herself and her younger siblings. She describes her father as positive and happy, and his illness was just something, that was there, which they sometimes had to face, and not as a predominant part of their lives. At that time Aisha lived in her own apartment, hung out with her friends, did a lot of shopping and traveling and worked as a sales coordinator in a larger company. She describes finding herself in a repetitive daily pattern; ‘I got up in the morning, went to work, worked, got off work, went to the gym, came back, ate supper, went to bed. Just longing for vacation so I could travel or a weekend so I could hang out with my friends in the café.’ Shefound herself in a void. Sometimes the emptiness could be filled with travelling and shopping, but before she knew it, the feeling was back and another trip or bag was needed. When her father died she started some kind of search to find out what would happen to him now. She started her search in Christianity but never found satisfactory answers. She started discussing the issue with her Muslim friends. This was the start of her search into Islam. One year later she converted, two years later she started wearing a headscarf and three and a half years later she changed her name.

Today Aisha is Muslim and she is married to Martin. He also converted to Islam, but both of them did it before they met each other. She spends her time attending Islamic teachings in the mosque, having conversations with new converts, studying to become a teacher and be the best Muslim she can be. To her, Islam is about inclusiveness, spirituality and aspiring to be a good and faithful person. She states that ‘Islam is divided into three parts: faith, rituals and spirituality. And to be a good Muslim you must have all three.’ According to Aisha it makes no sense to pray if you don’t have the right intensions. It makes no sense to do things that hurt other people – so of course she still celebrates Christmas with her family, but her intention on Christmas Eve is to be a good daughter and have a good time with her family, not to celebrate a Christian feast. She is happy and finds inner peace in her search to be a good person and Muslim and in the inner journey that she started with her conversion to Islam, which makes this life better.

Laura

Laura is 20 years old and she lives in a Copenhagen suburb with her mother, father and sister. Laura describes her upbringing as normal – **but** she has an older cousin who suffers from alcohol-related dementia. Laura and her family live in a terraced house and her father works as an administrator in the local municipality while her mother is a teacher at the local school. **But** Laura recalls her cousin being drunk now and then when she was younger. As a child Laura attended a lot of leisure time activities because it was very important to her mother, who believed that this was a good way for children to develop. Laura especially liked singing and dancing. Laura’s mother is very spiritual herself and does yoga or meditation almost every day. **But** the cousin wasn’t such a big part of their lives so his alcohol abuse hasn’t really traumatized Laura. All in all a very typical ‘Danish’ nuclear-family, according to Laura; ‘You know, we never really talked about religion… As my father used to say, when we are gathered around the table, we don’t discuss politics, religion or… hmm… I can’t remember the last thing.’

Laura had a very straight-forward educational path. She went to the local public school and after her graduation she attended HF and now she is in her first year at university. Her first interaction with religion, as she recalls, was when she attended confirmation class[[4]](#footnote-4). She never really gave much thought to what confirmation was beside presents and a nice celebration party. Once one of her classmates from school, the only Muslim in the class, stood outside waiting for them to finish confirmation class and the pastor asked what he was doing there and why he came to her house, and Laura found the pastor’s hostile attitude strange: He was our friend and he just stood there and waited quietly.’ **But** after confirmation, parties and drinking started and Laura recalls drinking at parties and having fun. Laura’s life was now school, fitness, friends, work and nights out on the town. Laura dated a non-practicing Muslim boy for a couple of months in 9th grade – just a flirtation. In 10th grade she started to hang out with some new friends. One of these was Muslim who went to Islamic teachings once a week. Out of curiosity and because she wanted to spend time with her friend, Laura also attended the teachings. Here she got her first knowledge of Islam and its relation to other religions. When some of her other Muslim friends heard that she attended classes, they made fun of her; ‘You could never be Muslim’, they said. Laura was offended; who were they to judge her? When she started HF, she attended religious studies classes and the first year was horrible. There were no believers in her class to her knowledge, and the dialog about religion and especially Islam was so demeaning. Her teacher directed them to a Salafi webpage and asked them to find answers to their questions on Islam there. Laura felt offended. In her second year she got a new teacher and this is where Laura first started to consciously reflect on religion: ‘when I sat in the bus looking at the sunrise or the stars, then I am just sure that there is something bigger than me.’ Laura was experiencing an identity crisis. Some days, after reading about Islam the whole night, she felt ready to convert, **but** the next she was out drinking and worrying about what people would say if she stopped drinking. **But** during her final exams Laura and one of her Christian friends decided to cut down on drinking and now she really wanted to convert – **she fully accepted not drinking**. She prayed in her own way for comfort when her final exams came, and she did well. After her graduation she decided now was the time, although she still faced a fear of not knowing enough of Islam and being afraid of her family’s reaction. Laura joined numerous groups on Facebook to look for help and one Friday night in July, she said the Shahada[[5]](#footnote-5) to herself. She wanted to do it officially and sought the internet for help: ‘I was never afraid of contacting people, if they are Muslims, then they will give me a good reception.’ She had to search for a long time before she found someone who represented the ‘pure’ Islam that she sought: ‘An Islam without hidden agendas’. She navigated with her gut feeling. After having found an organization which represented her beliefs, she resigned from the Facebook groups and in November 2015 she said her Shahada in front of an Imam. She describes it as ‘calm and just peaceful’ and very much in line with her perception of Islam as a spiritual comfort zone in which she finds peace of mind. She still navigates with her gut feeling and she decided not to wear a headscarf because she wants to be a good daughter, one her parents can be genuinely proud of: ‘If it was only about me, then I would probably wear it, but it isn’t. … I would never put my parents in a position, where other people would think that they are bad parents.’

# Previous habitus – in a Bourdieusian approach

In this section I will use a Bourdieusian approach to habitus. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus becomes a substantial part of a larger ontological theory of social sciences, where he presents an approach between the two commonly known ways of approaching social objects, namely the phenomenological and the structuralistic (Bourdieu, 1977). The new approach he calls praxeological, and it differs from the two others by focusing on both the dialectics between the objective structures and the dispositions in which these are structured (Bourdieu, 1973). Habitus is a part of these dispositions. Habitus is all that makes us, what we are – all the impacts from our earliest childhood and throughout our lives, known and unknown, and they tend to reproduce themselves in new contexts because they are what makes us recognizable to our selves (Bourdieu, 1977).

I chose three focal points which, I find, recur in the two stories above, but also in other similar interviews I made, namely *spirituality*, *respect of difference* and *being good*.

*Spirituality* is very much present in both of the converts’ lives from an early point. Aisha’s mother works as an alternative practitioner, believes in angels and tells her children that they must not lie because they will get black spots on their hearts and have inner diseases. Throughout her life Aisha has been heavily confronted with the innerness of well-being, as she states: ‘People come to my mother, when all the world’s doctors have been in contact with them, and they still feel bad, then my mother helps them get better.’ In the manner Aisha talks about it, there is an implicit acceptance of the fact that an inner balance is the answer to well-being. That things cannot be cured through inner balance is out of the question. Looking at Laura’s life Spirituality is not so explicit, but it is still present. Her mother practiced a lot of meditation and yoga throughout her childhood. What is especially interesting with regard to spirituality in both Laura’s and Aisha’s cases, is that spirituality is the only part of Islam that the mothers accept and the ‘language’ the converts use to explain Islam to their mothers. Aisha states that ‘I remember once, I talked to my mother of a lecture I attended in the mosque. It was about inner peace, which is a part of Islam I pay great attention to, and when we talked she said, “that is what I always told you, when you where children” ’. Or as Laura says, ‘Once I told my mother, that she could view the prayer as a five-times-a-day break, where I have time with myself and God, just like meditation. And now she does the same, not five times a day, but still. I tell myself that she got it from me.’

*Respect of difference* is also rather dominant in the stories of these two converts, although in two different ways. Laura always saw herself as part of the norm in the neighborhood she grew up in, and Aisha always felt a bit different because of the way the family lived and ate. Laura states that ‘I felt so sad, when they talked like that…’ when she refers to how her classmates in HF referred to religious people. She didn’t feel offended because she didn’t see herself as religious at that time, but she felt sad, because she thinks ‘it is beautiful when we are different and when people find something, which makes them happy’. Aisha always felt a bit different in her childhood. She didn’t eat what her classmates ate, she went to another school than the local one and she had a lot of responsibility because of her father’s illness. So when she got out of the Rudolf Steiner school she did everything she could to be like the rest. She started to live a life like her friends’ – work, go to cafés, travel, buy expensive things, work out and work again. But living the life of her friends did not satisfy her, and now she doesn’t mind being different. However, she also respects that other people might look at it differently; ‘I respect that they use my old name, because that is natural to them’, Aisha states when referring to the reactions on her new name.

*Being good* is the third and in my opinion most dominant principle of the two converts’ lives. Aisha was neither baptized nor confirmed because her parents thought that Aisha and her siblings should decide that for themselves. Once, when Aisha asked her parents why she wasn’t baptized or confirmed, they replied that ‘it doesn’t matter; the most important thing is to be good to yourself and others.’ Because of Aisha’s father’s illness she had to help out at home very early on. Aisha’s family’s everyday life depended on her helping. In Laura’s case the goodness was more reflected in her respect of other people. More than once she talks about episodes in her childhood where she feels bad when people are treated badly. An example is the situation with the Muslim boy who stood outside waiting for the confirmation class to finish and the pastor speaking to him in an unkind manner. Laura probably reacts on the pastors unkind remarks because she comes from a home where they were taught to rather be quiet than cause a row or be unkind. She states that her father always said that they weren’t allowed to talk about religion or politics when they dined, because there was a potential to hurt someone or fall out, and he preferred a nice and cheerful atmosphere with room for everybody.

I find that these three focal points can be united in what I will call a *humanistic habitus*. My definition is based on a rather literal meaning of the word, namely that one cherishes the individual’s right to be and think as it wants to and that no individual has the right to harm or judge others. Most of what is needed to live a satisfying life is inside the human being or can be reached by having inner balance.

# So, what kind of Muslim are you?

As in the previous paragraph I also found three focal points in Laura’s and Aisha’s perceptions of Islam and of themselves as Muslims. These are *Ihsan, Respect* and *Who am I to judge?*

Translated directly from Arabic, *Ihsan* means beneficence or well-doing, and is a term, which both Laura and Aisha refer to. Aisha describes how it is a part of an important Hadith[[6]](#footnote-6), which is called Hadith Jibril. According to Aisha this Hadith describes the foundations of Islam, which according to her can be divided into three parts, namely faith, actions and spirituality, where Ihsan represents the spirituality. Both Laura and Aisha pay great importance to this part of Islam and refer to the inner journey that their conversion sparked, and which they find is not an evident part of Islam to all Muslims. Laura states ‘Islam is about faith, actions and spirituality. Some people tend to forget the spirituality.’ Aisha states a similar point: ‘… many Muslims completely removed the spiritual part… it is all about faith and actions… this is why so many terrible things happen between different Islamic groups.’ Both Aisha and Laura were in contact with different Islamic branches in the beginning of their conversion and also attended teachings in various groups and both of them describe how they navigated trough their gut feeling. Aisha states ‘I once attended a teaching and it felt so cold’ and Laura even felt she wasn’t able to recognize Islam in one teaching she attended. She says ‘this is not the Islam I read about’. When asked to say more about the Islam, which is the right one for her, she answers ‘you know, pure Islam without hidden agendas’ and ‘what I like about where I am now is that there is no political aim. It is just Islam.’ From Aisha’s and Laura’s perspectives, Islam in many ways characterizes an individual faith powered by an inner spiritual movement to achieve goodness. As Laura describes it: ‘Islam is my comfort zone’.

*Respect* becomes an evident part of their perception of themselves as Muslims. Aisha describes herself as becoming more ‘tolerant’ after she converted. She especially remembers how she used to have big rows with her sister before she converted, and how she now tries to remember that there is a reason why they disagree about things, and that Aisha should have respect for those reasons. Respect also plays an important role in how Aisha and Laura continue to be a part of the cultural Christian traditions, which is a big part of their family life. According to Laura ‘a Muslim should respect her parents’ and this is also one of the reasons why Laura struggled in the three weeks between her conversion and until she told her parents. As she states: ‘As a Muslim it is so wrong to lie to your parents, but I was so afraid of what they would say.’

Although they do a lot to be respectful towards other people, they don’t always feel it is being returned. As Laura states ‘It is so sad. I feel restrained’, when she talks about why she doesn’t wear a headscarf. She would like to wear it, but she feels she has to respect the people around her and she fears a lot that other people would judge her parents as bad parents or that her parents wouldn’t be able to be genuine proud of her if she decided to wear a headscarf.

*‘Who am I to judge?’* is a phrase used by both Laura and Aisha throughout the interviews, and they both say more than once that no human can judge another. They can disagree on other people’s readings of the Quran and they can state that ‘this isn’t Islam for me’, but they never talk about right or wrong. When they talk about actions conducted by other Islamic groups, e.g. IS[[7]](#footnote-7), they say ‘I don’t see how they read this’ or ‘it is not in line with my perception of Islam’.

I find that it is definitely possible to draw some lines between the *humanistic habitus* we found in Laura’s and Aisha’s stories on their upbringing and their present perception of Islam and themselves as Muslims. I find that spirituality becomes a recurring theme and that much of what they say about Islam centralizes around an inner journey between themselves and Allah, which is unfolded through their own good intentions and actions. Inspired by Roy, I will refer to this as *Humanistic Islam.*

# Humanistic Islam; Spirituality and being good

What I term Humanistic Islam is actually a current of Islam which Olivier Roy advocated for in 2004. In his studies on Islam in the West he saw tendencies towards a more spiritually oriented and individualized Islam. He states that ‘Spiritualisation accompanies the individualisation of religion’ (Roy, 2004) with regards to this humanistic perception of Islam, and that ‘Salvation is as much a matter of worldly things as it is heavenly ones.’(Roy, 2004). Roy argues that it is important not to see this as a new Islam, because these values are present in earlier Muslim traditions too. The new thing, he argues, is the relationship between *haram* and *halal* (actions or things that are forbidden and allowed in Islam); ‘Norms are reformulated in terms of values, and are subsequently ‘negotiable’, meaning that the issue is not to follow the letter but the spirit of the law.’ (Roy, 2004).

Just as we saw an assumed attraction towards Salafi Islam with the radical Protestant and Catholic converts to Islam, my analysis tends to show the opposite with regards to these not previously religious converts. They talk about how they also had brief contact with the Salafi branch or other Islamic branches, which are more in strict accordance with the applicable rules and scriptures, and that it didn’t feel right. They refer to their gut feeling when they speak of these branches. Islam is an inner feeling of individual right or wrong to these converts and they pay great importance to the fact that there is no universal right or wrong.

What we tend to see, both in relation to the previously religious converts, as described by Shanneik and Roy, and the not previously religious converts presented here, is that previous habitus somehow determines where the converts end up placing themselves in their new religious field. Using a Bourdieusian terminology (Bourdieu, 1973) there seems to be an exchange of capitals between the secular social room in which Laura and Aisha are brought up and their new religious social room.

# Discourses we live by

You may have wondered why I sometimes use bold letters in Laura’s story. This is because I want to emphasize something which also recurs in the interviews of these converts – namely that they seem to live by a discourse not so foreign from how conversion researchers used to view converts.

Historically the discipline of conversion research started in the American Psychologist Society in the early eighteenth century. The psychological angle was widely researched and conversion was viewed from a range of different psychological theories and perspectives, and most of the research viewed conversion through the individuals’ experiences of existentialistic/traumatic crises (Damsager and Mogensen, 2007b). Even though other disciplines such as history, anthropology, and later sociology also found interest in the area, the psychological angle seemed to stick to the phenomenon. This becomes especially clear in Laura’s story. The first thing she tells me when I ask her to tell me about her life is that she grew up in a typical nuclear family, but that she had an older cousin who had a drinking problem. We talk about something else but throughout the interview she keeps coming back to the cousin. She tells me, that they almost never saw him, not because of the drinking, but because they didn’t see that part of the family much. Throughout her story the cousin turns up and in some way he becomes a justification or explanation of her choice. Even when she decides to convert the story centers on alcohol. She says that she was surprised how easy it was to stop drinking, although she previously said, that she never really drank very much alcohol. When I read through this interview it doesn’t seem that the alcohol-demented cousin really played any role in her life. She never uses his name or speaks of experiences with him, but he keeps turning up in this story. She sounds like she is used to connecting her cousin’s drinking with her conversion to Islam, either as a sort of explanation, which can be understood in her surroundings, or as an explanation to herself, which is very much in line with how converts are normally viewed in psychological research.

Looking at the history of conversion research (Taylor, 1976, Beckford, 1978, Damsager and Mogensen, 2007a), I find that the converts I interviewed to a great extent live by a discourse created by previous research and seemingly adopted in society, which I find seems to function as a justification of their choices. So I find that we have to pay great emphasis in reading through the discourses (if possible?) when dealing with a group of people who live by a discourse so heavily discussed as Islam is at this moment, otherwise we may merely verify previous research instead of conducting new. One may justly ask if I am doing right in suggesting that their ‘traumatic’ experiences are not a substantial part of their conversion. However, looking at the way it is presented in their stories and how the stories are created around this ‘traumatic’ experience and other more general experiences, I find that these ‘traumatic’ experiences are fitted into the conversion rather than being explanatory determinations.

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1. Catholic habitus is first described by Tom Inglis (INGLIS, T. 1998. *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, University College Dublin Press.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An upper secondary education, which gives access to higher education such as university and vocational training. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Confirmation in the Lutheran Church is the symbolic affirmation of the baptism, usually taking place in the ages 13-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In Denmark youth normally attend confirmation class once a week in 7th or 8th grade before they have their confirmation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Shahada is the Islamic creed. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In Islam, Hadith refers to the collections of sayings and anecdotes attributed to the Prophet Muhammed and his contemporaries. The Hadith literature ranks, alongside the Quran, as the fundamental scripture of Islam. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Islamic organization, Islamic State. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)