Re-Examining the Radicalization of Religious Converts

by

David Alexander Jones

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Department of Political Science
University of Alberta

Abstract

This thesis asks two interrelated questions: why are religious converts significantly overrepresented among acts of terrorism in North America and Europe, and can this tell us anything about the nature of radicalization in general? To answer these questions, three key arguments are advanced. First, it is argued that in failing to recognize the centrality of ideology to terrorism, and downplaying the cognitive aspects of radicalization, many pre-existing explanations of radicalization are incomplete. Second, this thesis argues that because of this discomfort with the ideological dimensions of terrorism, previous studies of convert radicalization have focused too much on structural variables (i.e. socioeconomic status, previous criminality, etc.). Finally, based on case study induction, this thesis proposes a new variable that may explain pieces of the radicalization process, specifically for converts: disappointment. In introducing this new variable, the thesis also suggests that researchers ought to pay more attention to the religious, social, and emotional factors that occur post-conversion when attempting to explain convert radicalization. Notably, this thesis' argument is based off two novel sources of data: first, the *Radicalized Canadian Converts* dataset, and second, a collection of social media posts from a Canadian foreign fighter. Ultimately, the thesis argues that paying more attention to the stated intentions and justifications of violent extremists, and understanding how these beliefs intersect with their experiences is central to understanding how radicalization to violence occurs, and what can be done to stop it.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

1. Introduction

The image of Michael Zehaf-Bibeau wearing a *keffiyeh* and carrying an aging rifle as he charged Canada's Parliament Hill is etched into Canada's collective memory. This act of violence in 2014, along with a vehicular attack carried out by Martin Couture-Rouleau two days prior in Saint-Jean sur Richelieu, Quebec, suspended any notions that Canada was somehow immune to the spectre of globalized terrorism. Zehaf-Bibeau and Couture-Rouleau are representative of a broader trend among Canadians involved in violent extremism – both perpetrators were religious converts. This trend is not isolated to Canada, nor is it new; indeed in one of the earliest episodes of religious terrorism in Canada, five individuals from the United States and Canada who were part of a group that referred to itself as *Jamat al-Fuqra* were charged with conspiring to attack an Indian cinema and a Hindu temple in Toronto in 1991. Interestingly, this case predates the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Centre, often considered the starting point of larger-scale *salafi-jihadist* terrorism in North America. A significant minority of the individuals implicated in this plot were also converts to Islam who, in the months prior, frequently traveled across the US-Canada border and journeyed to upstate New York to train for their planned attack.[1]

In the contemporary context, defined as post-September 11th 2001, converts are overrepresented in samples of both domestic terrorists, meaning those who plotted attacks within their own countries, and foreign fighters, meaning those who left Europe or North America to join *jihadist* groups such as the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (Daesh), Al-Qaeda (AQ) or Hayat

[1] John Goddard, "Forgotten Islamist Terror Plot Targeted Toronto," *Toronto Star*, August 31, 2010, https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2010/08/31/forgotten_islamist_terror_plot_targeted_toronto.html.

Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).[2] This trend raises an important question with respect to political violence: why are religious converts significantly overrepresented among acts of terrorism in North America and Europe?[3] Can this overrepresentation tell us anything about the nature of radicalization in general?

This thesis will advance three arguments. First, it is argued that in failing to recognize the centrality of ideology to terrorism, and downplaying the cognitive aspects of radicalization, many pre-existing explanations of radicalization are incomplete. They fail to differentiate necessary from sufficient conditions for involvement in violent extremism or account for the presence of clearly articulated ideological justifications for violence offered by nearly every violent extremist. Ignoring the ideological dimension impedes a clear causal explanation for involvement and obscures opportunities to reduce the occurrence of terrorism.

Second, this thesis argues that because of this discomfort with the ideological dimensions of terrorism, previous studies of convert radicalization have focused too much on structural variables (i.e. socioeconomic status, previous criminality, etc.). These variables both fail to provide a satisfactory level of specificity and are, upon closer examination, not as common across cases as previous authors have argued. To make this argument, this thesis will rely on a novel dataset of Canadian converts who were involved with groups like Daesh or AQ in the post-9/11 era. These data are in turn complemented by the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Reponses to Terrorism's (START) database entitled

[2] HTS has been the subject of several mergers and splits, even vis-à-vis the generally fractious rebel movement in Syria. In its earliest form, when many of the Canadians who joined the group arrived in Syria, it was known as *Jabhat al-Nusra,* or Al-Qaeda in Syria.

[3] Bart Schuurman, Peter Grol, and Scott Flower, "Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction" (The Hague, 2016), http://icct.nl/publication/converts-and-islamist-terrorism-an-introduction/; Scott Flower, "Muslim Converts and Terrorism," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyyses* 5, no. 11 (2013): 6–9.

Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS),[4] which allows parallel comparisons between the phenomenon in Canada and the experience in the United States.

Finally, based on case study induction, this thesis proposes a new variable that may explain pieces of the radicalization process, specifically for converts: disappointment. As opposed to previous authors who focus largely on the structural factors pre-dating conversion, the focus here is more on what happens *after* individuals convert. It is argued that post-conversion, converts can struggle to fit into their new faith community and build strong positive attachments for a variety of reasons, including an overly romantic view of Islam and challenges navigating the cultural dimension of religious practices.[5] As a result, a pronounced sense of disappointment caused by the apparent gap between their idealized expectations of their new religion and reality can create resentment, isolation, and a search for a solution to this new problem. Here, the critiques offered by Daesh and Al-Qaeda of Islam as practiced by many Muslims in the West, in addition the view of the West as a corrupting influence, may be especially resonant and prompt radicalization. Consideration of the role of disappointment in the radicalization of converts has not been explored before.

To make this argument, this thesis uses the social media history of Andre Poulin, one of the more prominent Canadian members of Daesh, to explore how his "cognitive opening"[6] to violent extremism may have emerged. Importantly, the temporal nature of Poulin's posting history over

[4] National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism, "Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States [Data File, Version 3.2]," 2018, http://www.start.umd.edu/pirus.
[5] Madeleine Sultán, "Choosing Islam: A Study of Swedish Converts," *Social Compass* 46, no. 3 (1999): 325–35; Maha Al-Qwidi, "Understanding the Stages of Conversion to Islam: The Voices of British Converts" (University of Leeds, 2002); Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).
[6] Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam," *Rhodes College Research Paper*, 2004, http://insct.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Wiktorowicz.Joining-the-Cause.pdf.

a series of years gives insight into the process of his radicalization that would otherwise be missed if his story were distilled to simply a series of variables.

The following analysis will critically engage with the existing literature on religious converts who become involved in violent extremism, and the religious conversion literature in general. It explores potential personal and social characteristics that make converts a "unique" subset (or not) of violent extremists and presents primary and secondary findings on individual case studies of Canadian religious converts who have been radicalized to violence. In contrast to much of the existing literature on this topic, this thesis seeks to incorporate literature from outside the narrowly constructed domain of 'terrorism studies', with specific attention paid to literature from the sociology and psychology of religion that explores conversion in general.[7] This decision was in response to an identified need within the discipline of terrorism studies to look at existing scholarship in related areas of study, as opposed to continually 'reinventing the wheel' to deal with a relatively niche subject.

This thesis's analysis first raises questions related to the findings of previous studies and some common assumptions on the linkage between radicalization to violence and conversion. Many previous authors have settled on some variant of the four following factors to explain converts' involvement: the role of structural factors, the presence of religious zeal, the absence of religious knowledge or radicalization occurring immediately after conversion. While these explanations each have their own intuitive appeal, they are both independently and jointly insufficient. In the dataset, none of these indicators are present across all or even most cases, and

[7] Lorne L Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements and the Radicalization of Home-Grown Terrorists: Opening a Dialogue," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 1 (2009): 1–21.

further, at least some of these variables should be understood as antecedents to conversion in general, not risk factors for subsequent radicalization to violence.

Existing literature on radicalization is sensitive to the heterogeneity of histories and experiences of born Muslims who radicalized to violence; however, this thesis argues that this also holds true for converts who became involved in violent extremism. Some radicalized converts were clearly recruited by others during a point of acute social and personal vulnerability in their lives: individuals like Martin Couture-Rouleau and Michael Zehaf-Bibeau are clear examples of this. However, other radical converts have served as charismatic leaders within terrorist groups or organizations, directly or indirectly inspiring other Canadians to attempt to leave the country and join the fight in Syria and Iraq.

For example, both Damian Clairmont, from Calgary, and Andre Poulin, from Timmins, fit this archetype – the former was a leader within a cluster of several Calgarians who travelled to fight in Iraq and Syria, while the latter inspired roughly five other Canadians to join Daesh.[8] Acknowledging this heterogeneity allows future study to be more precise when discussing radical violence, and further seeks to problematize narratives that characterize violent religious converts as purely passive actors without agency. An analysis of the Radicalized Canada Convert data (RCC) finds that most Canadian converts involved in violent extremism are marked by their normalcy rather than their dysfunction. Further, this thesis argues that the current overreliance on a view that often portrays converts from a deficit-based perspective may be impeding progress in understanding how these individuals come to be involved in violent extremism. This is not to say that previously identified factors, like criminality or mental health, are not pertinent at all; the

[8] Nazim Baksh and Adrienne Arsenault, "Timmins, Ont.-Born Jihadist Recruited 5 Others for ISIS," *CBC News*, 2015, https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/timmins-ont-born-jihadist-recruited-5-others-for-isis-1.2978988.

data presented here are not robust or comparative enough to draw this conclusion. Instead, this thesis argues that a sustained focus on these explanations, especially given their uneven occurrence across cases, obfuscates other cognitive and ideational variables which have more causal weight in explaining the transition from religious conversion to radicalization. Outside of posing a challenge, or at least qualification to some previous findings in this area, this study reveals the somewhat unique social dynamics of conversion that converts have a tendency to experience - and how that socialization process may create vulnerabilities to radicalization to violence in idiosyncratic ways.

Put simply, religious converts, radicalized or not, often experience some sense of dislocation (imagined or actual) and exclusion – both from s co-religionists of their new-found faith and in some instances, their pre-conversion friends and family. This in-group isolation – from their new co-religionists – may generate vulnerability due to an acute and pronounced feeling of post-conversion disappointment.[9] Already engaged in a profound form of identity transformation, this experience of dual or multiple exclusion may generate a cognitive opening to another form of conversion – namely radicalization to violence. However, given this shared experience among many converts, it must then be asked – what differentiates converts who are radicalized to violence?

The answer here is incomplete – and to an extent speculative. However, the answer may be, unsatisfyingly, that chance and random encounters may play a more significant role than many academics and analysts would care to recognize.[10] If an individual encounters violent extremist

[9] Anne Sofie Roald, "The Conversion Process in Stages: New Muslims in the Twenty-First Century," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 3 (2012): 355.
[10] Lorne L Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model for Explaining Homegrown Terrorist Radicalisation," *ICCT Research Note*, no. January (2017), https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/ICCT-Dawson-Social-Ecology-Model-of-Radicalisation-Jan2017-2.pdf.

beliefs and networks at a time of more pronounced emotional disruption, they may be more willing to accept these beliefs and act on them than they would be at other points in their lives. This conclusion underscores the unpredictable and highly variable nature of radicalization to violence, while also identifying two key processes which work together to create some degree of risk: the role of social networks and the impact of post-conversion disappointment. Encouragingly, however, this finding generates several potential avenues for future research and, possibly, preventative efforts.

One final note: conversion is change in response to some personal need,[11] and is not in itself indicative of a turn to radicalism or violence. As previous studies have shown, for the vast majority of converts to any religion, their conversion is primarily a positive life experience that generates desirable social and individual outcomes.[12] This thesis aims to avoid casting aspersion on, or advancing arguments in favour of further securitizing, Muslim communities in the West. This is a community that is already subjected to intense, indiscriminate, and unwarranted suspicion, an unfortunate reality that is doubly true for converts to Islam.[13]

2. Methodology and Terms

2.1 Development of the Radicalized Canadian Convert (RCC) Data Set

[11] John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 862.
[12] Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts*; Roald, "The Conversion Process in Stages: New Muslims in the Twenty-First Century"; Scott Flower and Deborah Birkett, "(Mis)Understanding Muslim Converts in Canada: A Critical Discussion of Muslim Converts in the Contexts of Security and Society," 2014, http://tsas.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/TSASWP14-06_Flower-Birkett.pdf; Raymond F. Paloutzian, James T. Richardson, and Lewis R. Rambo, "Religious Conversion and Personality Change," *Journal of Personality* 67, no. 6 (1999): 1047–79.
[13] Kevin Brice, "A Minority Within a Minority: A Report on Converts To Islam in the United Kingdom," *Faith Matters*, 2010, http://faith-matters.org/images/stories/fm-reports/a-minority-within-a-minority-a-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk.pdf.

One of the most important contributions of this research is the construction of a novel dataset of 25 Canadian converts involved in violent extremism post-9/11. This dataset includes 20 variables that are tested against indicators offered by several previous academic studies on the subject. Each variable is available in Appendix I at the end of this document, but in general they include many of the explanations commonly offered by other authors, which are discussed in more detail below. These data were drawn from publicly available secondary sources (i.e., journalistic, legal, and academic) and are supplemented where possible by an analysis of individuals' social media activity. While the present study selects on the dependent variable (involvement in terrorism) out of necessity, testing these 20 variables against a control group, meaning converts who did not become involved in violent extremism, would be a worthwhile initiative for further research.[14]

Where possible, to provide some comparative context, references to the Prior Instances of Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database are included. This database, developed by researchers at the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), represents one of the only systematic efforts to develop qualitatively rich and rigorously coded profiles of individuals who radicalized to violence. While the PIRUS data focuses exclusively on cases in the United States, several similarities between the Canadian data and the PIRUS data indicate that the findings in this thesis may have some relevance to different contexts and are worthy of further exploration. However, even the START database has clear limitations. PIRUS, which has catalogued profiles of every individual who carried out any form of ideologically motivated violence in the United States – a country with a

[14] A recent study by Geelhoed, Staring and Schuurman is a promising development on this front, wherein they interviewed 26 converts (radical and non-radical) in an effort to introduce a control group. See: Fiore Geelhoed, Richard Staring, and Bart Schuurman, "Understanding Dutch Converts to Islam: On Turbulent Trajectories and (Non-) Involvement in Jihadist Movements" (The Hague, 2019).

population of roughly 325 million people – has fewer than 2800 cases for the period between 1948 and 2017.[15] The low base rate of violent extremists, which while a good thing for society, presents a methodological challenge for those studying violent extremism.

More attention should be paid to inductive theory-making and hypothesis generation through careful analysis of smaller datasets before moving on to the deductive analysis of larger datasets. Not only does PIRUS complement the RCC data by allowing for some comparative analysis, but it is also a more comprehensive dataset. Relative to Canada, there is significantly more data available about individual American extremists: U.S. court records – containing interviews with the extremists, search warrants and affidavits – are readily available online, prosecutors tend to communicate details of the cases more frequently, and U.S. media appear to be more interested in covering extremism than their Canadian counterparts.[16]

2.2 In-Depth Case Study: The Forum Post History of Andre Poulin

During the research process to build the RCC dataset, multiple year's worth of posts on *ummah.com* from Andre Poulin were found. *Ummah.com* was a site that was at one time very popular with young Muslims. Poulin featured in two of Daesh's most well-known recruitment videos targeted towards the English-speaking world, both of which touted the benefits of living under the state in Syria and Iraq as contrasted with a life of sin and excess in the West and served as an important charismatic figure in encouraging other Canadians to travel to Syria.[17] This data is quite unique: media coverage and the academic study of radicalization are both often marked

[15] National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism, "Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States [Data File, Version 3.2]."
[16] There are, of course, some notable exceptions: Stewart Bell, Michelle Sheppard and Dylan Robertson have done exceptional reporting.
[17] Poulin featured in both *Flames of War*, the most well-known Daesh video produced at the peak of the group's power, as well as *Al-Ghuraba: The Chosen Few from Different Lands* which focused specifically on foreign fighters joining the group.

by the absence of primary data,[18] especially data interviews or statements by violent extremists themselves on why they became involved in the first place.[19] While these accounts are crucial to improving our understanding,[20] many such accounts occur post-hoc, which create some interpretative challenges. Horgan observes that: "all accounts are partial because they reflect current and past situations, and the detail associated with some of them may or may not be demonstrably false if there is an agenda that is being played out."[21] While Dawson offers a convincing argument that some concerns over the validity of such accounts may be overstated,[22] the critique has nevertheless presented a significant methodological hurdle. The data provides a way to partially sidestep this issue.

With Poulin's postings not only was a personal account of his own radicalization available, but there was also a temporal dimension to it. His posts span the time before, during and after his radicalization. When reading through the posts, they highlight the dynamic nature of his radicalization process, and the saliency of various factors at different points in his radicalization. They also provide clear insight into his psychological state. Of course, Poulin's contemporaneous account certainly contains its own biases and, likely, untrue information. Nevertheless, the postings remain a unique piece of data, making them worthy of closer study.

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[18] Bart Schuurman, "Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2018, 1–16.
[19] Lorne L Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters : Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 3 (2017): 191–210.
[20] Simon Copeland, "Telling Stories of Terrorism: A Framework for Applying Narrative Approaches to the Study of Militant's Self-Accounts," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 11, no. 3 (2019): 232–53; John G. Horgan, "Interviewing the Terrorists: Reflections on Fieldwork and Implications for Psychological Research," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 4, no. 3 (2012): 195–211; Lorne L Dawson, "Taking Terrorist Accounts of Their Motivations Seriously: An Exploration of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 5 (2019): 74–89.
[21] Horgan, "Interviewing the Terrorists: Reflections on Fieldwork and Implications for Psychological Research," 200.
[22] Dawson, "Taking Terrorist Accounts of Their Motivations Seriously: An Exploration of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion."

Likewise, there are reasons to suspect that his contemporaneous accounts of his psychological state may, in many ways, be less biased than a post-hoc interview or survey.

Analyzing these forum posts revealed the most novel contribution of this thesis: the possible role that disappointment plays in explaining the radicalization of converts. Over time, Poulin's disappointment with his new religious community became clear through his comments and was evidently linked to his subsequent radicalization. This underexplored pathway is worthy of further study.

The structure of the argument is as follows. First, this thesis reviews the existing literature on two topics: religious conversion and radicalization and put two in conversation with each other.[23] The literature review critiques previous attempts to downplay the role of ideological radicalization and terrorism and instead stresses the necessity of carefully considering the roles faith and religion and their related emotions play in radicalization. The subsequent section expands on the challenge that converts pose to existing models of radicalization, many of which are explicitly or implicitly predicated on the experience of growing up as a Muslim in the West, a precondition that does not hold for converts. Next, the thesis summarizes previous efforts to explain convert radicalization and draw out the four key hypotheses that have emerged from previous studies.

Using the RCC, there is then an empirical and theoretical test of the adequacy of each explanation, ultimately arguing that none of the previous models provide compelling explanations. Finally, this thesis describes how disappointment may facilitate radicalization to

[23] Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements and the Radicalization of Home-Grown Terrorists: Opening a Dialogue."

violence before concluding with a discussion of the broader implications of this finding for the study of radicalization in general.

2.3 Definitions

Many of the terms currently associated with the study of violent extremism, or terrorism are emotionally charged and highly contested. While legal definitions to describe, prohibit and prosecute acts of terrorism have been developed, there remains no academic consensus about how terrorism and related phenomena ought to be understood. Gregory Levitt likened the search for a definition of terrorism to the quest for the Holy Grail:

> "The search for a legal definition of terrorism in some ways resembles the quest for the Holy Grail: periodically, eager souls set out, full of purpose, energy and self-confidence, to succeed where so many others before have tried and failed. Some, daunted by the difficulties and dangers along the way, give up, often declaring the quest meaningless. Others return claiming victory, proudly bearing an object they insist is the real thing but which to everyone else looks more like the same old used cup, perhaps re-decorated in a slightly original way."[24]

One key point to consider is the importance of maintaining the analytical usefulness and rigor of contested terms. For these reasons, while many of the terms used in this thesis remain open to reasonable debate, this thesis will attempt to, for the most part, sidestep these debates in the interest of brevity.

2.3.1 Terrorism

Particularly in the post-9/11 environment, the label of 'terrorist' has taken on emotionally charged reactions, as well as an important and distinctive legal character. Unfortunately, the fundamental struggle of developing a definition is, as Laqueur noted, that "one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter".[25] Laqueur was primarily reflecting on the anti-colonial struggle

[24] Geoffrey Levitt, "Is 'Terrorism' Worth Defining?," *Ohio Northern University Law Review* 13 (1987): 97.
[25] Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), 7.

across the Middle East and North Africa that characterized terrorism in the latter half of the 20th century, but the sentiment remains appropriate. In addition to concerns over the use of the word unfairly impugning what some may (reasonably) view as a noble cause,[26] attempts to broaden the scope of what terrorism is risks eroding the terms usefulness.

This thesis defines terrorism as violence or the threat of violence, committed by a non-state actor against civilian or non-combatant targets [27] to advance an ideological or political goal.[28] Importantly, terrorism should be understood to be primarily a tactic – not an essential characteristic of any ideology or group. Groups whose primary tactic to achieve their objectives is the use of terrorism, and who are designated by the Canadian government as Listed Terrorist Entities will be referred to as terrorist organizations.[29]

2.3.2 Extremism & Violent Extremism

There was a move in the years after 9/11 to 'parse' terrorism into its constituent parts to both allow for greater analytic clarity and in recognition that the word terrorism often did not adequately capture the movements that were being studied, nor did all terrorists necessarily have an extreme ideology motivating their acts of violence. For example, many of the anti-colonial movements in North Africa used terrorist tactics, but their ultimate goal – self-determination, was not extreme in itself. As J.M. Berger notes:

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[26] Richard Jackson, "Constructing Enemies : 'Islamic Terrorism' in Political and Academic Discourse," *Government and Opposition* 42, no. 3 (2007): 395.

[27] There exists a lively debate in the terrorism studies literature about whether or not states can engage in acts of terrorism, which I consciously side step. While the issue is interesting, it is not especially germane to the overall thrust of the argument made herein. For a thorough critique of the exclusion of state actors in orthodox terrorism studies, see Ruth Blakeley, "Bringing the State Back Into Terrorism Studies," *European Political Science* 6, no. 3 (2007): 228–35.

[28] Leonard Weinberg et al., "The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 4 (January 2004): 777–94; Alex Schmid, "Terrorism - The Definitional Problem," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 36, no. 2/3 (2004): 375-375–3419.

[29] Public Safety Canada, "Currently Listed Entities," 2018, https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrt/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrnt-lstd-ntts-en.aspx.

> "Terrorism is a tactic, whereas extremism is a belief system. Because extremist movements are often small, they are motivated to adopt asymmetrical tactics such as terrorism. When extremists do use terrorism, they usually create ideological justifications to support that decision. But many extremists eschew terrorism, and not everyone who employs the tactic of terrorism is necessarily an extremist."[30]

The term "violent extremism" entered the academic and political discourse on security and terrorism over the last eight to ten years, for at least two important reasons. First, it began with the recognition that the phrase 'terrorism' was often viewed outside of academia as an inherently 'political' and frequently stigmatizing word for certain ethnocultural or religious communities. Muslims around the world, who bore the brunt of post-9/11 securitization, justifiably felt the term was overapplied in cases where the perpetrator of an attack was racialized.[31] Second, the term "terrorism" tends to conjure images of a highly-organized, internationalized group or cell, as opposed to the seemingly disorganized "bunch of guys"[32] or "lone actors"[33] involved in organizing and perpetrating many of the post-9/11 attacks in the Western world. However, the differences in both the capacities and threat level between, for example, simultaneous airline hijackings and a single individual stabbing people on public transit, is analytically substantial. For the purposes of this work, violent extremism refers to the actions of groups or individuals who use violence in pursuit of a goal or objective that involves a fundamental reordering of society motivated by political, religious, or otherwise ideological purposes.

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[30] J.M. Berger, *Extremism* (MIT Press, 2018), 29–30.
[31] Adrian Cherney and Kristina Murphy, "Being a 'Suspect Community' in a Post 9/11 World – The Impact of the War on Terror on Muslim Communities in Australia," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 4 (2016): 480–96; Gabe Mythen, Sandra Walklate, and Fatima Khan, "'I'm a Muslim, but I'm Not a Terrorist': Victimization, Risky Identities and the Performance of Safety," *British Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 6 (2009): 736–54.
[32] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terrorist Networks in the 21st Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
[33] Paul Gill, John G. Horgan, and Paige Deckert, "Bombing Alone : Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 59, no. 2 (2014).

2.3.4 Radicalization (to Violence)

There is nothing inherently dangerous in radical political beliefs. Individuals like Mother Theresa, Gandhi and Martin Luther King were all radicals in so far as their views on how society ought to be structured were tremendously different from the mainstream. Even those who hold radical, repugnant views about other religions, sexual or gender identities, ethnicities, etc. are not necessarily concerning, and in most states, have a constitutionally or legally protected right to express radical views or opinions that significantly differ from mainstream or orthodox political thought. Radicalization only becomes troubling when it starts to move beyond a desire to bring about some fundamental change in society and towards believing that change can only be achieved using violence.

Braddock and Horgan similarly note that radicalization is a "poorly defined, inconsistently used term that has been used to characterize everything from acquiring extreme beliefs to actual engagement in violent activity".[34] Sageman notes radicalization itself must be understood in two different ways: first, as cognitive radicalization, which is the "acquisition of extreme ideas", and second, as behavioral radicalization, meaning "the turn to violence…allegedly based on these extreme beliefs". This view is supported by Peter Neumann, who cites the need to establish an "end point" of radicalization, that is, whether the outcome of radical beliefs is violent.[35] The fundamental tension between differing conceptualizations of radicalization is whether or not cognitive radicalization – or extreme beliefs – is a necessary precursor for engagement in terrorist violence, or whether or not the two are even strongly

[34] Kurt Braddock and John G. Horgan, "Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39, no. 5 (2016): 385.
[35] Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 90; Peter R Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 874.

related at all. This debate is highly relevant for the argument of this thesis and will therefore be discussed in more detail in a subsequent section.

This thesis uses a definition similar to that developed by Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins: [36] radicalization to violence is a complex, non-linear pathway by which an individual adopts an extremist ideology that moves beyond the limits of reasonable debate and employs (or materially supports) violence to advance this set of beliefs. In what follows, radicalization and radicalization to violence will be used interchangeably, referring to the same outcome – the non-linear process of becoming engaged in criminality or violence to advance an ideological cause or goal.

2.3.6 Conversion

In its most simplistic form, conversion can refer to any process by which an individual comes to hold a new "ordered view" of reality.[37] It is important to note that this conversion cannot be performative, it must be genuine and constitute "not only a change in values, beliefs, and identities, but more fundamentally and significantly… the displacement of one universe of discourse by another or the ascendance of a formerly peripheral universe of discourse to the status of a primary authority."[38] Max Heirich summarizes conversion as a "changing a sense of root reality" or "a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding".[39] This change in an individual's attitude and framework for *understanding* the world, not just their behavior, is an important differentiating factor that separates religious conversion from more minor forms of religious

[36] Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 11 (2015): 960.
[37] Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," 862.
[38] David A Snow and Richard Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion," *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984): 171.
[39] Max Heirich, "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories About Religious Conversion," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 3 (1977): 673–74.

change, such as affiliation.[40] Lofland and Stark differentiate between verbal converts, "who professed belief and were accepted…as sincere" and total converts, "who exhibited their commitment through deeds as well as words",[41] it is the latter group this thesis is especially interested in.

This distinction is important given the argument made herein is about converts who come to view the world in an entirely different way, and go so far as to sacrifice themselves in order to bring about change, making the totality of their conversion extremely clear. An admittedly imperfect and less extreme way to differentiate the two may be to imagine someone joining a Pentecostal church to satisfy a spouse (affiliation) in contrast with someone joining the church after having been spiritually moved by seeing someone speak in tongues. Intuitively, it is likely that the latter would constitute a more intense form of conversion that would alter both the behavior and cognitive outlook of the converter in a more fulsome way. As mentioned above, when referencing conversion, it is taken to mean the process whereby one adopts a new religious or moral way of ordering their world.

2.3.7 Disappointment

One of the novel contributions this thesis makes is its exploration of the role that disappointment may play in radicalization to violence. A definition of disappointment offered by Dijk and Manstead is helpful here. The two authors define the emotion as one "[arising] from comparing an obtained outcome with a better outcome that might have resulted from the same choice being made; that is, disappointment stems from disconfirmed expectancies".[42]

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[40] Lorne L Dawson, "Self-Affirmation, Freedom, and Rationality: Theoretically Elaborating 'Active' Conversions," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 2 (1990): 146.
[41] Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," 864.
[42] Wilco W Van Dijk and Antonys R Manstead, "The Experience of Regret and Disappointment," *Cognition and Emotion* 12, no. 2 (1998): 222.

Importantly, such situations are tend to be "appraised as relatively uncontrollable and caused by an agent other than the self", [43] meaning that blame often rests outside of the individual experiencing the emotion. Importantly, disappointment is also more likely to be felt when there is a large gap between expected positive outcomes and actual outcomes.[44] In the context of religious conversion, disappointment refers to the gap between one's expectations of their new faith and religious community and the reality of each post-conversion.

[43] Nico H Frijda, Peter Kuipers, and Elisabeth Schure, "Relations Among Emotion, Appraisal, and Emotional Action Readiness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 2 (1989): 224.; see analysis in: Wilco W Van Dijk, Marcel Zeelenberg, and Marcel Zeelenberg, "What Do We Talk about When We Talk about Disappointment ? Distinguishing Outcome- Related Disappointment from Person-Related Disappointment," *Cognition and Emotion* 16, no. 6 (2002): 789.

[44] Dijk, Zeelenberg, and Zeelenberg, "What Do We Talk about When We Talk about Disappointment ? Distinguishing Outcome- Related Disappointment from Person-Related Disappointment," 790.

3. Reviewing the Literature

It is also necessary to provide an overview of the literature related to the two key processes discussed herein: radicalization and conversion. The first concept necessitates drawing from a broad array of disciplines, reflecting the multi-disciplinary nature of terrorism studies, whereas the latter primarily rests within sociological and religious studies literature. Importantly, there has been curiously little cross-pollination across the terrorism studies and religious studies, which has resulted in limited engagement with ideological variables in the terrorism studies research in comparison to structural or demographic variables.

3.1 Conversion Literature

Reviewing the conversion literature is relevant to the arguments advanced in this thesis for two reasons. First, given the topic, understanding the literature on conversion in general is important as it provides broader context to understand the phenomena, as opposed to viewing radicalized converts solely through the lens of terrorism studies. As will become apparent below, failing to do so impedes our analysis as we come to view radical converts as an entirely unique population, rather than as a subset of a larger population: religious converts. Viewing these people as religious converts who subsequently radicalize – differentiating the conversion process and the radicalization process – allows for a more complete understanding of radicalization. Second, it reveals the parallels between the study of religious conversion and the study of radicalization to violence, specifically as it relates to an individual's agency in each process, and the role (or not) of factors like class and family history. Many early theorists of religious conversion viewed these factors as highly influential, an opinion that over time waned as scholars began to better understand the phenomena; however, many scholars of radicalization still view these factors as explanatory.

Much of the early literature on conversion comes from writers working within, or trying to explain, the Christian tradition. For many decades, interest in conversion was largely limited to religious scholars, many of whom treated the question primarily as one of theology, and not sociology or psychology, or to historians who sought to trace the spread of Christianity through pagan Europe from the third century onwards.[45] Writing in 1977, Max Heirich argued that most of the literature written in the first half of the 20th century lacked generalizability and clear causal mechanisms, making it of little social scientific utility.[46]

The systematic study of religious conversion by sociologists and psychologists emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, with some of Edwin Starbuck's work in the early 1900s being an important exception.[47] This interest was animated in part by the rapid growth in both non-western religion in the western world, and the emergence of a number of new religious movements (NRMs), often referred to colloquially as cults. Snow and Machalek noted in the mid-1980s that a significant majority of the sociological literature on religious conversion at that point in time had been authored in the preceding 20 years and much of it was focused on NRMs or related revivalist movements within Christianity.[48] The emergence of NRMs and subsequent increase in research on these movements revealed two key, interrelated debates within the literature: the nature of religious conversion and the types of people who undergo religious conversion.

[45] Simon Price, "The Road to 'Conversion': The Life and Work of A.D. Nock," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 105 (2010): 317–39.
[46] Heirich, "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories About Religious Conversion," 657.
[47] Edwin Diller Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness* (Walter Scott, 1899).
[48] Snow and Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion," 167.

Initial anecdotal studies and media coverage of who sought out a new religious identity, and specifically those who joined NRMs, tended to cast converts as "young, idealistic and gullible people" or "maladjusted and marginal losers"[49] whose "socialization circumstances…leave one ripe for the plucking".[50] However, over time, it became clear that this line of reasoning was perhaps more of an attempt to distinguish converts as uniquely persuadable – especially those who joined NRMs, thereby providing a convenient logic to ignore their conversion, than it was a belief based in evidence. Closer study of the phenomenon revealed that, by and large, converts did not look appreciably different from the general population – the majority were well-educated,[51] came from reasonably affluent homes,[52] and were not psychologically distinct or deviant.[53] One of the key insights from this closer study was the pronounced importance of social networks in an individual's initial involvement and conversion.[54]

3.1.1 Active vs. Passive Conversion

One of the more entrenched, but important, early debates relates to the nature of religious conversion itself – is it a process which an individual seeks out and has some agency in bringing about ('active conversion') or is it something done to someone, due to events or pressures beyond their direct control ('passive conversion'). Most early scholars studying conversion to an NRM adopted some variant of the 'passive' framework for understanding conversion,[55] where

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[49] Lorne L Dawson, "Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why: Twenty Years of Research and What Have We Learned?," *Studies in Religion* 25, no. 2 (1996): 143–44.
[50] Heirich, "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories About Religious Conversion," 656.
[51] Dawson, "Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why: Twenty Years of Research and What Have We Learned?," 154.
[52] Saul Levine, *Radical Depatures: Desperate Detours to Growing Up* (Harcourt Books, 1984); Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 196–205.
[53] John P Kildahl, "The Personalities of Sudden Religious Converts," *Pastoral Psychology* 16, no. 6 (1965): 41; Joel Allison, "Adaptive Regression and Intense Religious Experiences," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 145, no. 6 (1968): 456.
[54] Heirich, "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories About Religious Conversion," 673; Dawson, "Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why: Twenty Years of Research and What Have We Learned?," 147.
[55] Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective"; Dennis Parrucci, "Religious Conversion: A Theory of Deviant Behavior," *Sociological Analysis* 29, no. 3 (1968): 144–54.

"the individual is conceptualized as a passive recipient of personality changes and life experiences. Whether psychologically predisposed or situationally tempered, individuals' conversions are considered determined, in large part, by impersonal and powerful forces acting upon them, within them, or both."[56] This view of conversion dates back to early Christianity and Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, where a beam of light descended upon Paul, and he spoke with the Lord and was from that point forward, one of the early church's most prolific missionaries. In the story of Paul's conversion, powerful external force act upon the passive convert.[57]

Conversely, the 'active', or 'rational',[58] theory of conversion allows for more agency on the part of the individual, and conceives of the convert as an "individual seeker striving and strategizing to achieve meaningful change in his or her life experience",[59] where the conversion is the result of something more than merely structural forces acting upon the individual. This model does not ignore or negate the role that external forces may create in generating a search, but rather stresses the fact that the convert can respond, or not, to these forces. This shift was in part the result of a broader change in the social scientific literature that "allowed for an acting and conscious human agent".[60] This active model of conversion has since become the dominant paradigm for understanding religious conversion among most scholars.

3.1.2. Motifs and Models of Conversion

[56] Brock Kilbourne and James T. Richardson, "Paradigm Conflict, Types of Conversion, and Conversion Theories," *Sociological Analysis* 50, no. 1 (1989): 2.
[57] James T. Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24, no. 2 (1985): 165.
[58] Dawson, "Self-Affirmation, Freedom, and Rationality: Theoretically Elaborating 'Active' Conversions."
[59] Roger A. Straus, "Religious Conversion as a Personal And Collective Accomplishment," *Sociological Analysis* 40, no. 2 (1979): 158.
[60] Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research," 167.

In 1965, Lofland and Stark, working within a passive conversion paradigm, introduced a model of conversion that they termed "conversion to a deviant perspective", known colloquially as the 'World Saver' model.[61] The authors analyze the personal information of converts to a NRM based in the Bay Area of California. The model introduced seven stages of conversion: (1) tension between an idealized state and a person's current circumstances; (2) adoption of a problem-solving perspective wherein people attempt to bring about the idealized state (of note, Lofland and Stark suggest religion is one of the modes of problem solving); (3) religious seekership, where individuals settle on a religious understanding of, and solution to, their current problem; (4) turning points, or "situations in which old obligations and lines of action were diminished and new involvements became desirable"[62] (i.e. loss of employment, breakdown in relationship, etc.); (5) development of affective bonds between the convert and members of the NRM; (6) extra-cult affective bonds, meaning friends or family outside the NRM, begin to fall away or do not act to stop the convert from joining the NRM; finally (7) intensive interaction between the convert and other members of the NRM.

Lofland and Stark argue that it is this 7th stage where a convert transitions from "verbal conversion" towards being a "total convert"—that is, someone who "put their lives at the disposal of the cult".[63] Perhaps its most lasting contribution[64] of the World Saver model is that it identifies the importance of relationships built between converts and existing members of the religion. However, its conceptualization of conversion as a necessarily linear and stage-dependent process did not hold up well to subsequent scrutiny. Of some interest given the topic

[61] Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective."
[62] Lofland and Stark, 870.
[63] Lofland and Stark, 873.
[64] Roy L. Austin, "Empirical Adequacy of Lofland's Conversion Model," *Review of Religious Research* 18, no. 3 (1977): 282–87; Willem Kox, Wim Meeus, and Harm't Hart, "Religious Conversion of Adolescents: Testing the Lofland and Stark Model of Religious Conversion," *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 3 (1989): 227–40.

of this thesis, the World Saver approach to conceptualizing the conversion process has also been applied to understanding radicalization to violence.[65]

Later in 1981, Lofland and Skonovd introduced a new typology of what they termed "conversion motifs".[66] Of interest, in the fifteen years between the 'World Saver' model and Lofland's subsequent work on conversion motifs, they appear to have allowed for a more activist view of conversion. This later paper attempts to balance the convert's subjective view of the experience with a more objective analysis: "[w]e want also — on the other 'side' — to 'bracket' that subjective experience in longer, temporal terms and in broader ways than the convert might be prone to do".[67] Their paper offers six motifs: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive;[68] intellectual converts have the most agency, or represent the most 'active' converts, in the model while coerced converts most closely match up with the understanding of passive conversion.

Lofland and Skonovd predict that while up to the point of their writing, intellectual converts, or those whose conversion "commences with individual, private investigation",[69] were relatively rare,[70] they are likely to become increasingly common as the privatization of religion and technological change makes it "very easy for people privately to control their own decisions about religious beliefs, organizations, and even ways of life quite apart from any physically embodied social contact, support, or inducement of an affect-laden sort".[71] Their prediction

[65] Randy Borum, "The Etiology of Radicalization," in *The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism*, ed. Gary Lafree and Joshua D. Frielich (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 22; J. van den Elzen, "Radicalisation: A Subtype of Religious Conversion?," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (2018): 69–80.
[66] John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (1981): 373–85.
[67] Lofland and Skonovd, 374.
[68] Lofland and Skonovd, 375.
[69] Lofland and Skonovd, 376.
[70] This is asserted in the paper without a significant amount of evidence, and I am not sure I accept this as correct.
[71] Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 377.

appears to have borne out across cultural and religious contexts. Many contemporary converts to Islam in the West tend to fit the 'intellectual' motif'[72] which may be due in part to the large increase in the accessibility of core Islamic texts available on the internet,[73] and the general intellectual turn in conversions.[74] In practice, this means that many of them may come to the faith with pre-existing knowledge and idealized expectations of what it means to be a Muslim.[75] This gap between expectation and reality can create a series of powerful emotions, disappointment being one of them, which factors into both a convert's initial attempt to fit-in to their new community, and their subsequent radicalization to violence.

Writing in 1994, Lewis Rambo expanded on the work of Lofland and Skonovd to develop a model of religious conversion that aimed to address some of the criticisms of earlier models by providing a model that was consciously "*not* universal and invariant" [76] and instead provided a way of ordering the various components of conversion into a more accessible heuristic. In his book, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, he identified seven stages to conversion: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. A convert's social context that sets the scene for conversion, a personal crisis that forces a search for a solution to a new problem, an encounter with a new religion occurs, and then subsequent repeated interaction with

[72] Daniel W Snook et al., "Psychology of Religion and Spirituality Conversion Motifs Among Muslim Converts in the United States," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 2019; Ali Kose and Kate Miriam Loewenthal, "Conversion Motifs Among British Converts to Islam," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10, no. 2 (2000): 65–84; Flower and Birkett, "(Mis)Understanding Muslim Converts in Canada: A Critical Discussion of Muslim Converts in the Contexts of Security and Society"; Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 54; Al-Qwidi, "Understanding the Stages of Conversion to Islam: The Voices of British Converts," 185–87.
[73] Gary R. Bunt, "'Rip. Burn. Pray'" Islamic Expression Online," in *Relgion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, ed. Lorne L Dawson and Douglas E Cowan (New York: Routledge, 2004), 123.
[74] Szabolcs Keri and Christina Sleiman, "Religious Conversion to Christianity in Muslim Refugees in Europe," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 39 (2017): 283–94.
[75] Sultán, "Choosing Islam: A Study of Swedish Converts."
[76] Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 165.

the religion and its adherents prompts commitment to the new religious community.[77] While there are parallels between Rambo's model and the earlier 'World Saver' model, Rambo's stages are less rigid and prescriptive. Instead, his model allows for a more flexible interpretation of an individual's conversion. Interestingly, as will become clearer in the next section, the broad contours of Rambo's model share a number of similarities with several theories of radicalization to violence, namely the importance of context, response to crisis and the role played by social networks and intensive social interaction.[78]

In both the debate over who converts or joins an NRM and the individual's agency in the process, the parallels between the way in which radicalization to violence are discussed are clear. Almost without exception, media coverage of a violent extremist tends to portray individuals involved in one of two ways: if there is any evidence of previous deviant behavior or mental health issues, radicalization is portrayed as the inevitable endpoint of this mental distress. If, as is the case in most instances, there are no biographical oddities in the person's history, they are cast as having somehow been brainwashed, duped, fooled, coerced, tricked, etc. into their involvement with the violent extremist group. In many ways, the field of terrorism seems to mirror the trajectory of the study of new religious movements in the 1960s and 1970s in the sense that the field still views the problem of radicalization parochially. Much like cult members, violent extremists are not necessarily "sick" or in need of saving, but instead are often active and willing participants, as will be shown below.

3.2 The Radicalization Process

[77] Rambo, 165–69.
[78] Neil Ferguson and Eve Binks, "Understanding Radicalization and Engagement in Terrorism through Religious Conversion Motifs," *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 1 (2015): 16–26.

Despite significant empirical scholarship, there is no clear agreement on how or why the radicalization process occurs, indeed the term's definition is often taken as self-evident: someone is radicalized when they come to hold radical thoughts.[79] Some academics, especially those within the critical terrorism studies tradition, even challenge the notion of 'radicalization' as an idea – arguing that this term functions as a way for the state to place artificial boundaries around acceptable beliefs, and to further marginalize and cast suspicion upon Muslim communities around the world and reinforce negative perceptions of Islam. This usually comes at the expense of critical reflection on the grievances and politics that underpin political violence.

Arun Kundnani writes that radicalization and state responses to it have emerged as a "substantial intrusion into the mental and spiritual lives of young Muslims",[80] while Nasser-Eddine et al note that the term is often used in ways that are "so broad as to criminalise legitimate political opinions whose only crime is that they differ from normative social opinion."[81] These critiques, while secondary to the subject of my thesis, are worth keeping in mind: there is something disquieting when democratic countries place too many boundaries around acceptable forms of belief and expression. History has myriad examples of previously radical ideas: gender equality, racial/ethnic integration, individual rights that were accepted and are now taken for granted. This thesis is primarily interested in and focused on when this process of radicalization ends in a point where violence is viewed as necessary and justified. Debates within the literature on the causes of radicalization are further complicated by the highly interdisciplinary nature of the terrorism studies field itself.

[79] Minerva Nasser-Eddine et al., "Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Literature Review" (Edinburugh, Australia, 2011), 12, https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a543686.pdf.
[80] Arun Kundnani, "Radicalisation: The Journey of a Concept," *Race & Class* 54, no. 2 (2012): 20.
[81] Nasser-Eddine et al., "Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Literature Review," 13.

As scholars from various academic backgrounds began to coalesce around the study of terrorism, different traditions tried to impress the primacy of their own etiology on the phenomenon. Writing in 1981, before the massive increase in articles on terrorism and radicalization that happened post-9/11, Martha Crenshaw noted, even at that point, that "the highly varied treatments" with which terrorism had been studied resulted in a "lack [of] logical comparability" within the field.[82] The early generation of scholars often offered primarily monocausal explanations. Political scientists viewed ideology and power, or reactions to them, as the source of terrorism; psychologists first viewed terrorists as psychologically deficient or unique,[83] while later looking to social psychology to explain the process;[84] sociologists looked to the power of social networks or social ecology in facilitating involvement; finally, economists looked to economic or structural inequality as explanations for involvement.[85] While the second-generation of terrorism researchers have attempted to bridge these gaps to encourage a holistic, multi-dimensional or ecological understanding of radicalization, progress is still impeded by the siloed and transient nature of many scholars of radicalization, who will often write one article on the subject, relying primarily on their own disciplinary understandings, and never publish in the field again.[86] That said, there are some points of consensus which have emerged.

3.2.1 Pathways, Puzzles and Pushes

[82] Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 379–80.
[83] For a review of the early search for the 'terrorist mind', see: Randy Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, 2004), 18–21, https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/208552.pdf.
[84] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): 415–33.
[85] James A Piazza, "Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 3 (2011): 339–53.
[86] Schuurman, "Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship," 9.

Scholars writing on individual-level explanations radicalization have tended to characterize early models of radicalization as both linear and deterministic;[87] the models presumed there was a clear trajectory that ended in violence and focused primarily on the cognitive aspects of radicalization, in essence: "extreme ideas will lead to violent actions".[88] Critics of this approach often refer to such model as variants of a 'conveyor belt' theory: once an individual gets on, they are unable to get off.[89] Notably, very few authors critiquing the so-called conveyor belt theory can point to any specific instance of it; even the model most pilloried by this line of argumentation, developed by two intelligence analysts at the New York City Police Department in 2007, acknowledges people can "stop or abandon this process at different points" and admit "although this model is sequential, individuals do not always follow a perfectly linear progression".[90] Nevertheless, essentially every serious author writing in the discipline now recognizes the multifactorial, [91] non-linear nature of radicalization to violence; a person's social environment and network are influential and focusing on beliefs to the exclusion of all other variables is ineffective. Like the conversion models discussed above, consideration of a person's context is essential to understanding the process.

Still, though, the level of analysis and way of conceptualizing the interplay of the different variables varies across studies, the summary below is not an exhaustive list of the various interpretive schema, but rather a few exemplars of the various conceptual approaches

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[87] Earlier scholarship on previous waves of terrorism focused more on group-level explanations, but given the focus of this thesis this body of literature is not particularly pertinent.
[88] Lauren Powell, "Counter-Productive Counter-Terrorism. How Is the Dysfunctional Discourse of Prevent Failing to Restrain Radicalisation?," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 8 (2016): 56.
[89] Faiza Patel, "Rethinking Radicalization" (New York, 2011), https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/RethinkingRadicalization.pdf.
[90] Mitchell D Silber and Arvin Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat," 2007, 19, http://prtl-prd-web.nyc.gov/html/nypd/downloads/pdf/public_information/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf.
[91] John G. Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (2008): 80–94.

different scholars have taken. Schuurman refers to structural factors, group dynamics and individual motivations for involvement. Structural factors refer to the economic, social and political environment of the individual; group dynamics include peer pressure, social learning and socialization; while individual factors include fanaticism, cognitive openings and anger or frustration.[92] In contrast, Webber and Kruglanski focus on "individual motivation (needs), ideological justification of violence (narratives), and group processes (networks)" as a means of ordering the relevant variables.[93]

Matteo Vergani et. al propose a three 'P' conceptualization: push, pull and personal factors of involvement, based on a systematic review of the literature on radicalization. Push factors "overlap with the structural root causes of terrorism that drive people toward resorting to violence", while pull factors include "aspects that make extremist groups and lifestyles appealing to some people, and include, for example, ideology, group belonging, group mechanisms, and other incentives".[94] Personal factors include "individual characteristics that make certain individuals more vulnerable than their circumstantially comparable peers to radicalization."[95] Finally, Hafez and Mullins use the analogy of a puzzle with the following pieces: grievances, networks, ideologies and enabling environments / support structures.[96] Their preference for a puzzle analogy is based on their belief that scholars must move their "frame of reference away from uniform and linear processes and, instead, embrace the multifactor and contextual approach

[92] Bart Schuurman, *Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 42–47.
[93] David Webber and Arie W. Kruglanski, "The Social Psychological Makings of a Terrorist," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 19 (2018): 131.
[94] Matteo Vergani et al., "The Three Ps of Radicalization: Push, Pull and Personal. A Systematic Scoping Review of the Scientific Evidence about Radicalization Into Violent Extremism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2018, 3.
[95] Vergani et al., 3.
[96] Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," 960–62.

that is implied by the puzzle metaphor".[97] Here, engagement with the criminological literature has been quite influential in shaping how scholars conceive of the process of radicalization to violence.[98]

While the relative importance of each of these factors is still debated, each of these ways of conceptualizing the problem more or less include some of the following points: the importance of social networks and movements (whether real or imagined, virtual or physical),[99] the presence of personality markers like a quest for significance and heightened need for adventure or risk,[100] the importance of social identity,[101] the presence of some sort of perceived moral wrong or sense of relative deprivation (almost exclusively discussed in the context of the experience of second-generation immigrants),[102] and some sort of triggering event that creates an openness to radicalization.[103] A few initial explanations that emerged in research conducted during the 1960s and 1970s included economic marginalization and psychopathology – both of

[97] Hafez and Mullins, 959.
[98] Joshua D. Freilich and Gary Lafree, "Criminology Theory and Terrorism: Introduction to the Special Issue," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 1 (2015): 1–8.
[99] Arie Perliger and Ami Pedahzur, "Social Network Analysis in the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 1 (2011): 45–50; Bart Schuurman et al., "Lone Actor Terrorist Attack Planning and Preparation: A Data-Driven Analysis," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 63, no. 4 (2018): 1191–1200; Schuurman, *Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist*; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terrorist Networks in the 21st Century*.
[100] Lorne L Dawson, "Clarifying the Explanatory Context for Developing Theories of Radicalization: Five Basic Considerations," *Journal for Deradicalization* 0, no. 18 (2019): 146–84; Katarzyna Jasko, Gary LaFree, and Arie Kruglanski, "Quest for Significance and Violent Extremism: The Case of Domestic Radicalization," *Political Psychology* 38, no. 5 (2017): 815–31.
[101] Dina Al Raffie, "Social Identity Theory for Investigating Islamic Extremism in the Diaspora," *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 4 (2013): 67–91; Isaac Kfir, "Social Identity Group and Human (In)Security: The Case of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 4 (2015): 233–52; Bertjan Doosje et al., "Terrorism, Radicalization and de-Radicalization," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 11 (2016): 79–84; Andrew Silke, "Holy Warriors Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization," *European Journal of Criminology* 5, no. 1 (2008): 99–123.
[102] Fathali M. Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism a Psychological Exploration," *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (2005): 161–69; Randy Borum and Robert Fein, "The Psychology of Foreign Fighters," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, no. 3 (2017): 248–66; Michael King and Donald M Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 4 (2011): 602–22.
[103] Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Rowan & Littlefield, 2005); Wiktorowicz, "Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam."

which had their own *prima facie* logic - fell away for the most part as researchers gained access to improved data.[104] An improved appreciation for the complexity of involvement in violent extremism has yielded many benefits and certainly improved the specificity of analysis. However, curiously, as scholars added in more and more variables, the role that beliefs (ideological, religious, political, etc.) play in the process has been minimized or all together erased.

3.2.2 Cognitive vs. Behavioural Radicalization

One of the more hotly contested dimensions of the radicalization literature relates to the role of ideology in the process – whether cognitive radicalization (having radical beliefs) relates to behavioral radicalization (doing violent things). The cognitive vs. behavioral debate appears to be one of necessary vs. sufficient conditions. The majority of scholars who argue for consideration of cognitive radicalization would concede that, while it is a necessary condition for engagement in violence, it is not in itself sufficient; other factors must be incorporated in order to understand engagement in violence.[105] Conversely, other scholars – particularly those heavily influenced by psychology, psychiatry or criminology – argue that cognitive radicalization is not a necessary condition, and that involvement in terrorism or violent extremism does not necessarily require any extreme beliefs.

Social psychologists Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko are perhaps the two most prominent proponents of this argument, as exemplified in their 2017 piece, "Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model".[106] The two-pyramids model was a follow-

[104] King and Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence," 616.
[105] Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model for Explaining Homegrown Terrorist Radicalisation"; Dawson, "Clarifying the Explanatory Context for Developing Theories of Radicalization: Five Basic Considerations."
[106] Clark Mccauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model," *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (2017): 205–16.

up to an earlier piece they published in 2008 that remains one of the most cited works in the field of terrorism studies.[107] In their 2017 paper, the authors claim that it is well-established that beliefs are poor predictors of behavior,[108] and that focusing on radical beliefs excludes other motivations for involvement in terrorism like emotion: "[governments assume] terrorist violence is ideologically motivated—emotional reactions are off the table. A motive as simple as revenge for perceived Western humiliation of Muslims (Khouri, 2015) is not conceivable."[109] The authors then suggest that it may simply be an "accident" of language that caused a lone-actor terrorist like the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, to be considered a terrorist and not an assassin.[110] These claims require further examination.

As Neumann points out, much of this literature rests on a "straw-man" argument that suggests a link between cognitive radicalization and mono-casual explanations of radicalization, which simply is not the case in academic studies that aim to incorporate an ideological dimension to their explanation.[111] It is generally accepted that things like objections to foreign policy, or failed relationships and isolation may increase the likelihood of an individual engaging in violent extremism, but the assertion that the Unabomber's manifesto or traveling around the world to carry out a suicide bombing are somehow disconnected from, or could occur independent of, radical beliefs and an extreme ideology strains credulity.

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[107] McCauley and Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways toward Terrorism."
[108] Most of the literature they cite to make this point relies on survey data derived from undergraduate students in introductory psychology classes and the certainty they express in the validity of these findings is perhaps overstated, given the rampant reliability and replicability issues in social psychology. See: Open Science Collaboration, "Estimating the Reproducibility of Psychological Science," *Science* 349, no. 6251 (2015).
[109] Rami G. Khouri, "Beware the Hoax of Countering Violent Extremism," Al Jazeera, 2015, http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/9/beware-the-hoax-of-countering-violent-extremism.html. cited in Mccauley and Moskalenko, "Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model."
[110] Mccauley and Moskalenko, "Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model," 212.
[111] Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," 880.

Without an ideological or religious frame to understand the world, the humiliation of Muslims would lack salience or be essentially meaningless to the individuals spurred to violence by witnessing it. Similarly, Kaczynski's insistence on the two largest newspapers in the world, the New York Times and the Washington Post, publishing his 35,000 word intricately written and well-argued manifesto would imply that – *contra* McCauley and Moskalenko's characterization of his "disordered"[112] beliefs – he actually possessed a clear worldview and wanted desperately to convince others of his way of thinking. His acts of terror were both motivated by, and meaningless without, an ideological frame.

3.2.3 The Role of Belief and Ideology in Explaining Radicalization

Ultimately, the fact that not every individual who engages in terrorism or violent extremism possesses a *comprehensive* or even necessarily *internally consistent* understanding of the ideological justification for their actions does not somehow prove that their ideological orientation had little to no bearing on their actions. Rather it suggests that there is heterogeneity in the completeness of individuals' knowledge of their ideological motivation, not evidence that it is somehow unimportant in their daily lives. As Dawson notes, "faulty theology is not a reliable indicator of degree of religiosity or the primacy of religion in someone's motivations".[113]

This should not be a contentious assertion in that the intellectual depth of extremists' understanding is likely not dissimilar from most people's understanding of any social institution. By way of analogy, the fact that many Americans likely could not fully explain the philosophical underpinnings of American conceptions of individual freedoms, the importance of democracy or individual autonomy does not mean that these values had little to no influence on their decision

[112] Mccauley and Moskalenko, "Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model," 212.
[113] Lorne L Dawson, "Discounting Religion in the Explanation of Homegrown Terrorism: A Critique," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism*, ed. James Lewis, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 40.

to engage in behavior that advances these goals (i.e. joining the military or running for public office), especially when these behaviors can impose high personal costs (i.e. dying thousands of miles away from home or a humiliating electoral defeat that severely limits one's future prospects).

Suffice to say that, much like other dimensions of radicalization, like social isolation or mental health, the degree to which ideology matters varies between cases; but unlike other variables, it is present in essentially every case one can identify. It is a necessary condition for engagement in terrorism, which by its very definition has an ideological dimension that serves to distinguishes it from other types of criminality.

The current debate over the role of beliefs is intriguing given the general acceptance of the role of politics in catalyzing earlier periods of terrorism, like the anti-colonial or communist waves across Europe and North Africa in the post-WW2 era.[114] The harsh distinction between political and religious motivations is confusing, [115] as there appears to be deep discomfort with considering that the current wave of terrorism may be religiously-motivated by the same mechanisms previous waves of terrorism were politically-motivated.[116] Namely, that violent extremism emerges in response to some perceived threat to, or desire to realize, what anthropologists and psychologists refer to as 'sacred values'. Scott Atran defines sacred values as

[114] Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism."
[115] I have consciously attempted to sidestep a broader debate here about the functional distinction between the political and religious within some strands of Islam. A number of authors have argued that such a distinction is primarily a post-Enlightenment European phenomenon, and that the neat demarcation between the two that most Western academics take for granted may not hold for non-western faiths. For further reading see: Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle over Islam Is Reshaping the World* (St. Martin's Press, 2016); Lorne L Dawson, "Challenging the Curious Erasure of Religion from the Study of Religious Terrorism," *Numen* 65 (2018): 141–64.
[116] David Rapoport, *The Four Waves of Modern Terror: International Dimensions and Consequences*, *An International History of Terrorism: Western and Non-Western Experiences*, 2013; William F. Shughart, "An Analytical History of Terrorism, 1945-2000," *Public Choice* 128, no. 1–2 (2006): 7–39.

those which "incorporate moral beliefs that drive action in ways that seem dissociated from prospects for success" and tend to be viewed by individuals as "absolute and inviolable".[117]

Such a definition logically allows for an equation of traditional sacred values more closely associated with religious belief – the supremacy of God, the holiness of Jerusalem, etc. with non-religious values or secular values.[118] In the context of previous waves of terrorism, the justifications offered by actors engaging in terrorism to bring about national self-determination or the emancipation the proletariat were taken, for the most part, at face value and not dismissed out of hand. Clearly this is not the case when analyzing religiously motivated terrorism. That many seek to dismiss or minimize the role of these values in motivating contemporary religious terrorism can likely be attributed to what Lorne Dawson terms a "secular bias",[119] wherein:

> Pervasive and instrumental professions of faith of these terrorist groups are either categorized as nothing more than propaganda, treated as the surface manifestation of deeper irrational impulses, or dismissed in favor of other social, economic, and political grievances thought to be more plausible.[120]

This bias is echoed in the early study of new religious movements which, as discussed above, initially cast recruits to NRMs as being passive subjects whose 'sickness' or mental illness were contributory to their involvement in the NRM, and were therefore in need of treatment, a process referred to as medicalization:

> Behind the medicalization of cults is the latent premise that certain kinds of religion—emotionally fervent religion, stridently supernaturalist religion, authoritarian sectarianism, life-consuming religion, spiritual ecstasy and mysticism —are socially

[117] Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod, "Reframing Sacred Values," *Negotiation Journal* 24, no. 3 (2008): 222.
[118] Morteza Dehghani et al., "Sacred Values and Conflict over Iran's Nuclear Program," *Judgment and Decision Making* 5, no. 7 (2010): 540–46.
[119] Dawson, "Challenging the Curious Erasure of Religion from the Study of Religious Terrorism," 143.
[120] Dawson, 142.

regressive and thus hostile to mankind's deepest aspirations.[121]

There are clear parallels to this early conceptualization of members of NRMs and how some academics appear to treat radicalization. Implicit in both bodies of literature appears to be a strong resistance to believing the justifications offered by extremists for their actions. This may in part flow from a deep discomfort in considering that people may engage in violent behavior due in part to their religious beliefs, especially among academics – who tend to be highly skeptical of, or outright reject, the existence of a God and therefore appear to struggle in imagining religious motivations for individuals' actions.[122] This is likely doubly true when these actions involve extreme, some fatal, personal sacrifices. Such behavior lacks a clear logic to an external, secular observer. As will be discussed in subsequent sections specifically focused on the radicalization of religious converts, the desire to overattribute causality to contextual or personal factors and minimize the role of belief is particularly pronounced in existing explanations for converts' involvement in terrorism.

3.3 Disappointment, Regret and (De)Conversion

Religious conversions seem to carry an intrinsic degree of risk – not only does the convert risk being ostracized from their family and friends due to their new religious identity, but there also seems to be a risk that their new faith community may not be what they imagined or solve the problems they hoped it would. Failure to receive the expected benefits from this new religious community is likely to result in some combination of sustained disappointment and

[121] Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, "Deprogramming, Brainwashing and the Medicalization of Deviant Religious Groups," *Social Problems* 29, no. 3 (1982): 290.
[122] Elaine Howard Ecklund and Christopher P. Scheitle, "Religion among Academic Scientists: Distinctions, Disciplines, and Demographics," *Social Problems* 54, no. 2 (2007): 296.

regret. The two emotions, while closely related, have some important differences in how people attribute cause and react to each.

As discussed above, disappointment tends to occur when an individual feels some sort of unmet expectation after making a choice, but is still satisfied with the choice itself; conversely regret comes about when the individual feels that they have made an incorrect choice.[123] Blame for the situation tends to rest external to the individual when experiencing disappointment. Behaviourally, disappointment manifests itself through attempts to achieve the expected outcome – by adopting some other strategy to overcome barriers and realize the initial goal,[124] whereas regret tends to result in "wanting to undo the event and to get a second chance".[125] In the context of religious conversion, post-conversion regret takes the form of what scholars refer to as deconversion, which simply means "the process of leaving as a gradual and voluntary phenomenon that reflects disillusionment with both the social and emotional dimensions of religious commitment".[126] However, relatively little has been written about post-conversion disappointment. What literature does exist appears to focus primarily on this emotional experience as it pertains to converts to Islam in the West and is captured explicitly or implicitly in the work of Kate Zebiri, Anne Sofie Roald, Ali Köse, and Maha al-Qwidi.[127] All four authors provide excellent accounts of the disappointment that emerges when converts struggle to fit into their new communities and perceive a gap between how they imagined being a Muslim would

[123] Dijk and Manstead, "The Experience of Regret and Disappointment," 222.
[124] Van Dijk, Van Der Pligt, and Marcel Zeelenberg, "On Bad Decisions and Discomfirmed Expectancies," *Cognition and Emotion* 14, no. 4 (2000): 537.
[125] Dijk and Manstead, "The Experience of Regret and Disappointment," 227.
[126] Janet Jacobs, "Deconversion from Religious Movements: An Analysis of Charismatic Bonding and Spiritual Commitment," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26, no. 3 (1987): 294.
[127] Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*, 64–67; Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts*, 263–72; Ali Köse, "Post-Conversion Experiences of Native British Convert to Islam," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 5, no. 2 (1994): 200–203; Al-Qwidi, "Understanding the Stages of Conversion to Islam: The Voices of British Converts," 220–30.

be, and how it is. However, outside of exemplary accounts of the sources of disappointment, none of the authors – Roald being somewhat of an exception – thoroughly explored how converts mediated or reacted to this disappointment. Instead they tended to treat this period as a minor bump in the road on a subject's conversion journey. A subsequent section of this thesis will return to disappointment and argue that one such reaction could be radicalization, but first it is necessary to further contextualize the histories of Canadian converts and their involvement in violent extremism.

4. Converts' Involvement in Violent Extremism

Most evidence suggests that converts are overrepresented among violent extremists – including both foreign fighters and individuals who engage in terrorism domestically. For example, in the United States, 29 per cent of individuals charged with terrorism offences in Jihadist plots or successful attacks post-9/11 have been converts, while converts only represent approximately 20 per cent of the U.S. Muslim population.[128] Similarly, in the United Kingdom, 16 per cent of terrorist related offences between 1998 and 2015 were carried out by converts, despite converts only representing approximately three per cent of British Muslims.[129]

There has been no systematic study of either the proportion of the Muslim population in Canada who are converts, or the per cent of individuals involved in terrorism offences in Canada who are converts. However, there are some rough, somewhat anecdotal data that allow for an approximation of the size of the convert population in Canada, and their relative over involvement in domestic acts of violent extremism. In their 2014 piece, Scott Flower and Deborah Birkett estimate that converts represent one percent of the Muslim community in Canada.[130] By comparison, of the eight domestic Jihadist plots or attacks which have occurred in Canada in the period between 9/11 and January 2020, five were either carried out by converts or had converts involved as part of a larger group.[131]

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[128] New America Foundation, "Who Are the Terrorists?," accessed October 25, 2015, https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/who-are-terrorists/; Pew Research Center, "Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alientation or Support for Extremism," 2011, 24, http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/legacy-pdf/Muslim American Report 10-02-12 fix.pdf.
[129] Brice, "A Minority Within a Minority: A Report on Converts To Islam in the United Kingdom," 9.
[130] Dylan Robertson, "Q&A: Researcher Scott Flower on Converts and Terrorism," *Ottawa Citizen*, March 2, 2015, http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/qa-researcher-scott-flower-on-converts-and-terrorism.
[131] These eight plots include: the firebombing of the United Talmud Torah Jewish School in Montreal; the 'Via Rail' plot; the Misbahuddin Ahmed case; the Toronto 18 plot; the Saint Jean Sur Richelieu car ramming; the Victoria Legislature bomb plot; the Parliament Hill attack; the Aaron Driver case; the Edmonton U-Haul attack; the stabbing at a Toronto Canadian Forces Recruiting Centre and the attack at a Toronto-area Canadian Tire store.

Attempts to determine the actual proportion of Canadian converts present amongst foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq are similarly frustrated by a lack of data. However, there is enough evidence here to again indicate that, relative to their size in Canada's broader Muslim community, converts are overrepresented amongst individuals who joined terrorist groups in the Middle East, often referred to colloquially as foreign fighters or in the Government of Canada's parlance, extremist travelers or high-risk travelers. The Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) estimates that upwards of 160 Canadians have joined Jihadist groups in Syria or Iraq, however biographical details remain limited.[132] Lorne Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingham confirmed the identities of 21 Canadians who have died in Syria, five of whom were converts.[133] Further, of the three Canadians featured prominently in IS recruiting videos: Farrah Mohammed Shirdon, Andre Poulin and John Maguire, two of the three are converts.[134] While this is not necessarily a representative sample, it does provide evidence that converts constitute an important subset of Canadian violent extremists, and are therefore worthy of specific study.

4.1. Converts: A Challenge to Explanations of Radicalization

[132] This estimate likely significantly underestimates the true number from Canada. On a per-capita basis, the rate of travelers from Canada neared or exceeded some of the European countries who feature more prominently in discussion on this issue. See: Clint Watts, "Beyond Syria and Iraq, The Islamic State's HR Files Illuminate Dangerous Trends," War On The Rocks, 2016, https://warontherocks.com/2016/06/beyond-syria-and-iraq-the-islamic-states-hr-files-illuminate-dangerous-trends/.

[133] Lorne L Dawson, Amarnath Amarasingam, and Alexandra Bain, "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Socio-Economic Push versus Existential Pull Factors," 2016, 14, http://tsas.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TSASWP16-14_Dawson-Amarasingam-Bain.pdf.

[134] Stewart Bell and Andrew Russell, "Canadian Jihadi Farah Mohamed Shirdon Killed in Iraq Airstrike in 2015: U.S. Military," Global News, 2017, https://globalnews.ca/news/3722685/canadian-jihadi-farah-mohamed-shirdon-killed-in-iraq-airstrike-in-2015-u-s-military/; Stewart Bell, "'Regular Canadian' Killed in Syria Conflict Featured in Slick, New ISIS Propaganda Video," National Post, accessed October 26, 2017, http://nationalpost.com/news/canada/regular-canadian-killed-in-syria-conflict-featured-in-slick-new-isis-propaganda-video; Stewart Bell, "ISIS Fighter from Ottawa Appears in Video Threatening Canada with Attack 'Where It Hurts the Most,'" National Post, 2014, http://nationalpost.com/news/world/israel-middle-east/john-maguire-an-isis-fighter-from-ottawa-appears-on-video-warning-canada-of-attacks-where-it-hurts-you-the-most.

The radicalization to violence of converts presents an interesting theoretical challenge to scholarship on radicalization. As discussed above, scholars, especially when looking at the European context, have posited that the experience of first and second-generation Europeans of North African or Middle Eastern descent plays a large role in the radicalization process.[135] As discussed above, a frequent argument in this context is that structural economic marginalization, paired with societal discrimination and an identity crisis which originates as individuals try to reconcile their ancestral and European identities creates susceptibility to violent extremist narratives.[136] For example, Dawson writes that the children of immigrants must "manage the expectations of two often discordant worlds, the cultural traditions and norms of their parents, and the…cultural demands of their non-immigrant peer groups".[137] Hafez and Mullins posit "Muslim disenchantment", due to poor integration into Western society as a foundational aspect of radicalization.[138] It is suggested that during this period of both heightened awareness and instability in one's place in society and own identity, the narratives, promises and critiques of western culture and society made by terrorist groups may seem both logical and attractive.

Radicalized converts do not necessarily experience the structural constraints of society in the same way a minority group does, nor are they faced with having to navigate the (child of an) immigrant experience and the struggles around identity definition and construction that specific experience creates.[139] While, as will be discussed later, the conversion process itself in some way

[135] For example, see Maha Azzam, "The Radicalization of Muslim Communities in Europe: Local and Global Dimensions.," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 13, no. 2 (2007): 123–34; Piazza, "Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism."
[136] Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model for Explaining Homegrown Terrorist Radicalisation," 6.
[137] Dawson, 6.
[138] Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," 962.
[139] Teresa LaFromboise, Hardin L. K. Coleman, and Jennifer Gerton, "Psychological Impact of Biculturalism: Evidence and Theory," *Psychological Bulletin* 114, no. 3 (1993): 395–412.

can create the same dual exclusion present for the children of immigrants – converts often do not fully feel accepted in either their old culture or their new faith, it nevertheless is significantly different from the immigrant experience. As a result, the underlying societal marginalization or oppression that many models posit as setting the stage for subsequent radicalization does not clearly exist for converts, making the broader applicability of these models somewhat suspect. This is a problem given converts' disproportionate representation among violent extremists.

There have been several prior attempts to isolate and study the specific phenomenon of convert radicalization. Many of these studies have drawn similar conclusions: converts radicalize due to a desire, or 'zeal', to demonstrate their commitment to being Muslim;[140] they radicalize due to some underlying individual characteristics (mental health or pre-existing criminality) that predisposes them to violent extremism;[141] or they become involved due to a lack of knowledge about their newfound faith.[142]

Scott Kleinmann argues that while individual characteristics are insufficient to cause radicalization by themselves, "individual or internal forces, such as identity issues or cognitive function and style, play a much greater role in radicalizing converts than they do for those raised as Muslims".[143] Similarly, Mullins stresses that "[converts involved in violent extremism] are

[140] The most notable expression of this conclusion is found in Milena Uhlmann, "European Converts to Terrorism," *Middle East Quarterly*, 2008, 31–37, http://www.meforum.org/1927/european-converts-to-terrorism.
[141] Sam Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism: A Comparison of the U.S. and U.K.," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 6 (2015): 72–84, http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/474; Scott Matthew Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 4 (2012): 278–97.
[142] Julia Rushchenko, "Converts to Islam and Home Grown Jihadism" (London, 2017), 3, http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HJS-Converts-to-Islam-Report-web.pdf.
[143] Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts," 279.

socially and economically deprived and frequently suffering from mental health problems".[144] Marion Van San describes converts as "lost souls" in need of help and answers.[145] If this line of reasoning is accurate it suggests that individual characteristics do play a large role in the radicalization of converts. It is also striking to again note here the parallels between early studies of those who join NRMs and the language used to describe converts who become involved in violent extremism. The issues with each of these explanations will be examined individually in more detail in later parts of this thesis, but there are a few *prima facie* problems worth mentioning here.

First, these explanations seem to have some deterministic assumptions that are not explicitly addressed by the authors. In many of the previous studies on this topic, authors imply that it is unsurprising that converts become involved in violent extremism due to their unique susceptibility, stemming from individual deficiencies, This view is reminiscent of early "passivist" models of conversion, which tended to deny agency to individual converts. Instead, conversion was characterized as being the result of "impersonal and powerful forces acting upon them, within them, or both."[146] Not only does this view ascribe little agency to individuals, but it as applied to the problem at hand, the radicalization of converts, it ignores a) that most converts do not become radicalized and b) that many converts with troubled backgrounds experience conversion as a wholly positive experience.

Second, authors tend to treat radicalization and conversion as one distinct event or process and not differentiate the two. In so doing, they miss the possible role that experienced and

[144] Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism: A Comparison of the U.S. and U.K.," 78.
[145] Marion Van San, "Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 5 (2015): 47–57.
[146] Kilbourne and Richardson, "Paradigm Conflict, Types of Conversion, and Conversion Theories," 2.

emotions which occur after conversion may influence an individual's turn to violent extremism. The data gathered as a part of this thesis intends to complicate both these assumptions and attempts to tell a different story. Instead, a more compelling explanation can be found in the dynamics of converts' lives and emotions *after* they convert.

4.2. Radicalized Canadian Converts – An Initial Data Set

To test the assumptions about the unique susceptibility of converts to Islam to becoming radicalized, a data set containing biographical and descriptive information about 25 cases was developed. In the cases gathered, all but one of the subjects are male,[147] and the median age of the sample is just over 26 years old. The cases included reflect, to the author's best knowledge, all cases involving converts in Canada where their activity involved violence committed inside or outside Canada, where criminal charges were laid or where a peace bond was issued, and all of the converts publicly identified as having joined terrorist groups active in Syria and Iraq.[148] Some of the cases have received significant media coverage, especially where family and friends have been willing to talk to reporters or where the individuals were charged in Canada, which generated publicly-available court records. In others, a reluctance of the individuals' family or friends to speak publicly has resulted in relatively little coverage beyond basic biographical details.

[147] The actual incidence rate of women being involved in violent extremist groups is much larger than the sample suggests, but gendered assumptions about conflict and terrorism often lead to comparatively little media or legal attention paid to female participants, who are often cast primarily (or solely) as having been clueless or brainwashed wives. Their involvement was especially pronounced during the period of time that the Islamic State maintained a physical state; some estimate that women represented approximately 15-20% of high-risk travelers. For an extended discussion, see: Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State* (Rowan & Littlefield, 2017).

[148] The cases were compiled based on discussions at public events or conferences with security and law enforcement practitioners, and a news headline search within the *Canadian Newsstream* database for a series of phrases including "foreign fighters", "ISIS", "high risk travelers", "extremist travelers", "Canadian converts" and "homegrown violent extremism.

There are certainly some cases missing from this dataset. For example, there are some additional cases that have been referenced in the media, but with insufficient details to allow for their inclusion. One can think of these as the known unknowns. One of the more interesting examples of Canadian foreign fighters whose identity is still unknown, a convert from Toronto who used the *kunya* (nickname) Abu Osama al-Kanadi, became one of Daesh's prominent cyberhackers and was involved in several hacks of U.S. government social media sites.[149] Beyond such cases, there are of course the unknown unknowns, the individuals who left Canada to fight abroad and were never detected by journalists, academics or in some cases, security agencies. Uncovering more information about these unknown foreign fighters is a crucial stage of further research on this topic. As of March 2020, thousands of Western foreign fighters are languishing in prisons or camps in Kurdish-controlled areas of Syria,[150] if they make their way back to their countries of origin, more stories of Canadian converts may emerge.

4.2.1. The Four Dominant Explanations

In the literature on convert radicalization, as mentioned briefly above, four key hypotheses have emerged to explain why converts are over-represented amongst violent extremists:

1. Pre-existing personal characteristics, i.e. prior criminality, mental health issues, family and upbringing, etc. create a level of 'openness' to radicalization which exceeds born Muslims.[151]
2. The radicalization of converts occurs rapidly, and their conversion is more indicative of a desire to engage in violence than a genuine religious process.[152]

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[149] Adrian Humphreys, "Toronto-Born Canadian Is Mystery Man behind ISIL's High-Profile Cyber Attacks," *National Post*, 2018, https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/toronto-born-canadian-is-mystery-man-behind-isils-high-profile-cyber-attacks.
[150] Aaron Y Zelin, "Wilayat Al-Hawl: 'Remaining' and Incubating the Next Islamic State Generation" (Washington, 2019), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/wilayat-al-hawl-remaining-and-incubating-the-next-islamic-state-generation.
[151] Schuurman, Grol, and Flower, "Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction," 10.
[152] Uhlmann, "European Converts to Terrorism."

3. Converts lack requisite knowledge of Islam and are therefore uniquely susceptible to extremist narratives.
4. Converts' desire to prove their Muslim identity makes them more zealous, and therefore willing to engage in violence.

The validity of these explanations will be discussed in subsequent sections of this thesis. Ultimately, it is argued that the deductive approach used by previous studies is insufficient. While there are cases where some combination of these factors clearly plays a role in prompting an individual's turn to violence, none of them individually are necessary or sufficient conditions for radicalization to violence. In fact, when tested against each of these hypotheses, the proportion of radicalized converts who do not clearly demonstrate these risk factors is roughly equal to the proportion who do. There are a significant number of cases where the converts included in this data set are quite the opposite of the near caricature imagined by these four hypotheses, several of which will be described below.

While this may partially be a data availability issue, it is more strongly indicative of an incomplete understanding of the problem—largely due to the continued exclusion of more serious study of the cognitive processes associated with radicalization to violence. To address this shortcoming, as detailed in the methodology section, this thesis instead chose to adopt an inductive approach applied to a single-case study to propose some variables that should be studied in further detail.

Below is a chart summarizing the Canadian cases that are incorporated into this document, the chart provides estimates of the year an individual became involved in an identifiable plot, expression of support or attempt to travel to a conflict zone, and the nature of their involvement. Where involvement took more than one form, each act was coded separately. For example, in the

case of Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, both his attempted foreign travel and his subsequent successful attack were included.

Name	Year of Involvement	Nature of Involvement	
		Involvement Type One	Involvement Type Two
Nishanthan Yogakrishna	2005	Attempted Domestic Plot	
Jahmaal James	2006	Attempted Domestic Plot	Successful Foreign Travel
Steven Chand	2006	Attempted Domestic Plot	
Awso Peshdary	2009	Attempted Foreign Travel	Attempted Domestic Plot
Vilyam Plotnikov	2010	Successful Foreign Travel	
Aaron Yoon	2011	Successful Foreign Travel	
Michael Zehaf-Bibeau	2011	Attempted Foreign Travel	Successful Domestic Plot
Andre Poulin	2012	Successful Foreign Travel	
Collin Gordon	2012	Expressed Support	Successful Foreign Travel
Gregory Gordon	2012	Successful Foreign Travel	
Xristos Katsiroubas	2013	Successful Foreign Plot	Successful Foreign Plot
Damian Clairmont	2013	Successful Foreign Travel	
Amanda Korody	2013	Attempted Domestic Plot	
John Nuttall	2013	Attempted Domestic Plot	
Ismael Habib	2013	Successful Foreign Travel	Attempted Foreign Travel
John Maguire	2012	Successful Foreign Travel	
Martin Couture-Rouleau	2014	Attempted Foreign Travel	Successful Domestic Plot
Samuel Augustin Aviles	2014	Attempted Foreign Travel	
Ashton Larmond	2014	Attempted Domestic Plot	Attempted Foreign Travel
Carlos Larmond	2014	Attempted Foreign Travel	
Dwayne Boissoneau	2014	Expressed Support	
Aaron Driver	2015	Expressed Support	Attempted Domestic Plot
Abu Osama Al-Kanadi	2015	Successful Foreign Travel	
Tevis Gonyou-McLean	2016	Expressed Support	Attempted Foreign Travel
Samuel Augustine Aviles	2017	Attempted Foreign Travel	

Figure 1: Names, Year and Nature of Involvement

5. Testing Previous Explanations

Prior to fully fleshing out of a proposed model of convert radicalization, it is first necessary to test the adequacy of these four existing hypotheses. This thesis does this in two ways: first, the casual mechanism offered by each hypothesis is assessed: regardless of their prevalence, do these hypotheses provide a clear causal mechanism for subsequent involvement in violent extremism? Second, this thesis tests each hypothesis against the RCC dataset. On balance, none of the four explanations are consistently present in the data or theoretically convincing. The next chapter of this thesis proposes a new variable worth considering: the mutually reinforcing processes of disappointment and socialization.

5.1 Pre-Existing Personal Characteristics

Reading the literature on converts who become involved in violent extremism gives one the impression that these are fundamentally broken people. Marion Van San writes that susceptibility to radicalization for religious converts emerges from "a history of traumatic life experiences and mental or behavioural health issues."[153] Similarly, Kleinmann suggests that "many homegrown Sunni militants in the United States have psychological disorders or are of low intelligence".[154] Sam Mullins observes that "converts appear to conform, perhaps more than any other group, to the notion that people are drawn to Islamist terrorism as a result of being marginalized in society".[155] Broadly speaking, more or less every author writing on this topic points to some combination of the following factors as causal for converts' radicalization: absent

[153] Van San, "Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining Islamic State," 54.
[154] Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts," 287.
[155] Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism: A Comparison of the U.S. and U.K.," 76.

parents,[156] mental health,[157] addiction,[158] trauma,[159] prior criminality,[160] and economic marginalization.[161]

The first issue with convert radicalization explanations predicated on certain personal characteristics is that a number of scholars of religious conversion have previously pointed to some form of perceived personal trauma or negative individual experiences as antecedents to religious conversion in general, and so how these variable specifically link to radicalization remains unclear.[162] In these generic conversion models, such occurrences can play a central role in creating the sense of 'crisis' that some scholars view as an essential precursor to conversion.[163]

For example, in her study of generic converts to four different religions, Chana Ullman found these individuals, vis-à-vis those born into the religion, had more negative perceptions of their parents, recalled a greater number of specific childhood traumas and recounted a high degree of emotional trauma proximate to their decision to convert.[164] None of the authors focused on convert radicalization have explicated a model that points to a specific personal characteristic unique to radicalized converts, vis-à-vis converts in general.

In developing the dataset used in the analysis contained in this thesis, it also became clear that there is anecdotal evidence of some reporting bias in media coverage of converts involved in

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[156] Rushchenko, "Converts to Islam and Home Grown Jihadism," 32–33.
[157] Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts," 286.
[158] Kleinmann, 286.
[159] Van San, "Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining Islamic State," 54.
[160] Rushchenko, "Converts to Islam and Home Grown Jihadism," 34; Eitan Azani and Liram Koblentz-Stenzler, "Muslim Converts Who Turn to Global Jihad: Radicalization Characteristics and Countermeasures," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2019, 6.
[161] Rushchenko, "Converts to Islam and Home Grown Jihadism," 39.
[162] Chana Ullman, "Cognitive and Emotional Antecedents of Religious Conversion.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 43, no. 1 (1982): 183–92; Allison, "Adaptive Regression and Intense Religious Experiences."
[163] Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective"; Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 52.
[164] Ullman, "Cognitive and Emotional Antecedents of Religious Conversion."

violent extremism vs. 'born' Muslims who became involved. The prior lives of converts were covered in more detail – and therefore previous events that may be interpreted as traumatic are placed in sharper relief, vis-à-vis the life stories of born Muslims. A similar situation has been noted in other studies focused on convert radicalization in the United States, as well.[165] This makes unraveling the role of these negative life events somewhat challenging, as not only is it not always possible to discern whether or not the individual themselves viewed these events as traumatic or were deeply impacted by them, but also there may be underreporting of traumatic events in the lives of born Muslims, which impedes effective cross-comparison.[166] The nature of trauma and its effects on people is highly individualized and something that may induce trauma in one person could leave another unaffected. In Chana Ullman's study, the converts who did have negative life experiences often did not view the effects of these events as influential on their subsequent development: "converts often seemed oblivious to the abnormal or harmful nature of the early experiences they reported."[167] This should be interpreted as a cautionary tale for researchers placing too much stock in post-hoc sociodemographic explanations for involvement.

A second related issue which will be explored in a subsequent section relates to sequencing and timing. Most Canadian converts who become involved in violent extremism do so more than three years after their conversion, which is itself a number of years after an identified negative life experience. This significant lag time then raises the question of whether these events are

[165] Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts," 290.
[166] The differential impact of events that could be considered traumatic on individuals will be discussed more below, but is beyond the direct scope of this paper. For a good overview of the differential effects of trauma on individuals see: Centre for Substance Abuse Treatment, "Understanding the Impact of Trauma," in *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavorial Health Services* (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Adminstration, 2014), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/.
[167] Ullman, "Cognitive and Emotional Antecedents of Religious Conversion.," 191.

causally important specifically for radicalization to violence, or instead may just be correlated with an individual's prior religious conversion.

While perhaps there are perhaps some very specific personal characteristics (i.e. a subset of diagnosed mental illnesses)[168] which may play a role in increasing risk for subsequent involvement specifically in lone-actor terrorism, the majority of the personal characteristics described as predisposing factors in much of the literature are almost entirely unhelpful. Even if they have some predictive power, they are far from being either necessary or sufficient conditions to explain radicalization to violence.

All that said, in several of the cases in Canada, converts experienced some degree of trauma or hardship during their childhood. However, it should be noted that this is not uncommon amongst any randomly selected subset of the population. The nature of the trauma experienced by the individuals included in this dataset were wide-ranging. In the case of Ashton and Carlos Larmond, both were sexually assaulted as children and once watched a man try to drown their mother in a bathtub.[169] At a less extreme end of the spectrum, Steven Chand,[170] John Maguire,[171], Martin Couture-Rouleau,[172] and Damian Clairmont all had parents who separated or divorced

[168] Emily Corner et al., "Mental Health Disorders and the Terrorist : A Research Note Probing Selection Effects and Disorder Prevalence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 6 (2016): 560–68; Paul Gill and Emily Corner, "There and Back Again: The Study of Mental Disorder and Terrorist Involvement," *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (2017): 231–41.
[169] Gary Dimmock and Kenneth Jackson, "The Terror Twin Tapes: Ashton and Carlos Larmond Reveal Childhood Abuse, Talk of Jailbird Father and Finding Islam," Ottawa Citizen, 2016, http://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/larmond-terror-twins-reveal-childhood-abuse.
[170] Hayley Mick, "A Convert Who Wanted to Spread the Faith," The Globe and Mail, 2009, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/a-convert-who-wanted-to-spread-the-faith/article20412061/.
[171] Andrew Duffy and Meghan Hurley, "From JMag to Jihadi John: The Radicalization of John Maguire," Ottawa Citizen, 2015, http://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/from-jmag-to-jihad-john-the-radicalization-of-john-maguire.
[172] Rene Bruemmer, "Martin-Couture Rouleau: Clues of a Tragedy Foretold," Montreal Gazette, 2014, http://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/martin-couture-rouleau-clues-of-a-tragedy-foretold-2.

during their childhood or adolescence.[173] Criminality is another somewhat common marker in many of these cases, however for the most part this criminality was often linked to either drug possession or distribution, and not violent crimes, which could have possibly foreshadowed their subsequent embrace of extremist violence.[174] The chart below details some common personal characteristics that are often discussed in the literature as being related to radicalization. The cases included represent ones where there was enough publicly available data to build a profile, as coverage of cases varies widely. As is obvious, even in cases with ample public reporting, it was difficult to gather enough information to completely fill out each column.

[173] Stewart Bell, "The Path to Extremism: The Story of How One Young Man from Calgary Ended up Dead in Syria," *National Post*, April 25, 2014, http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/the-path-to-extremism-the-story-of-how-one-young-man-from-calgary-ended-up-dead-in-syria.

[174] Dimmock and Jackson, "The Terror Twin Tapes: Ashton and Carlos Larmond Reveal Childhood Abuse, Talk of Jailbird Father and Finding Islam"; Mark Gollom, "Michael Zehaf-Bibeau and Martin Couture-Rouleau Shared Traits," CBC News, 2014, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/michael-zehaf-bibeau-and-martin-couture-rouleau-their-shared-traits-1.2812241.

Name	Divorced or Seperated Parents	Abuse	Prior Drug Use	Criminality	Precipitating Personal Crisis	Mental Health Issues
Michael Zehaf-Bibeau	Yes	-	Substance Abuse	Yes	Potentially	Potentially
Andre Poulin	-	-	Yes	Yes	Potentially	Self-Identified
Damian Clairmont	Yes	No	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
John Maguire	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	-
Ashton Larmond	Unclear	Yes	Substance Abuse	Yes	-	-
Carlos Larmond	Unclear	Yes	Substance Abuse	Yes	-	-
Aaron Driver	Mother Died	No	Yes	Minor	Yes	Potentially
Martin Couture-Rouleau	Yes	No	Yes	Minor	Yes	Yes
Aaron Driver	Mother Died	-	Yes	-	Potentially	-
Collin Gordon	No	-	Yes	-	-	-
Gregory Gordon	No	-	-	-	-	-
Aaron Yoon	-	No	-	Minor	-	-
Vilyam Plotnikov	No	No	-	No	-	-
Steven Chand	Yes	-	No	No	Potentially	Potentially
Xristos Katisiroubas	No	No	No	Minor	-	-
Ismael Habib	Yes	No	Yes	No	-	-
Dwayne Boissoneau	-	-	Yes	Yes	-	Yes
Awso Peshdary	No	-	No	No	-	-

Figure 2: Sociodemographic Factors of Radicalized Canadian Converts

The cases summarized above indicate that several of the individuals in the data set had some sort of life event that matches the identified indicators offered by other authors. However, none of the indicators are extreme or consistent enough to hold any predictive power themselves or provide a clear causal mechanism for subsequent radicalization to violence. Prior arrests for drug possession, or the breakup of one's parents, does not provide a compelling theoretical reason for one to subsequently become involved in violent extremism, particularly because a qualitative analysis of the biography of converts with such indicators reads more as a story of resilience and growth, not fragility or susceptibility.

For example, consider the case of John Maguire. Despite growing up in a home where there is some anecdotal evidence that his father verbally abused his mother and was deeply invested in a series of conspiracy theories, Maguire appeared to be making the most of his life.[175] He earned a number of scholarships, obtained high grades in university, was well-liked by those around him and was not combative or confrontational in his everyday interactions.[176] If these traumatic events had been so impactful on him that the lasting negative effects on him were a significant causal factor in his radicalization, it seems more likely than not that the effects would have visibly manifested themselves prominently in other aspects of his life as well. Indeed, outward markers of success like doing well in school after a troubled upbringing and being regarded by peers as thoughtful and balanced, tend to be understood as signs of individual resilience, not radicalization.[177]

[175] Duffy and Hurley, "From JMag to Jihadi John: The Radicalization of John Maguire."
[176] Duffy and Hurley.
[177] Glenn E. Richardson, "The Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 58, no. 3 (2002): 307–21.

In an alternate reality, had Maguire's desire to change the world and defend the weak been channeled into something constructive, as opposed to his decidedly destructive decision to join Daesh, his life story would have been interpreted as overcoming odds and affecting change in the world.[178] This seems to be an important but subtle point that many previous scholars have either missed or minimized. While the net result of violent radicalization is, of course, a bad thing, viewing those who become involved as somehow deficient or morally lacking, rather than as operating according to a different morality, impedes our ability to understand their stories and the choices they made. This point will be returned to in a subsequent section.

For the majority of Canadian converts in the data set though, there does not appear to be any significant precipitating trauma or criminal involvement. In the cases of Aaron Yoon, Ali Medlej and Xristos Katsiroubas, the latter two of whom died in an attack on an Algerian gas plant by a group associated with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), there is no clear trauma evident.[179] While their friends remembered them as rebellious in high school, no accounts of their behavior point to some serious personality flaws or propensity for violence. For Yoon, his conversion "lessen[ed] family tensions and [brought] the 24-year-old closer to his siblings and

[178] Examples of this sort of analysis are somewhat pervasive in discussions by European scholars of terrorism, and the assumed 'crime-terror' nexus. For example, see: Anton W Weenink, "Behavioral Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 2 (2015): 17–33; Alex P Schmid and Judith Tinnes, "Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective" (The Hague, 2015), https://doi.org/10.19165/2015.1.08.

[179] Adrian Humphreys, Tom Blackwell, and Maiya Keidan, "How Three Canadians Graduated from a Rebellious High School Friendship to the World of Islamic Terrorism," The National Post, 2013, http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/how-three-ontario-school-friends-grew-up-to-become-islamist-terrorists-in-north-africa.

parents".[180] A family friend of Katsiroubas family described Xristos as "very much a teenager but still the polite, nice kid who had been coming to her shop for years".[181]

Awso Peshdary, alleged to be one of the most prolific recruiters and facilitators of terrorist activity in Canada,[182] was near-universally looked upon as a model citizen, and a model member of Ottawa's Muslim community prior to his first arrest in 2010.[183] Presumably by his second arrest, the community's view had changed. In 2010, Peshdary was married with a young child, and active in Ottawa's non-profit community where he had several jobs that provided him the opportunity to counsel and mentor at-risk youth. Again here, there is no indication of any substance abuse or severe precipitating crisis in his life. However, of some interest, is that he became highly sectarian in years after his conversion, despite his parents' Shi'a background.[184]

The same pattern of marked normalcy is seen in the radicalization of brothers Anthony and Colin Gordon from Calgary, who appear to have lived lives largely devoid of personal trauma and did not have criminal pasts.[185] Their parents were together throughout their lives and both brothers attended post-secondary school in British Columbia, where one was a varsity athlete and a socially well-connected student, who was known for organizing concerts and parties on

[180] Tom Blackwell, "'He's 100% against Terrorism': Man Wants to Clear His Name after Reports Link Him to Algeria Attack, Brother Says," *National Post*, April 3, 2013, https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/aaron-yoon-wants-to-clear-his-name.
[181] Victoria Ptashnick, "London Residents Shocked by News That Canadians Named in Terror Attack," *Toronto Star*, April 2, 2013, https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2013/04/02/london_residents_shocked_by_news_that_canadians_named_in_terror_attack.html.
[182] Stewart Bell, "Awso Peshdary, Charged with Paying for Canadians' Trips to Fight with ISIS, Complained of 'discrimination' at Ottawa College," *National Post*, February 3, 2015, https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/awso-peshdary-charged-with-paying-for-canadians-trips-to-fight-with-isis-complained-of-discrimination-at-ottawa-college.
[183] Daniel Schwartz, "PROFILE: Awso Peshdary," *CBC News*, August 30, 2010, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/profile-awso-peshdary-1.901643.
[184] Evan Dyer, "Awso Peshdary, Terrorism Suspect: Who Is He?," *CBC News*, February 3, 2015, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/awso-peshdary-terrorism-suspect-who-is-he-1.2943955.

campus.[186] Again here, there is no clear evidence for any of the hypothesized personal shortcomings or traumas that authors have pointed towards as explanations for involvement.

This is not to suggest that some underlying personal characteristics did not play some unseen but important role in the stories of some individuals who turn to violence, but rather, as suggested earlier, the data is so diverse that it provides little explanatory value. Further, even if there was significant evidence of some consistent connection between markers like personal trauma or some specific violent criminal past amongst the converts who became involved in violent extremism, using these variables as explanations for involvement is not useful. This is because these experiences are not only unique to converts who become involved in violent extremism, but rather, as mentioned above, they are common to converts in general.

Like other religions, Islam's moral framework and the associated outward projections of faith, appeal and offer redemption and guidance to individuals with traumatic, abusive or criminal pasts who are attempting to leave that lifestyle behind and adopt a new way of living and a new way of understanding the world.[187] For example, reviewing the literature on the topic of prison conversion to Islam, Hamm finds that "Islam has a moderating effect on prisoners that plays an important role in prison security and rehabilitation".[188] Similarly, a study of converts in Britain found 27 per cent of those interviewed viewed their past life as either sinful or "going in the wrong direction" – both sentiments that could reflect drug use, criminality or a host of other things that authors may lump into 'personal characteristics'.[189] For almost every one of these

[187] Basia Spalek and Salah El-Hassan, "Muslim Converts in Prison," *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 46, no. 2 (2007): 99–114; Flower and Birkett, "(Mis)Understanding Muslim Converts in Canada: A Critical Discussion of Muslim Converts in the Contexts of Security and Society."
[188] Mark S. Hamm, "Prison Islam in the Age of Sacred Terror," *British Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 5 (2009): 669.
[189] Köse, "Post-Conversion Experiences of Native British Convert to Islam," 197.

people, their conversion experience is universally positive. Viewing this experience as a potential risk factor both further securitizes an often-stigmatized group, and would produce an unacceptable, and counterproductive, number of false positives.

In a passage typical of studies which place a high degree of explanatory weight on 'personal characteristics', Ilardi writes that:

> "It should finally be noted that the importance of these individual preconditions seemed to be greatest among the converts, rather than those born into Islam. It was among converts that personal struggle, crisis, and self-destructive lifestyle predominated, with the result that these experiences enhanced the resonance of Salafism and jihadi messaging."[190]

While this may be accurate, there is a clear tension here between what may be retrospectively true, and the prospective utility of this inquiry for predictive or explanatory purposes. In other words, while every convert who becomes radicalized may have had some personal trauma, the number of converts with personal trauma who then subsequently become radicalized is essentially a rounding error.

Further, there is a trend among all converts to any religion "to exaggerate pre-conversion tensions because of the very nature of biographical reconstruction", which makes ascribing much significance to this dimension challenging to accept.[191] Staples and Mauss define biographical reconstruction as "the idea that individuals who undergo the radical change of conversion reconstruct or reinterpret their past lives from the perspective of the present".[192] For the newly saved convert, there may be a natural tendency to paint their pre-conversion past as much worse than it in fact was: recreational drug use becomes a drug addiction, shoplifting

[190] Gaetano Joe Ilardi, "Interviews With Canadian Radicals," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 9 (2013): 713–38.
[191] Snow and Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion," 182.
[192] Clifford L. Staples and Armand L. Mauss, "Conversion or Commitment? A Reassessment of the Snow and Machalek Approach to the Study of Conversion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26, no. 2 (1987): 135.

becomes a life of crime, etc. When looking at such accounts for indicators of radicalization, the researcher may then place too much weight on these biographic variables. This problem most likely also exists in accounts of former extremists who may engage in the same type of reconstruction explaining their own process of involvement, which in turn may further amplify unimportant biographic variables and minimize important dimensions of the process of involvement in relative terms. Often, the accounts of formers downplay their own agency in the process and highlighting structural variables to mitigate the guilt they may have for their previous actions. In sum, the inconsistency of these factors and the lack of a clear causal connection to engagement in terrorism makes them of limited utility for explaining involvement in violent extremism.

5.2 Duration of the Radicalization Process

There is a tendency to conceive of radicalized converts as "converts to terrorism",[193] as opposed to converts to Islam who later became involved with *Salafi-Jihadist* groups. This argument suggests that the religious conversion is merely instrumental for otherwise violent individuals in order to allow them to ascribe some moral or religious justification for violence they may had already felt some desire to engage in. It is complementary to the focus on personal characteristics discussed above, insofar as it minimizes the role that beliefs or other cognitive factors may play in violent extremism, and instead foregrounds risk factors perceived to be related to a propensity for violence. For example, Olivier Roy claims involvement with *Salafi-Jihadist* groups is little more than a new form of radicalism that appeals to "disaffected, nihilistic and suicidal youths"[194], not dissimilar to what radical or extremist left-wing movements in places

[193] Uhlmann, "European Converts to Terrorism."
[194] Olivier Roy, "Who Are the New Jihadis?," The Guardian, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/apr/13/who-are-the-new-jihadis.

like Italy or Germany offered youth in the 1970s and 1980s.[195] In other words, the ideological or religious dimension of groups like Daesh or Al-Qaeda are essentially irrelevant as they are secondary to these groups' ability to offer an excuse or justification for glory-seeking and violence; Roy refers to this as "the Islamization of radicalism".[196]

However, contrary to this notion of nearly immediate adoption of extremist beliefs or engagement in violent extremism, most Canadians only became involved in violent extremism several years after conversion. In the subsample from the RCC of 17 Canadian cases where there was enough data to be able to (roughly) compute the time between conversion and subsequent involvement in violent extremism, the average length of time between conversion and discrete involvement was 3.24 years. Discrete involvement is defined as the point at which there is clear evidence of domestic attack planning, planning to travel abroad, recruiting others to join extremist groups, direct calls for violence on social media, etc. In an ideal scenario, it would be possible to create a more precise timeline that captured both cognitive radicalization and behavioral radicalization, but unfortunately that is not possible using solely publicly available information. Where individuals do rapidly move from conversion to involvement, their behavior tends to manifest in domestic attacks, not foreign fighting, and variables like mental health tend to play a larger role.[197] The clear lag time between conversion and involvement, where converts presumably spend time among other things, learning their faith, forming new relationships, etc. suggest two critical things:

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[195] Victor H. Sundquist, "Political Terrorism: An Historical Case Study of the Italian Red Brigades," *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, no. 3 (2010): 53–68.
[196] Olivier Roy, "France's Oedipal Islamist Complex," Foreign Policy, 2016, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/07/frances-oedipal-islamist-complex-charlie-hebdo-islamic-state-isis/.
[197] For example, conversion and involvement happened rapidly for both Martin Couture-Rouleau and Dwayne Boissoneau. In both cases, as is discussed elsewhere in this work, there were very clearly indicated mental health issues that played explanatory, if not directly causal, roles in these two individuals' involvement.

1. It calls into question the belief that these individuals lacked a clear understanding of their religious beliefs, as most spent a considerable time living as Muslims prior to involvement.
2. If this process of engagement is not rapid, forces acting upon the individuals after their conversion must play some important role in their subsequent radicalization to violence.

The chart below provides details on the 17 cases where duration could be calculated.

Name	Time between conversion and discrete involvement in violent extremism	Time
Samuel Augistine Aviles	Greater than 10 years	10
Andre Poulin	Approx. 6 years	6
Aaron Driver	Approx. 5-6 years	5.5
John Maguire	Approx. 5 years	5
Damion Clairmont	Approx. 4 years	4
Michael Zehaf-Bibeau	Approx 3-4 years	3.5
Colin Gordon	Approx. 2.5-3 years	2.75
Anthony Gordon	Approx. 2.5-3 years	2.75
Steven Chand	Approx. 2-3 years	2.5
Ashton Larmond	Approx. 2-3 years	2.5
Aaron Yoon	Approx. 2-2.5 years	2.25
Xristos Katsiroubas	Approx. 2-2.5 years	2.25
Carlos Larmond	Approx. 1.5-2 years	1.75
Nishanthan Yogakrishnan	Approx. 1.5-2 years	1.75
Vilyam Plotnikov	Approx. 1-1.5 years	1.25
Martin Couture-Rouleau	Less than one year	0.75
Dwayne Boissoneau	Less than one year	0.5

Figure 3: Time Between Conversion and Involvement (Canadian Converts)

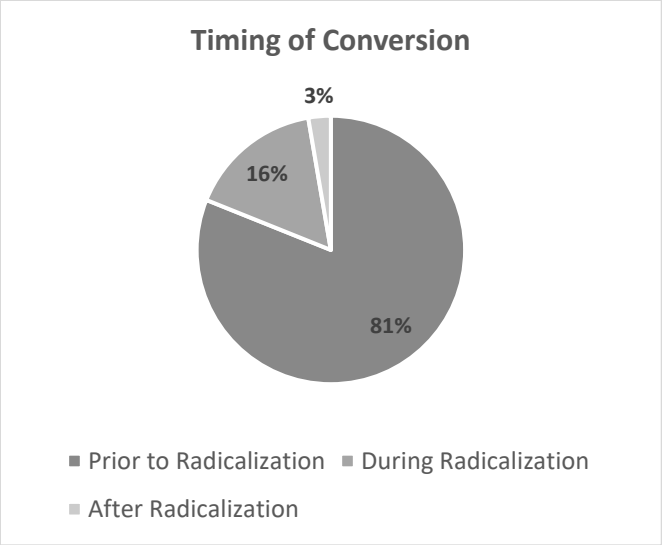

Figure 5: Time of Conversion (PIRUS Data)

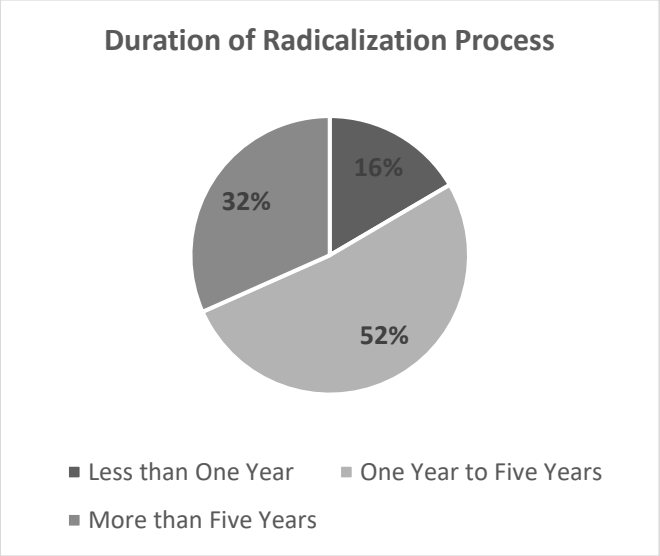

Figure 4: Duration of Radicalization Process (PIRUS Data)

The significant amount of time between an individual's conversion and involvement is not unique to just the Canadian data. An analysis of the PIRUS database, represented by *Figure 4* reveals that of the 185 religious converts involved in violent extremist plots in the United States,[198] 88 per cent converted prior to beginning to demonstrate some degree of either behavioral or cognitive radicalization.[199] Similarly, as shown in *Figure* 5, in 81 per cent of these cases, there was more than one year between the first evidence of cognitive or behavioral radicalization and the date of the plot's exposure,[200] meaning that in most instances these are not processes that occur rapidly –

[198] National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism, "Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States [Data File, Version 3.2]."
[199] Note, for this analysis, all religious converts included in the data file were included and the motivating ideology was not constrained to Salafi-Jihadism. Of the 185 converts, 139 were involved in Salafi-Jihadist plots, 19 were involved in far-right plots, 9 were involved in far-left plots and 18 were involved in single-issue plots. Most of the single-issue converts were individuals who converted to Christianity and were later involved in anti-abortion plots targeting health care practitioners or human service agencies that provided abortion services.
[200] The PIRUS codebook defines exposure as the "time of incident or arrest, or earliest mention of individual in sources, so long as these are related to the plot/radicalization of the individual". This could include, for example, the earliest date in an indictment where an individual is mentioned as having come to the attention of law enforcement or intelligence agencies, which would likely pre-date by some time the date of arrest.

these individuals are not "converts to terrorism".[201] For some reason, many of the previous studies on this topic have fixated on a minority of violent extremists, for example those who converted contemporaneous to their radicalization, or those who became involved nearly immediately after converting, as opposed to the majority of individuals whose trajectories took considerably longer. As *Figure 6* shows, in cases where data on dates of conversion and exposure could be determined by PIRUS researchers, roughly 50 per cent of converts spent upwards of six years in their new faith community being exposed before being involved in violent extremism.

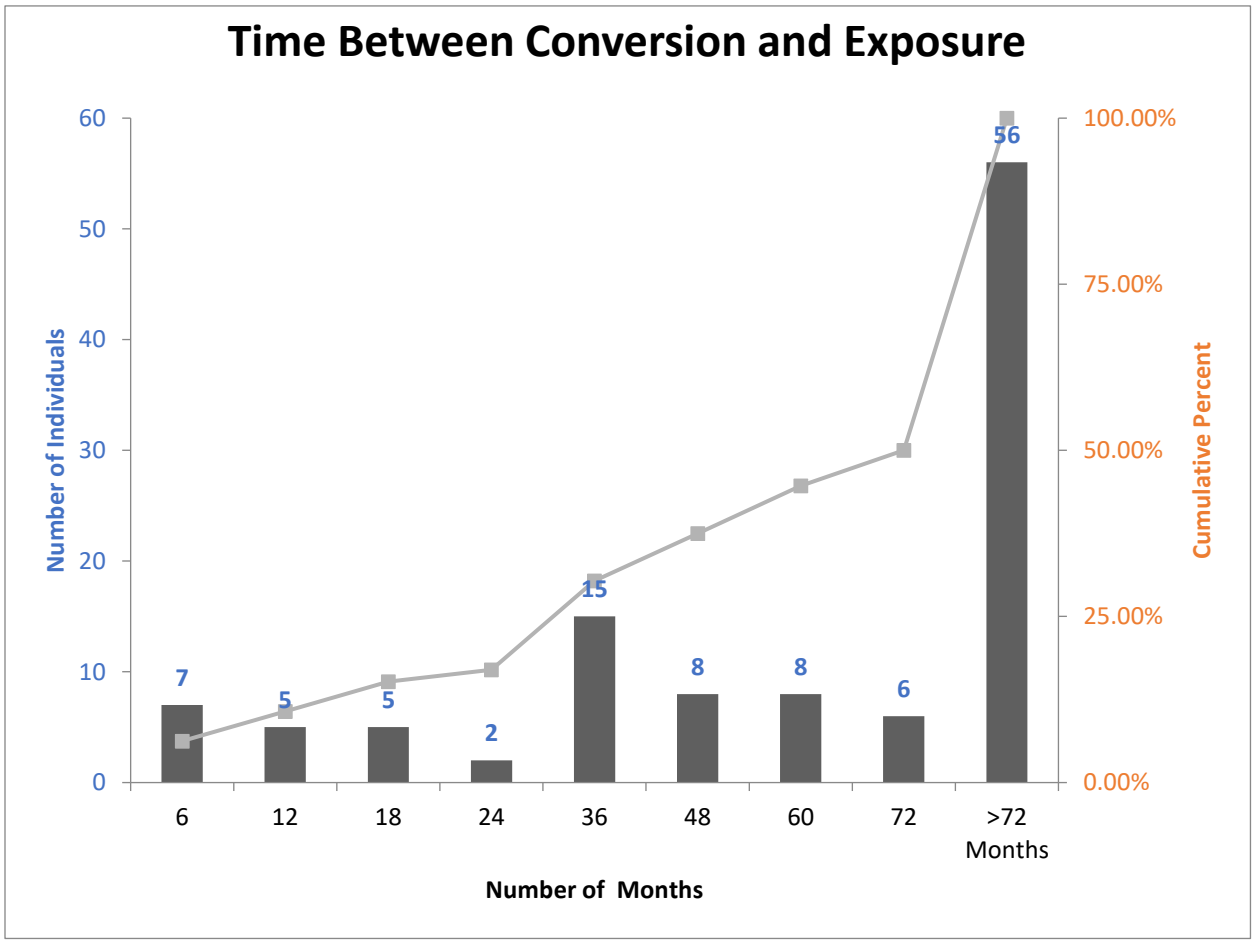

Figure 6: Time Between Conversion and Exposure (PIRUS Data)

[201] Uhlmann, "European Converts to Terrorism."

These data provide further evidence that when trying to understand the trajectory of converts who become involved in violent extremism, understanding the process of conversion and the process of radicalization as one continuous event may serve as an impediment to developing a deeper understanding of the overall process. Instead, there is a need to pay more attention to what happens to individuals *after* they convert, and how they navigate their new religious community and their new religious identity. Likewise, this temporal account supports my assertion that while conversion and radicalization are likely related, they are most certainly distinct processes.

As evidenced by *Figure 6*, the process from conversion to radicalization is a long-term process, likely influenced by events, emotions, and ideas that the individual experiences after religious conversion occurs. For this reason alone, it may be worthwhile for future research to focus more on what happens after people convert. How do they go about becoming embedded in their new religious community, and how do they mediate their former identity with their new identity? These questions stand opposed to the more superficial characteristics that are often focused on. In later sections on disappointment and socialization, this thesis attempts to do just this. It is argued that the explanations found in this line of inquiry are much more promising than the current dominant explanations. The next section returns to the final two hypotheses related to converts' post-conversion cognition and beliefs.

5.3 Religious Knowledge

There is an often recounted story of the would-be foreign fighters from Birmingham, England who purchased an *Islam for Dummies* book prior to their departure for Syria that has been frequently cited as evidence of the level of knowledge most recruits to groups like Al-Qaeda and Daesh possess.[202] Such anecdotes advance the argument that participation in a violent extremist organization with self-proclaimed religious goals could only come about as a result of limited knowledge of the religion that the group is nominally fighting in support of. Again here, this line of argumentation intends, consciously or unconsciously, to minimize the role that cognitive radicalization, which is taken to mean radical or extreme beliefs, plays in explaining involvement in violent extremism.

Van San typifies this conclusion in her study of Belgian and Dutch converts – concluding that "[converts] are more susceptible than others to radical versions of Islam because of their limited knowledge of the religion's various traditions".[203] A number of other authors have made similar arguments to that end, including Rushchenko;[204] Bastug, Douai and Akca;[205] Ilardi;[206] and Azani and Koblentz-Stenzler.[207] Roy makes a similar point about all individuals, converts or not, who join terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda or Daesh, noting that in personnel files seized from the Islamic State, "while most of the fighters are well-educated, 70 per cent state that they

[202] Martin Robinson, "British Terrorists from Birmingham Bought 'Islam for Dummies' Book before Travelling to Syria to Join Rebel Fighters in Jihad," Daily Mail, 2014, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2684714/I-tell-I-m-going-jihad-Lol-I-ll-arrested-What-British-terrorist-Birmingham-told-childhood-friend-travelled-Syria-join-rebel-fighters.html.
[203] Van San, "Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining Islamic State," 54.
[204] Rushchenko, "Converts to Islam and Home Grown Jihadism," 3.
[205] Mehmet F. Bastug, Aziz Douai, and Davut Akca, "Exploring the 'Demand Side' of Online Radicalization: Evidence from the Canadian Context," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 0, no. 0 (2018): 17.
[206] Ilardi, "Interviews With Canadian Radicals," 725.
[207] Azani and Koblentz-Stenzler, "Muslim Converts Who Turn to Global Jihad: Radicalization Characteristics and Countermeasures," 6.

have only basic knowledge of Islam.[208] In another piece, he writes that "[violent extremists] almost never have a history of devotion and religious practice. Quite the opposite."[209] The characterization of a pronounced lack of knowledge often intersects with narratives of 'susceptibility' or naive and uneducated youth being duped into involvement with terrorism – what Simon Cottee calls the "*Zoolander* theory of terrorism", referring to the film where the main character is brainwashed into doing the bidding of an evil genius. [210] This argument has parallels to the debate in the latter half of the twentieth century around individuals involved in cults or new religious movements.

When new religious movements (for example, the Unification Church, Hare Krishna, etc.) emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, many had strange beliefs and practices but were, despite this, attracting outwardly successful youth to join their ranks.[211] There then quickly emerged a body of scholarship that described their recruits as having been brainwashed or coerced into their religious conversion, and that they failed to understand the moral, religious or ideological claims these groups were making. Brainwashing or mind control were convenient explanations because "it provides a convenient and 'sensible' account for those who are otherwise at a loss to explain why individuals are attracted to 'deviant' and 'menacing' groups."[212] However, over time, it became clear that there was little evidence that 'brainwashing' was occurring, and the vast majority of the individuals who joined these NRMs did so without any coercive intervention from a mysterious mind-controlling cult leader, and did so with knowledge of what the groups

[208] Roy, "Who Are the New Jihadis?"
[209] Roy, "France's Oedipal Islamist Complex."
[210] Simon Cottee, "The Zoolander Theory of Terrorism," *The Atlantic*, May 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/05/zoolander-terrorists-brainwashed-isis/393050/.
[211] Levine, *Radical Depatures: Desperate Detours to Growing Up*.
[212] Snow and Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion," 179.

believed and practiced.[213] The parallels to the study of violent extremism are obvious.[214] Instead of trying to minimize or explain away the possibility of a connection between beliefs and actions, and the fact that an individual may earnestly hold extreme beliefs, we should further investigate this apparent link. To do so requires examination of two key questions: first, what level of religious knowledge do converts in general demonstrate and what role does a quest for knowledge play in their conversion, and second, what evidence exists about the level of religious knowledge amongst radicalized Canadian converts?

There is a large amount of evidence, as alluded to earlier, that the stories and experiences of most converts to Islam in the West in general can be understood as being representative of what Lofland and Stark referred to as the 'intellectual motif. [215] Recall that Lofland and Stark described an intellectual conversion as one motivated by:

> Individual, private investigation of possible 'new grounds of being,' alternate theodicies, personal fulfillment, etc. by reading books, watching television, attending lectures, and other impersonal or "disembodied" ways in which it is increasingly possible sans social involvement to become acquainted with alternative ideologies and ways of life.[216]

What little survey evidence exists in Canada on converts to Islam in general suggests that theological or existential questioning was a key factor animating religious conversion. Rather than conversion occurring with little knowledge or little interest in gaining new sacred knowledge, conversion was instead the result of an explicit quest for religious answers, and that

[213] Dawson, "Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why: Twenty Years of Research and What Have We Learned?"; Robbins and Anthony, "Deprogramming, Brainwashing and the Medicalization of Deviant Religious Groups"; Dick Anthony, "Pseudoscience and Minority Religions : An Evaluation of the Brainwashing Theories of Jean-Marie Abgrall," *Social Justice Research* 12, no. 4 (1999): 421–56.
[214] Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements and the Radicalization of Home-Grown Terrorists: Opening a Dialogue," 2.
[215] Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 375.
[216] Lofland and Skonovd, 376.

the intellectual dimension of religion is important to many converts.[217] This finding mirrors other more methodologically rigorous research on conversion to Islam in other Western countries, which finds that the 'intellectual motif' is the one most commonly described by converts in the United States[218] and France.[219]

While the three surveys discussed above did not focus on converts who became involved in violent extremism in particular, it is not clear that there is any specific basis on which to suspect that converts who become involved in violent extremism are a somehow unique group distinct from other converts or disinterested in knowledge. Indeed, there is a significant amount of data to suggest that among radicalized converts a desire to gain religious knowledge is clear. Rather, the underlying issue with the 'lack of knowledge' hypothesis seems to be that previous authors, a number of whom were referenced about that, have focused on this explanation have made several errors. First, they have drawn false equivalence between a minority interpretation of theology and a general lack of religious knowledge. Second, they have conflated a basic or functional level of religious knowledge – which is all that many adherents to any faith have – with no knowledge at all. Finally, they appear to have confused knowledge with intensity of belief; one need not know everything about their faith to strongly believe in what they do know.

With regard to the first point, while debates about just how hierarchical or monolithic Islam is or is not are beyond the scope of this work, it is relatively uncontroversial to acknowledge the tremendous diversity in beliefs, practices and interpretations within the religion. Deep

[217] Flower and Birkett, "(Mis)Understanding Muslim Converts in Canada: A Critical Discussion of Muslim Converts in the Contexts of Security and Society," 11.
[218] Snook et al., "Psychology of Religion and Spirituality Conversion Motifs Among Muslim Converts in the United States."
[219] Mounia Lakhdar et al., "Conversion to Islam among French Adolescents and Adults: A Systematic Inventory of Motives," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 17, no. 1 (2007): 7.

knowledge and belief in fringe or minority interpretations of the *Qur'an*, *Sunnah*, and *Hadith* are not, in and of themselves, indicators of an individual being somehow not a true Muslim or not knowledgeable about their beliefs. Analogously, it appears unreasonable to expect that for a Baptist to be deemed knowledgeable about their Christian faith, they must also be well versed in the theological nuances and liturgical differences between themselves, Catholics, and the Eastern Orthodox churches.

Unlike, for example, the Catholic Church, there is no hierarchical structure or authoritative institution within Sunni Islam that can credibly issue absolutely accepted statements of 'right' and 'wrong'. Instead, there are theological or jurisprudential arguments over the correctness of a specific interpretation – all of which are rooted in appeals to traditional and contemporary religious authorities.[220] This is problem that confronts not only converts; as Wicktorowicz notes, "the vast majority of Muslims are not trained in *fiqh* or other Islamic sciences and are therefore ill equipped to weigh the considerable religious evidence marshaled to defend competing religious interpretations".[221] It is worth stressing here that there are appeals to religious tradition and authority on both sides of the debate about the validity of the theological arguments made by terrorist groups. However, assessing the comparative strength and validity of each side is beyond the scope of this thesis. The primary reason for raising the theological claims made by groups like Al-Qaeda or Daesh is to stress that they do exist and cannot be simply dismissed out of hand.

[220] Despite the absence of an overarching authoritative institution within Protestant Christianity, each denomination or sect still tends to build institutions that govern the beliefs and behaviors of adherents. For example, in the United States, associations like the American Baptist Association or Southern Baptist Convention issue doctrinal and policy statements by which member churches, and religious leaders, are expected to abide.
[221] Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*, 25.

That said, as technological change lessens the distance between believers and religious scholars, charismatic and credible personalities who may have been unable to gain a pulpit in the past may seem more credible to online participants.[222] While deep religious knowledge of Islam, aided by recognized scholars, may be a bulwark against extremism,[223] and outward religious practices (i.e. praying daily or attending the *masjid* regularly) are not indicators of violent/criminal behavior,[224] real and genuine belief in a fringe interpretation seems to play a highly significant role in most cases of violent involvement. It appears that rather than a lack of knowledge about Islam in general, it is knowledge of a *specific minority interpretation* of Islam, alongside the exclusion of any counterarguments or other interpretations, that is a point of concern.

Many of the Canadians who became involved in violent extremism were recognized as intelligent, well-read, and knowledgeable about their new faith. Based on a variety of sources, including the stories of individuals who knew them, most of these individuals possessed a significant, albeit myopic, understanding of their faith. In Andre Poulin's postings on *ummah.com* (where he used the screenname Uncle Umar) there is clear evidence that he relied heavily on textual arguments, however marginal they may be, to advance his beliefs about what it meant to be a Muslim. At various points, his online engagement involved either complex references to the *sunnah* or a *hadith*, or sometimes an extended argument over the role of *imams*

[222] Nabil Echchaibi, "From Audio Tapes to Video Blogs: The Delocalisation of Authority in Islam," *Nations and Nationalism* 17, no. 1 (2011): 33–36; Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*, 26.
[223] Robert Lambert, "Salafi and Islamist Londoners: Stigmatised Minorit Faith Communities Countering Al-Qaida," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 50, no. 1 (2008): 73–89.
[224] Michael Wolfowicz et al., "A Field-Wide Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Putative Risk and Protective Factors for Radicalization," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 2019.

and scholars in contemporary Islam. As he developed his online persona, other members of the forum also began to look to him for guidance and advice on spiritual issues.

This again should not be interpreted as evidence that his beliefs were correct or generally accepted within the broader Muslim community, but rather that they had their own logic, existed within a school of thought, and were acknowledged by other members of the forum as being insightful. While confirmation by one's peers should not be evidence of expertise or mastery of a topic, it should serve as evidence of a degree of knowledge and the fact that, at least for Poulin, gaining knowledge and exploring the intellectual side of his new faith was highly important. For example, one snippet of a conversation from May 22nd, 2012 between him and another forum user (*Bianchoir)*, typifies this recognition:

> **Uncle Umar***:*[225] *It has been narrated from Ibn Umar; that the Holy Prophet said, "He who speaks without firstly giving salaam, then do not answer him (to what he has to say)."*
>
> *It has been narrated from Hazrat Ali that the Holy Prophet said, "Commonly in Islam there are six rights of a Muslim upon a Muslim: when he meets him he should give salaam; when he invites him (to a meal) he should accept it; when he sneezes he should bless him; when he falls ill he should visit him; when he dies he should accompany his funeral and he should prefer for him that which he prefers for himself."*
>
> **Bianchoir**: *Your posts are full of reminders/knowledge of Islam, Seriously I'm learning a lot akhi…may Allah reward you*
>
> **Uncle Umar**: *I am posting for myself first. I wanna boost myself; make dua for me akhi. The fruit of knowledge is taqwa. talk is talk, the real deal is in the deeds. May Allah reward you with better than what you ask for me*

Similar evidence exists in the case of Damian Clairmont, one of the foreign fighters who left Alberta to travel to Syria. Referring to Clairmont by his *kunya,* Abu Talha al-Kanadi, an

[225] Uncle Umar was Andre Poulin's username on *ummah.com*, a popular online Muslim forum. Screenshot available as Figure 1 in Appendix II.

individual who knew Clairmont prior to his leaving Calgary and later operated a Tumblr account supportive of Daesh wrote:

> "Contrary to the media-hype regarding [Damian] being a troubled teenager and the hilarious claim that he was simply a gullible "sitting target for extremists", brother [Damian] was in fact a very intelligent and mature individual who could think and decide for himself. Anyone who held a few minutes of discussion with the brother would come to realize that not only the brother was intellectually gifted, but he was also very knowledgeable and well-read about whatever topics he discussed. He loved to engage in philosophical discussions with just about anyone. He was very intelligent and yet very humble at the same time; a rare combination of blessings except for those whom Allah provides with special favors"[226]

Here again, the individuals who become involved are not described as clueless zealots or as being uninterested in debate or expanding their knowledge about their faith. For Clairmont's friends from Calgary, he was quite the opposite.

Steven Chand, convicted in the Toronto-18 plot,[227] was regarded by members of the mosque he attended, before being arrested, as "devout", and he would attend prayers at least three to four times a week.[228] Finally we see another example of this knowledge and intellectual approach to religion and conversion in John Maguire, who died in Syria while fighting for Daesh. Maguire was regarded by both his co-religionists and co-workers as being "deeply religious",[229] and able to converse knowledgeably and non-confrontationally on the intellectual and historical relationship between Islam and Christianity, and do so in a way that his friends found to be both reasoned and reasonable. One of his coworkers described his relationship with Maguire (who

[226] Abu Dajana, "Islamophobe to Mujahid: Journey of Abu Talha," accessed March 15, 2018, https://abumuhajir.tumblr.com/.
[227] The Toronto—18 plot, disrupted in 2006, involved a group of 18 individuals (11 of whom were ultimately convicted) who intended to detonate truck bombs at a number of locations across Ontario including the Toronto Stock Exchange, Parliament Hill and the headquarters of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.
[228] Mick, "A Convert Who Wanted to Spread the Faith."
[229] Ian McMillan, "I Knew John Maguire," Shaunanagins, 2015, https://shaunanagins.com/2015/01/15/i-knew-john-maguire/.

preferred to be called Yahya after his conversion) as follows. It is worthwhile to reproduce a large section:

> The conversations that the two of us had about religion, faith and morals fascinated me. As a student of history, I could talk to Yahya about the early church history and its relationship with the Islamic Faith. We talked about the crusades, the religious justification for them and the morality of killing in the name of God (for his part, Yahya shared his personal belief that killing in the name of God was only justifiable if an innocent life was at stake). We talked about the similarities and differences between the two religions. It was all very civil, very respectful and always informative. I pictured this as how any religious conversation should be. This went on for almost a year, every day the two of us talking to each other about what is truth and what is just. Not only did we work well together, we had some of the most intellectual conversations that I have ever had.[230]

This behaviour is not indicative of someone with limited, superficial knowledge of their own faith. Rather, it appears to depict someone with a genuine understanding of their belief system, and a willingness to speak reasonably with others about it.

There are of course several counterexamples. For example, Martin Couture-Rouleau appears to have moved very rapidly from initial exploration to conversion to involvement in violent extremism, making it unlikely that he gained any serious understanding of his new faith.[231] Similarly, the case of Amanda Korody and John Nutall, notwithstanding issues with the RCMP's conduct during the investigation, clearly demonstrated their limited knowledge of their faith and the very thin ideological frame they used to justify their actions.[232] However, individuals who follow this trajectory do not appear to be the majority in Canada. A lack of knowledge, no desire to become more knowledgeable, or a superficial understanding of their beliefs appear to be exceptions to the rule for converts involved in violent extremism.

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[230] McMillan.
[231] Stewart Bell, "Mental Health System Failed Quebec Man Who Became Infatuated with ISIL and Killed a Soldier: Coroner," National Post, 2017, http://www.nationalpost.com/m/wp/news/canada/blog.html?b=news.nationalpost.com/news/martin-couture-rouleau-quebec-coroners-report.
[232] R. v. Nuttall, 2018 BCCA 479 (CanLII), para. 445, <http://canlii.ca/t/hwnvs#par240>, retrieved on 2020-02-27

It is important to note here that religious knowledge and devout practice of one's faith must not be interpreted as evidence of radicalization. Rather, the point of this discussion was to highlight that counter to much of the literature written on converts involved in violent extremism, these individuals are not uniformly unknowledgeable or incapable of practicing their new faith properly; rather in many cases it is quite the opposite, so this explanation by itself is unsatisfactory.

5.4 Religious Zeal

Conversion, or the adoption of a set of new beliefs and a related new identity, is a paradigm shifting experience. The convert comes to see the world through a new moral prism and tries to make sense of their life in a new way. This experience is emotionally powerful and may generate a desire to prove to others how 'real' their conversion is. Authors writing on convert radicalization have seized upon this zeal as an explanation for some converts' turn to violent extremism.[233]

Hafez and Mullins write that converts are often "knowledge hungry" and are searching for "clarity and zeal".[234] Silber and Bhatt assert that "converts have played a prominent role in the majority of terrorist case studies and tend to be the most zealous members of groups. Their need to prove their religious convictions to their companions often makes them the most aggressive".[235] Geelhoed et al. also argue that zeal "contribute[s] to the likeliness of some new Muslims embracing radical or extremist positions."[236] Bartoszewicz succinctly summarizes the

[233] Rushchenko, "Converts to Islam and Home Grown Jihadism," 3; Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," 966.
[234] Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," 966.
[235] Silber and Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat," 29.
[236] Geelhoed, Staring, and Schuurman, "Understanding Dutch Converts to Islam: On Turbulent Trajectories and (Non-) Involvement in Jihadist Movements," 41.

predominant view , writing: “a majority of experts treat converts as a homogenous group; broad generalisations are conducted whereby converts are presented as gullible individuals, easy to influence and prone to fall into an outbidding spiral when trying to prove their worth to their new brethren.”[237]

In this explanation, the higher levels of zeal the higher the likelihood of involvement in violent extremism. The underlying causal mechanisms for involvement according to this line of reasoning are the in-person or online recruiters and extremist communities who can exploit or dupe the zealous new convert for their own ends. As the convert knows little about their new faith but desires to show their conviction, extremism represents an attractive way to do so. However, this perspective does not hold up to closer scrutiny. As discussed earlier, the first issue with this explanation is that the level of religious knowledge within converts to Islam does not appear to be as minimal as many authors have presumed. To understand the potential link between zeal and involvement in violent extremism it is first necessary to develop a way of conceptualizing, measuring, and interpreting religious zeal.

There exists relatively little literature describing how converts navigate their existence post-conversion, especially converts to Islam. As noted in the literature review, there are only three or four sources that cover the experience in depth, although there is greater emphasis paid in each to describing the experience as opposed to developing an analytic model to interpret them. One thorough model, developed by Anne Sofie Roald in 2012, is quite helpful.

In her article “The Conversion Process in Stages: New Muslims in the Twenty-First Century”, Roald develops a four-stage linear model of behaviour and beliefs *after conversion*:

[237] Monika G Bartoszewicz, “Controversies of Conversions : The Potential Terrorist Threat of European Converts to Islam,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 3 (2013): 18.

zealotry, disappointment, acceptance, and secularization [see *Figure 7*]. Zealotry is "marked by the convert distancing himself or herself from old peer groups and becoming totally absorbed into a new worldview",[238] disappointment then occurs when "new Muslims realize that they have bitten off more than they can chew". [239]Next, she argues, new Muslims do one of two things. They either then *leave the faith* or move towards *acceptance*, a period where converts "tend to search for new understandings of Islam, particularly those suitable to the cultural context in which they live.[240] Subsequently, *acceptance* leads to *secularization*, or "an approach to religion as private tends to lead the person to choose parts of the religious message rather than following a set of ready-made codes of conduct".[241] Roald acknowledges that these stages are not necessarily sequential or evolutionary, and that not all converts move to the fourth stage of privatization or secularization, some hold strong to the reasonable belief that Islam provides an appropriate and helpful way to order their private and public lives.

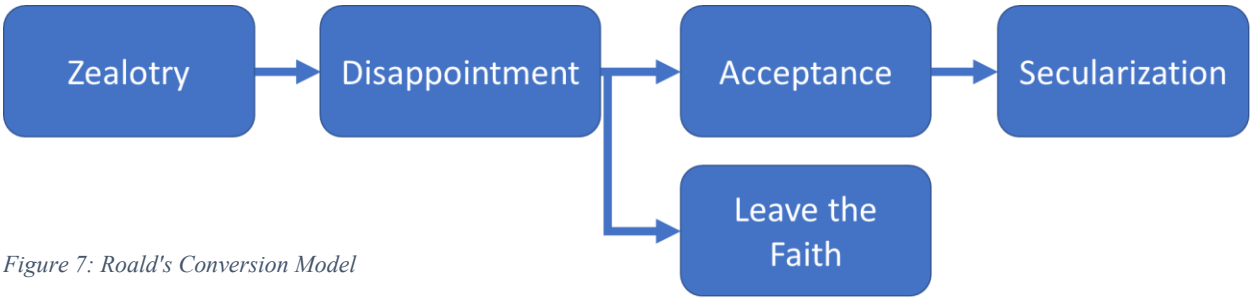

Figure 7: Roald's Conversion Model

Roald also articulates a temporal dimension of the model and argues that while individuals can get 'stuck' in the first stage for a prolonged period of time, most move beyond that to a relatively short period of disappointment, where they then either leave the faith altogether or move forwards towards "acceptance", at which point they are better able to manage both their

[238] Roald, "The Conversion Process in Stages: New Muslims in the Twenty-First Century," 349.
[239] Roald, 353.
[240] Roald, 353.
[241] Roald, 356.

identity as Muslims and 'come back to themselves'. This process involves a partial return to their pre-conversion identity, mediated through their new religious identity; essentially a balancing of their old and new identities.[242] She suggests that secularization is a much longer-term process that only some individuals participate in.

Roald acknowledges the radicalization debate and suggests that individuals who eventually engage in some form of violent extremism get 'stuck' in the zealous phase and are often influenced heavily by *Salafi* texts, a conclusion common to many authors studying radicalization of converts, as discussed above. Roald asserts that Salafism is particularly attractive to converts due to the movement's claims of authenticity, which is ostensibly resonant with new converts in a way that other Muslim schools of thought are not.[243] Salafism's appeal is a result of its claim to be a pure form of Islam, and its focus on replicating the religious practices which existed in Islam's early years. As will be discussed below, there may be some links between disappointment with Salafism as practiced in Western contexts and subsequent radicalization.

Fixating upon 'zeal' as an explanation for violent extremism has a intuitive appeal; after all, as the saying goes: there is no zealot like a convert.[244] This argument is compelling and is perhaps explanatory in cases such as those of Vilyam Plotnikov, Dwayne Boissoneau and Martin Couture-Rouleau, where the processes of radicalization and mobilization appear to have happened relatively quickly. In these three cases, discrete involvement in extremism began well within two years of conversion, and clear behavioural indicators of radicalization were evident in

[242] Roald, 353–54.
[243] Roald, 352.
[244] I have some reservations about the conflation of zeal with religious fanaticism that seems to be implicit in many of the pieces that fixate upon zeal as an explanation, insofar as they seem to assume that engagement in violence is the logical endpoint for zeal. I would argue that there are a host of far more likely, non-violent or even pro-social endpoints for religious zeal. As discussed earlier, some of this discomfort in the literature around viewing zeal as a positive thing may stem from the well-established secular bias in the field.

advance of that. For example, Couture-Rouleau appears to have started making posts generally supportive of violent extremism and Daesh well within six months of converting; it is highly unlikely that his religious identity had fully formed or even stabilized prior to his initial exploration of extremism.[245]

One of the 'Canadian radicals' that Ilardi interviews describes a similar trajectory, wherein they adopted what they described as a radical viewpoint within six months of converting; the respondent attributed this to a natural continuation of the conversion process and subsequent seeking of knowledge.[246] In such cases, the velocity of their radicalization makes it relatively unlikely that they progressed much beyond the initial stage of zealotry before at least flirting with involvement in violent extremism. However, there are at least two problems with this explanation. First, while survey data are limited, it is not clear that converts are necessarily more zealous or radical overall than individuals born into the religion. Second, for a majority of converts who become involved in violent extremism, it is a process that occurs years, and not months, after they convert. Each of these issues will be explored in turn.

There exists little quantitative data on religious zeal, perhaps due in part to the fact that the label itself is highly subjective, context dependent and difficult to measure. What looks like zeal in one religion is simply a reasonable expectation in another religion. For example, a convert to the United Church going to attend services or events three or four times a week would likely be considered quite zealous, but the same behavior would not necessarily count as zealous for a convert to Islam or Catholicism, both religions where daily attendance at a place of worship is not uncommon. That said, analysis conducted by Pond et al., associates with the Pew Forum

[245] Bruemmer, "Martin-Couture Rouleau: Clues of a Tragedy Foretold."
[246] Ilardi, "Interviews With Canadian Radicals," 717–20.

on Religion and Public Life, attempted to measure the religiosity of new converts using data from the 2007 Religious Landscape Study (RLS).[247] They used six variables captured by the RLS to construct a proxy for religiosity: "religious salience, weekly worship attendance, absolute certainty of belief in God, daily prayer, regular sharing of faith, and assent with the statement that one's own faith 'is the one true faith leading to eternal life.'"[248] Taken together, these measures are likely to be considered by most as constitutive of someone with religious zeal. Interestingly, their findings suggest that the archetype of a zealous convert may be overstated.[249] In their model, while conversion was highly significant ($p<0.01$), meaning it did partially predict religiosity, the effect size was smaller than those of gender, age, level of education, martial status, number of children and ethnicity.[250] All this is not to suggest that post-conversion zealotry is not a common or impactful experience, but rather that its importance may be overstated, especially when it comes to explanations for involvement in violent extremism.

Absent a stable, generally accepted definition, it is also worth looking at some proxies that could be reasonably understood as indicators of zeal, as experienced by converts. The only quantitative study that exists specifically focusing on the relative level of radicalism and activism between converts and non-converts does find some statistically significant correlation between conversion and willingness to engage in legal (defined as activism) and illegal (defined as radicalism) behavior.[251] The study, based on a measure using eight questions (ARIS) developed

[247] Allison Pond et al., "The Zeal of the Convert: Religious Characteristics of Americans Who Switch Religions," 2015, www.asrec.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Pond-Smith-Sahgal-Clement-Zeal-of-Convert-ASRE09.doc.
[248] Pond et al., 14.
[249] Oddly, the paper's abstract highlights that the authors found support for the 'zealous convert' hypothesis but note that the effect size was modest. Reading the paper in more detail suggests that they may have buried the lede in the analysis: the effect that being a convert has on religiosity appears to be quite minimal, at least in the aggregate.
[250] Pond et al., "The Zeal of the Convert: Religious Characteristics of Americans Who Switch Religions," 20.
[251] Ari D Fodeman, Daniel W Snook, and John G. Horgan, "Picking Up and Defending the Faith: Activism and Radicalism Among Muslim Converts in the United States," *Political Psychology*, 2020, 16.

by two social psychologists, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, whose work on radicalization has been quite influential,[252] found that "being a convert is a significant predictor of higher intent to engage in radicalism, even while controlling for significant covariates such as gender and education".[253]

However, there are a few issues with this study. As the authors acknowledge, the survey data is zero-inflated and in some of the zero-inflated regression models used in their analysis, conversion ceases to be a significant, or when using some regression models, even a positively correlated variable, which raises some questions about the statistical rigour of their findings.[254] Moreover, the ARIS questions refer to relations between the respondents' in-group and various out-groups or threats to the in-group, and while the survey was administered only to Muslim Americans, respondents were never explicitly directed to consider Muslims as the in-group for the purpose of the ARIS measurements.[255] Here again, if the findings of the paper are correct, and converts are more open to radicalism than those born into Islam, it is difficult to directly attribute this to zeal. First, the causal mechanism is not especially clear; radical, criminal, or violent behavior is not the necessary endpoint of zeal. Second, the sequencing of this openness to radicalism is uncertain: given the way the survey data was collected, it is not clear whether this higher level of radicalism developed shortly after conversion (during a hypothesized period of zeal) or much later and is attributable to some other stage of conversion.

[252] Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley, "Measuring Political Mobilization: The Distinction between Activism and Radicalism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 2 (2009): 239–60.
[253] Fodeman, Snook, and Horgan, "Picking Up and Defending the Faith: Activism and Radicalism Among Muslim Converts in the United States," 14.
[254] Fodeman, Snook, and Horgan, 12–14.
[255] Fodeman, Snook, and Horgan, 8.

The second issue is the average length of time between conversion and involvement in violent extremism seem to be longer than most scholars describe the period of zeal lasting. While most conversion models do not estimate the duration of this phase of zealotry, it is often described as an emotionally intense, exhausting period. Roald describes how "after a while, when the first 'intoxication' has worn off, many new Muslims realize that they have bitten off more than they can chew".[256] This phenomenon is not unique to converts to Islam; Werner recounts a catechism written by a Catholic priest operating in the Nordic countries in the 1920s, where the priest describes how "during the first phase, the convert is filled with enthusiasm and runs the risk of exaggerating his religious practices".[257]

While Roald argues conversion lends itself to rapid radicalization, the evidence suggests involvement in violent extremism tends to come after long periods of time in the convert's new faith. Recall the PIRUS data discussed earlier: for 84 per cent of the individuals, radicalization occurred more than one year after conversion and roughly 50 per cent of individuals were only exposed as being involved in violent extremism more than six years after conversion.[258] It thus seems unlikely that an individual could sustain this emotionally intense state over a long enough period of time for it to explain radicalization to violence.

This section discussed the four dominant hypotheses: the role of personal characteristics, the duration of radicalization, religious knowledge, and religious zeal. Each argument was addressed in turn. Individually or collectively, no hypothesis provided both the necessary and sufficient conditions to explain radicalization to violence. Using the RCC dataset, this section

[256] Roald, "The Conversion Process in Stages: New Muslims in the Twenty-First Century," 353.
[257] Yvonne Maria Werner, "Catholic Mission and Conversion in Scandinavia: Some Reflections on Religion, Modernisation, and Identity Construction," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 35, no. 1 (2010): 71.
[258] National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism, "Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States [Data File, Version 3.2]."

argued that previous studies may have understated (as in the case of religious knowledge) or overstated (as is the case with personal characteristics) the prevalence of some important variables. The following chapter will expand on the two key processes at play in the radicalization of religious converts: disappointment and socialization. The former provides the crucial emotional state – or 'cognitive opening' – to radicalization, which is then reinforced and deepened through social networks. Socialization is not in itself a new consideration for radicalization, but the way it works to reinforce and offer a corrective to post-conversion disappointment has not been previously discussed.

6. Exploring the Role of Disappointment in Radicalization

Having now criticized the dominant explanations of convert radicalization on both theoretical and evidentiary grounds, a new variable worthy of future exploration will be proposed and explored: disappointment. To develop this contribution, disappointment's role in explaining the radicalization of Andre Poulin will be examined through an analysis of his forum posts on *ummah.com*. This section will also elaborate on the theoretical connection between radicalization to violence and disappointment.

What makes Poulin's posts unique is the sustained nature of them, beginning years in advance of his direct involvement with an extremist group. Poulin's data also get around what Snow and Machalek term the "temporal variability" of convert's stories.[259] In the case of Poulin, rather than having his involvement retold at some future point in time where the weighted importance of experiences may change, his posts provide instant insight into his emotions, which should at least partially reduce the effect of any reconstructive biases. Several of Roald's stages can be discerned from Poulin's posts, however it was during the disappointment stage that he started to radicalize, which Roald's model does not predict.[260] This paper builds on Roald's model by outlining a third potential path through the period of disappointment in the process of conversion: radicalization.

Prior to exploring the ways in which disappointment may have created a radicalization pathway for Andre Poulin, I will again stress that this radicalization 'pathway' is based upon evidence from one case with incomplete data. One case is obviously insufficient to serve as the foundation for an entirely new understanding of what animates convert radicalization, but

[259] Snow and Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion," 176.
[260] Roald's model suggests that disaffiliation or reconciliation follow disappointment.

nevertheless, further exploring the understanding offered below may breathe fresh life into an area of the discipline that remains more or less stagnant and fixated on somewhat simplistic explanations. However, as has been shown in a variety of contexts, induction using single case studies are superior to large-N studies for the purposes of hypothesis generation. The radicalization literature has focused too greatly on structural, sociological variables because of its reliance on large-N studies, to the detriment of cognitive and ideological explanations. Case study induction makes the temporal and cognitive dimensions of radicalization clearer: over time, Poulin's growing resentment towards other Canadian Muslims and his perception of deficiencies in the ways in which Islam is practiced in many western countries appear to have created an acute sense of disappointment and rejection of the faith as practiced by most Canadian Muslims that may have caused him to seek out and learn more about more extreme interpretations of the faith.

6.1 Early Growth in Islam: 2009

Poulin's posting history begins with indications of both knowledge-seeking and a desire to outwardly profess his new-found faith; each is indicative of the first stage of conversion: zeal. In early posts he inquires about how to handle Christmas celebrations and tries to develop, at least superficially, a better understanding of the different belief systems of Sufis, Salafis, etc. He writes about his desire to gain knowledge and in one thread discusses his desire to wear a black turban as an outward manifestation of his new religion. These posts occurred roughly between nine and fifteen months after his conversion.

In March 2009, when he first begins posting on the forum, he asks:

> *what is a salafi…simply put i am a new muslim and i dont know about most of the stuff they are talking about. although i am trying to learn, it will take some time, but is a salafi*

basically a sunni?[261]

In December 2009 he tries to figure out how to navigate his second Christmas as a Muslim with his Christian family,[262] writing:

> *I read one fatwa saying you can give presents and wish people a merry Christmas and all that, and another saying the oppisite. this was last year. i was so confused, and i still am…what i was seeking was a solution or ideas or hear your stories of how you handled this with your family, so that i can try to salvage some type of relationship with them*.[263]

During the same period, in several different posts, he expresses beliefs and opinions decidedly not in line with the beliefs proscribed by *Salafi-Jihadism*. While he may have still been at the 'zeal' stage of this process – this zealotry did not express itself in a manner consistent with what the 'radicalization as religious zeal' literature would suggest.

For example, Poulin cautions users about casually calling others *kuffar* (a sometimes derogatory word for non-Muslims), and includes reference to an article written by Fareena Alam, a female British Muslim journalist whose family has been the recipient of death threats for her reformist views on Islam.[264] In the portion Poulin posted, it contains a warning about calling people '*kuffar'* and how this approach erodes harmony within the Muslim community. In another post seemingly reflective of his mindset at the time, he writes:

> *there is the middle path we folw. we give both muslims and nonmuslims dawah. we invite the non muslim to the perfect way, and we invite the muslim to better themself…we have to talk to kaffirs. its an oblegaion. and we have to talk to thm repectfuly too. you cant jude them, that is ONLY the right of Allah. not your right, not my right*[265]

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[261] Screenshot of posting available as Image 2 in Appendix II.
[262] This quote again also demonstrates the apparent challenges for converts stemming from a lack of clear hierarchical religious authority within Islam; two *fatwas*, both authored by religious authorities, saying opposing things.
[263] Screenshot of posting available as Image 3 in Appendix II.
[264] Rachel Aspden, "NS Interview - 'The Petrodollar-Funded Literalists Think Their Version Is the Real Islam. I'm for an Islam That Is at Home in Britain,'" NewStatesman, 2006, https://www.newstatesman.com/node/163805. Screenshot of posting available as Image 4 in Appendix II.
[265] Screenshot of posting available as Image 5 in Appendix II.

Without ascribing too much significance to this quote, it is worthwhile to note that this interpretation of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims is somewhat unexpected if, in fact, Poulin had, at this point, adopted the *Salafi-Jihadist* view of the world – one that rejects nuance, incrementalism and coexistence. Studying Poulin's post history, and recalling the stories of friends and families of other converts discussed above calls into question Oliver Roy's claim that converts who become involved in extremism never had any interest in a 'moderate Islam', and that they were immediately drawn into the most violent and extreme perversion of the faith.[266] In most cases, as established in earlier sections of this thesis, it appears that their movement towards extremism happened over time, usually after some engagement with mainstream Islamic beliefs and communities. For Poulin, towards the end of 2010, something begins to happen.

6.2 Disappointment and Declining Zeal: Late 2010

Beginning in approximately November 2010, roughly two and a half to three years after Poulin converted to Islam, there is a clear shift in his tone and views – one which appears to be linked to and partially motivated by three factors: 1) a perception of discrimination against converts within the Muslim community, 2) increasing frustration with, and rejection of, the practices of 'born' Muslims, especially the practices of the religious scholars (*ulama*), and 3) the initial period of religious zeal fading. Understandably, the confluence of these three factors may create a strong sense of disappointment within the convert population, and a desire to seek out an alternative approach to the faith and a new social network. Moreover, in the absence of some religious guidance and a strong, positive social network to reduce the intensity and duration of these emotions, a pathway towards radicalization may emerge.[267]

[266] Roy, "France's Oedipal Islamist Complex."
[267] Interestingly, some of this emotional turmoil may have either been the cause of, or aggravated by, a breakdown in his relationship with his wife, which happened sometime in the latter half of 2010.

For example, Poulin comments on how he believes he is being discriminated against, and it becomes apparent that he does not feel entirely accepted by the Muslim community, especially when attending mosques with predominantly South Asian congregants, complaining:

> *yeah pakistani people are hipocrites liek this. the majority i have met do this. they just ignore me and go speak their own language of their own kind*[268]

In another representative post, titled "why hatin on the white guys?", he writes:

> *just because we got pastey white skin doesnt mean we are less then anybody else.*[269]

He also becomes highly critical of 'mainstream' Islam in the West, viewing it as inauthentic and corrupted. In a lengthier post, responding to another poster who critiqued the forum's tendency to engage in 'ulama bashing', or the unfair criticism of Imams and religious scholars in the West who support moderation and coexistence, Poulin becomes very critical of religious scholars living in the United States and Canada.

> *Allah mad the haqq so clear that the illiterate desert bedouin could understand it. the truth to islam, the criterion is clear. you dont need a scholar to tell you these basic things that a child can understand. like i said, scholars have come up with some really wishy washy fatwas in the past 10 years. should we [follow] them on the basis of 'well they have more knowledge?...*
>
> *no, haqq is haqq, and it is as simple as that…nobody is more dangerous than a deviant scholar"*[270]

Another consistent issue he had with the Muslim community were the decorations and furnishings inside the mosques in the greater Toronto area, which he perceived as ostentatious

[268] Screenshot of posting available as Image 6 in Appendix II
[269] Screenshot of posting available as Image 7 in Appendix II
[270] Screenshot of posting available as Image 8 in Appendix II

and hypocritical. In a November 2011 post responding to someone asking how life in Canada was, Poulin wrote:

> *wjhen ppl are starving in Somalia there are 50 million dollar masjid being built here. wep, thats what i call brotherhood. who needs to feed your brother when you have a* ***gold chandelier*** *hanging from the ceiling. which reminds me, dident the prophet pbuh say that we cant put gold in masjids?*[271]

He then follows up with another post about what he believes are the large number of people obsessed with earthly possessions, referred to frequently on the forum as 'dunyaholics' (from the Arabic word *dunya* meaning the temporal world and material possessions),[272] in Toronto's Muslim community. All this is to suggest that not only was the behaviour of 'born' Muslims bothering him – as it bothers many converts – but he also perceived issues with the mainstream practice of Islam in Canada. [273]

Concurrent to these complaints about his own role within the community, Poulin begins to describe how his faith has changed over time and expresses regret that at the time he was writing, it felt as though it was waning. In a post titled "sometimes I feel like a bad Muslim", Poulin writes the following:

> *"i think back to when i said my shahadah. i was really firm back then. my eyes never left the ground. i always had a book in my hand. i was always doing dhiker. i was calmer and better with words. i gave more dawah. i had less of an ego, i studied for days or weeks just on one simple topic (i remember when i was trying to understand the concept of humility). i had more zeal and desire but not the type you would be so firm with that you would just burn out. it was just natural, it was a gift. then i got married and it all went to crap…*
>
> *i have tried just about everything to gain that desire back, that desire to live akhirah more then anything"*[274]

[271] Screenshot of posting available as Image 9 in Appendix II
[272] Screenshot of posting available as Image 10 in Appendix II
[273] Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts*, 260–65.
[274] Screenshot of posting available as Image 11 in Appendix II

Recalling Roald's model discussed above, at this point in his post-conversion process, Poulin seems to be sharing emotions and critiques of the Muslim community much more reflective of someone deeply disappointed with his religious community and the state of his belief, as opposed to consumed by zeal. However, while Roald's model predicts either religious disaffiliation or subsequent reconciliation between the convert's idealized version of Islam and Islam as a lived reality, neither of these occurs. Instead, something else happens.

6.3 A Radical Turn: 2011

In the latter half of 2011, Poulin started to demonstrate views that were more fringe, or in some cases explicitly radical or violent views. Despite having made several posts only a year earlier that were clearly opposed to sectarian discrimination between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, in August 2011 Poulin has substantially shifted his views on sectarianism, and writes:

> "*so i was talking with the brothers in town today, and i said shia arnt muslim because they changed the aqeedah of islam from what allah revealed to what they made it. big taboo topic lol. was a good debate though*"[275]

Likewise, he goes from talking about the importance of making friends with non-Muslims and trying to bring people to faith by positive actions for the first few years of his presence on the forum to instead writing about how he "isnt making friends with the kuffar."[276] Similarly, his views on *da'wa* (proselytizing) moved from advocating for kindly inviting other to Islam towards an argument for forced or violent conversion. In July he writes, "for those who say you cant force a non mulsim country to adopt sharia you should read up on egypt, india and

[275] Screenshot of posting available as Image 12 in Appendix II
[276] Screenshot of posting available as Image 13 in Appendix II

persia…it wasent dawah by mouth", all three countries were invaded by Muslim forces in the centuries after the Prophet Muhammad's death.[277]

Around this time he also starts to discuss his affinity for the lectures and ideas of Anwar al-Awlaki, a key *Salafi-Jihadist* ideologue and key leader of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.[278] While Poulin used to be more tolerant towards those on the forum who disagreed with him, he starts to be more dismissive and authoritative in his rejections of opposing points of view.

Finally, by early June 2012, a few months before leaving for Syria, his posts reflect a newfound zeal, or a return to that initial emotional state he experienced shortly after conversion. In two posts on June 6th, 2012, he writes:

> *"anyone here remember the feelings you had when you just went on your journey, the one path that lead you to islam. its really nice when you get those feelings back.*
>
> *to all the new muslims who just entered islam, enjoy this time, you will never have it again. shaytan is plotting against you and over time this will wear you down.*
>
> *to my new muslim brothers and sisters my suggestions to you to protect your eeman is to hold fast to Allah no matter how hard it is, and to move away from the west. dont do it hastily without thought but make the move.*
>
> *it wears away. recently ive had a revival of sorts. its that sweetness of eeman. the willingness to sacrafise, to be shunned, to be a stranger. never caring what people said or thought, giving dawah constantly.*"[279]
>
> *"it gives you that feeling. it came naturally. Alhamdulilah its comming back*"[280]

[277] Screenshot of posting available as Image 14 in Appendix II
[278] Anwar al-Awlaki was hugely influential in introducing younger individuals to key texts and ideas of Salafi-Jihadism. Being raised in the United States, and being a fluent English speaker, he connected on multiple levels with an audience that may have otherwise not had access to older, predominantly Arabic language tracts. For an extended discussion of the pervasiveness of Al-Awlaki's propaganda, see: Donald Holbrook, "What Types of Media Do Terrorists Collect?" (The Hague, 2017).
[279] Screenshot of posting available as Image 15 in Appendix II
[280] Screenshots of posting available as Image 16 and Image 17 in Appendix II

This series of posts suggests that Poulin's post-conversion disappointment may have provided an openness to radicalization, which in turn allowed him to regain the initial feeling of certainty and confidence he felt after his initial conversion. This is a significantly different result than what Roald's model would have predicted. Rather than turning away from the faith, Poulin instead attempted to actively seek out ways to overcome the disappointment,[281] and bring about what he perceived to be positive changes in his life.

This close examination of Andre Poulin's behaviour is not intended to inform a general theory, however – as mentioned earlier – patterns are present in radicalization and in many ways, Andre Poulin's experience is emblematic of other Canadian converts who became involved in violent extremism, insofar as his biography is unremarkable and his process occurs gradually over time. What makes his experience unique, and worthy of study, is the openness of his online posts and discourse. Understanding the role that disappointment may play in radicalization to violence also requires some discussion of how disappointment intersects with the role of socialization in radicalization to violence.

A recurring theme within Poulin's posting history is that of isolation or an inability to meaningfully connect with the broader Muslim community, which in turn induced a pronounced sense of disappointment. In Poulin's case, this appear to have been due to both his perception of how they practiced Islam, the small Muslim community in the city he was initially living in, and a subsequent inability to be accepted by the Muslim community when he relocated to Toronto. The phenomenon of converts being isolated within their new communities is a somewhat common experience across any number of religions, although subsequent radicalization and

[281] Dijk, Pligt, and Zeelenberg, "On Bad Decisions and Discomfirmed Expectancies," 537.

involvement in violence is, of course, extremely uncommon. However, this social isolation and relative marginalization paired with a sense of lost zeal and/or disappointment with how their co-religionists practice their faith may create a cognitive opening to, or search for, more radical strains of religious practice.

Roald has written on this in the context of converts in Scandinavia, who often feel initially well-received, but frequently not "wholly accepted into the new faith community".[282] Research on converts in Britain also highlighted the challenge of feeling comfortable in Muslim communities, specifically communities where there was a high degree of cultural homogeneity. Ali Köse found that "converts had a feeling of belonging to the greater Muslim community and the universal brotherhood. They did not feel at ease with the culture or tradition of Muslim communities around them. They stated that some elements of different ethnic communities had been inserted into Islam and regarded as part of it".[283] Similarly, Adam Deen, a convert and former senior member of Al-Muhajiroun,[284] writes about this, noting that the "mainstream Muslim community may still see [converts] as outsiders".[285] Kate Zebiri's and Maha Al-Qwidi's work on Muslim converts in Britain has also reached similar conclusions.[286]

When disappointment and isolation intersect, not only can they become mutually reinforcing of the convert's critique of Western Islam, but they can also increase the resonance of the messaging of *Salafi-Jihadist* ideologues and terrorist organizations. Consider the work of Anwar

[282] Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts*, 254.
[283] Köse, "Post-Conversion Experiences of Native British Convert to Islam," 202.
[284] Al-Muhajiroun was an Islamist group based in the UK in the early 2000s. Its views were radical, albeit mostly non-violent. A significant number of its members later joined jihadist groups abroad or planned attacks in the UK.
[285] Adam Deen, "Why Are Converts to Islam Specifically Vulnerable to Becoming Extremists," The Independent, 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/westminster-london-terror-attack-terrorist-khalid-masood-convert-muslim-islam-extremism-a7647626.html.
[286] Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*; Al-Qwidi, "Understanding the Stages of Conversion to Islam: The Voices of British Converts."

al-Awlaki, who preached about the decadence of culture in the West, the failures or duplicity of many Western imams, the need for unity, and protection of a transnational identity - the global *ummah* - as opposed to identifying with an ethnic group or nationality.[287] This last point is especially important given the tendency to place a high degree of importance on Muslims' transnational identity – the *ummah* – that scholars have found is highly salient with converts.[288]

For example, in his widely-shared work *44 Ways to Support Jihad*, Al-Awlaki stresses the importance of "fighting the lies of the Western media"[289] that influence Muslims in the West and "exposing the hypocrites" within the Muslim community, who: "hide behind the cloak of religion to spread their poisonous ideas, the way to fight them is by revealing the truth and exposing their lies".[290] For converts seeking affirmation that both their critique of the Muslim community is valid, and that they have an important role to play within a sometimes fractious faith community, these narratives may well be persuasive. *Salafi-Jihadism* offers both what they view as a valid critique and an achievable solution.

Some degree of real or perceived social isolation and lack of a positive social network, both recognized as explanatory factors for radicalization to violence in general,[291] are not unique to converts. Rather the dynamics of their conversion and subsequent struggle or inability to fit into the Muslim community may make them more likely to seek out or become involved in a violent extremist group. The role of social networks in facilitating involvement in violent extremism is

[287] Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, "As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar Al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad" (London, 2011), https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/ICSR-Report-As-American-As-Apple-Pie-How-Anwar-al-Awlaki-Became-the-Face-of-Western-Jihad.pdf.
[288] Köse, "Post-Conversion Experiences of Native British Convert to Islam," 202.
[289] Anwar Al-Awlaki, "44 Ways to Support Jihad" (Victorious Media, n.d.), 8, https://ia801906.us.archive.org/23/items/44WaysOfSupportingJihad/44-ways-of-supporting-jihad.pdf.
[290] Al-Awlaki, 9.
[291] National Institute of Justice, "Radicalization and Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned From Canada, the U.K. and the U.S." (Arlington, Virginia, 2015), 10, https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249947.pdf.

well-established,[292] and echoes much of the earlier literature on conversion to NRMs.[293] Converts' overrepresentation among violent extremists may be at least in part due to their overrepresentation within a vulnerable subset of believers; those who lack strong positive social connections within their community of believers or view the community as somehow flawed and as a result, seek out new connections and friendships.

It is important to reiterate here that this disconnection from their religious community should not be interpreted as a more general social isolation. Indeed, as was argued above, many of the converts who became involved in violent extremism in Canada, especially those who became foreign fighters, were not entirely isolated. Instead, most maintained reasonably good relationships with their friends and family,[294] but lacked strong connections to a broad subset of the Muslim community in their cities. This finding was also noted among converts to Islam in the Netherlands, who were not as isolated from their old social networks as many previous authors speculated.[295]

[292] Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism"; Webber and Kruglanski, "The Social Psychological Makings of a Terrorist."
[293] Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, "Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 6 (1980): 1376–95.
[294] In some cases, their connection to friends and family improved, at least for a period of time, after their conversion. This was certainly the case for Damian Clairmont.
[295] Geelhoed, Staring, and Schuurman, "Understanding Dutch Converts to Islam: On Turbulent Trajectories and (Non-) Involvement in Jihadist Movements," 16–20.

7. Radicalization as a Redemptive Process: Adopting a New Morality

As has been argued throughout this thesis, the general tendency among many who study radicalization to view involvement in violent extremism as being the result of some combination of the following: a variant of criminality, the result of acute vulnerability due to some behavioral or mental health issues, a response to economic marginalization or an outcome of some other general anti-social character trait. In so doing, they often ignore or explicitly reject the possibility that violent extremism offers people a moral framework through which they can view and interact with the world.

For example, in her study of convert involvement, Julia Rushchenko asserts some correlation between parental absence and "antisocial behaviour that manifests as petty crime or terrorism during adulthood".[296] For Rushchenko, involvement in violent extremism is viewed as equivalent to, or a continuous process beginning with, criminality. Basra and Neumann quote a law enforcement officer from Europe who compared Daesh to a "super-gang."[297] Similarly, Arthur Snell – a British diplomat who formerly ran the British government's counter-extremism program Prevent – recalls how the foreign fighters he interviewed in Iraq after the 2003 invasion were: "young men without much sense of direction or status, and by joining the insurgency in Iraq, they felt for the first time in their lives that they mattered, that they were doing something important, almost heroic…So basically, it's a mental health issue".[298]

These quotes are just a sampling, but the general theme that emerges is one discussed above in the context of religious conversion, where violent extremists are seen as fundamentally

[296] Rushchenko, "Converts to Islam and Home Grown Jihadism," 34.
[297] Rajan Basra, Peter R Neumann, and Claudia Brunner, "Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus" (London, 2016), 8, https://doi.org/10.2307/26297703.
[298] Helen Lewis, "Why Extremists Need Therapy," *The Atlantic*, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/02/britain-london-terrorism-deradicalization/606376/.

antisocial individuals, with some nearly-incurable flaws that cause them either to seek out and engage in violence or to be easily duped into involvement in violent extremism. And in turn, any religious or moral justifications they offer for their actions, which are extraordinarily easy to find in the interviews given by leaders, statements in courts from individuals on trial, propaganda videos, written work and social media presence,[299] are dismissed as lies, irrational, or as the delusions of someone with a mental illness.

As Dawson notes, and as was discussed above, this may be in part due to the tendency of many social scientists to "find strong, and hence often intolerant, religious convictions baffling, if not repugnant".[300] As a result, the field is more or less where it was twenty years ago when it comes to answering the fundamental question: "why do people engage in terrorism". Perhaps, as some have argued, this is question that cannot be answered, and so we should instead focus on answering questions about behavioral indicators of mobilization to violence – essentially asking the 'how' not the 'why'.[301] However, the 'why' question appears to be answerable if you take what violent extremists of any ideological persuasion say seriously. These are individuals who are animated to act, often at a high personal cost, to advance the cause of something they believe in. Again, the erasure of ideology from these decisions is both curious and unwarranted.

Reconsider, for example, the above quote from Arthur Snell: "they felt for the first time in their lives that they mattered, that they were doing something important, almost heroic."[302] Outside of the specific population (foreign fighters in Iraq) Snell was referring to, the general sentiment here could be said about an individual running for public office, a medical professional

[299] Dawson, "Discounting Religion in the Explanation of Homegrown Terrorism: A Critique," 42–43.
[300] Dawson, 41.
[301] Schuurman et al., "Lone Actor Terrorist Attack Planning and Preparation: A Data-Driven Analysis"; Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism."
[302] Lewis, "Why Extremists Need Therapy."

volunteering to work for Médecins Sans Frontières, someone joining the military,[303] or a host of other activities that we understand to be pro-social and laudable, rather than necessarily deviant. Instead, Snell, because of his (reasonable) moral objections to their mission, simply dismisses their commitment as something attributable to mental illness rather than moral or religious motivation. While accounts of terrorists should obviously be subject to reasonable scrutiny, scholars and practitioners ought not to dismiss them out of hand, as is so often in the case, due to their facial moral repugnancy.[304]

As Dawson and Amarasingam note, far from being amoral, many of the individuals they interviewed who left Canada for Syria or Iraq offered very clear moral justifications for the actions they undertook,[305] and their friends and family spoke extensively about these fighters' clear sense of morality and moralistic way of interpreting the world.[306] This finding mirrors earlier work on NRMs. In Eileen Barker's seminal book, *The Making of a Moonie*, she argues that converts to the Unification Church were not "rejecting the values that were instilled in them during their childhood; they appear, on the contrary, to have imbibed them so successfully that they are prepared to respond to an opportunity…to live according to those very standards and ideas."[307] For converts who became radicalized, as discussed above, many of their friends and

[303] For a specific analysis of the similarities between recruitment of (un)conventional soldiers and violent extremists, see: Kevin D Haggerty and Sandra M Bucerius, "Radicalization as Martialization: Towards a Better Appreciation for the Progression to Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2018, 1–21.
[304] Dawson, "Taking Terrorist Accounts of Their Motivations Seriously: An Exploration of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion."
[305] Dawson and Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters : Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq," 202.
[306] Lorne Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, ""I Left to Be Closer to Allah": Learning about Foreign Fighters from Family and Friends" (London, 2018), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Families_Report.pdf.
[307] Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?*, 210–11.

family similarly described their religious conversion as initially a wholly positive experience, and in some ways a return to the values their parents hoped to instill in them.[308]

This introduced a clear point of tension between the personality and character described by their family, and the pre-existing characteristics seized upon by many scholars as evidence of moral failing or predilection for deviance. However, if we accept the often-stated religious goals and motivations of groups like Al-Qaeda or Daesh and their followers, as genuine, the whole process becomes eminently understandable, and in its own twisted way, rational.[309] These movements lay claim to a religious truth and offer their adherents salvation in this life and glory in the next in a way that an otherwise disappointed convert may find attractive.

For example, below is an excerpt from the first issue of *Dabiq*, Daesh's premier English language magazine.[310] Prominently featured in it was an excerpt from one of Abu Mohammed al-Adnani's (Daesh's spokesperson) speeches:

> The time has come for those generations that were drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the darkness of neglect – the time has come for them to rise. The time has come for the Ummah of Muhammad (sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone, and the dawn of honor has emerged anew.[311]

The rest of the magazine stresses the need for Muslims to make *hijrah* to Daesh's territory and help build up the embryonic state. Consider the resonance of this call for someone sitting in Brussels, Paris, London, New York, Toronto, or Edmonton who for years had watched the

[308] The same is true of the families of 'born Muslims', whose parents often note that their children's initial return to faith and outward religiosity was initially a positive development, prior to their turn to violence.
[309] The same hold true of many white supremacist movements. While beyond the scope of this thesis, the religious (often variants of British Israelism or Paganism) dimensions of many of these groups are understudied and underappreciated.
[310] Dabiq first published in the summer of 2014, after the group took control of the Iraqi city of Mosul and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Daesh, declared the creation of a Caliphate.
[311] Al-Hayat Media Center, "Dabiq #1," 2014, 9, https://jihadology.net/2014/07/05/al-ḥayat-media-center-presents-a-new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-1/.

humanitarian crisis in Syria unfold. Paired with a general discontent for the way their new faith was currently practiced and, perhaps, a need to atone for their previous sins, and it is becomes clear why so many converts "joined the caravan"[312], as Abdullah Azzam called going to fight abroad, and joined groups like HTS or Daesh to fight and state-build in Syria. Rather than viewing this decision as a radical break from many convert's previous lives, conceiving of it as a part of their religious journey, and as – in their minds – a 'good' thing to do, makes the decision much easier to comprehend and perhaps by extension, to prevent.

[312] Abdullah Azzam, "Join the Caravan" (Peshwar, n.d.), https://english.religion.info/2002/02/01/document-join-the-caravan/.

8. Conclusion

The motivating question behind this thesis is to answer why converts are overrepresented within groups like Al-Qaeda and Daesh. To answer this, a data set of 25 radicalized Canadian converts was developed, against which common existing hypotheses were tested. Ultimately, the thesis argued that each of these existing explanations fell short in two ways: existing explanations failed to tell a convincing theoretical story about why their (non)occurrence was (in)frequent enough that they failed to constitute meaningful indicators.

The theoretical contribution put forward in this thesis is that a mix of a specific type of social isolation, disappointment with their new religion and a related loss of religious zeal may create a cognitive opening to violent extremism. For individuals experiencing this mix of emotions, random or happenstance contact with a radicalizing agent in-person or online may create an openness to radicalization. *Salafi-Jihadism* offers these individuals validation of their critiques of Islam as its practices in most Western countries and offers a set of clear correctives: become a foreign fighter, carry out a domestic attack, or provide logistical support to a terrorist organization.

To make this argument, this thesis focused on the ideational, religious, and emotional dimensions of radicalization and conversion—variables that are often overlooked in studies of radicalization that focus solely on the development of large-n datasets at the expense of careful qualitative analysis. To that end, a single in-depth case study of Andre Poulin's social media post history was used to illuminate the role that disappointment may play in radicalization to violence.

Behind all this analysis was a desire to achieve two interrelated goals: one, to better integrate research on religious conversion and the literature on the radicalization of religious

converts. Second, to reconsider the "curious erasure" of religion from the study of terrorism,[313] in a way that does not implicate a broad set of believers, but acknowledges that stated religious motivations must be more carefully considered than is currently the case. Rejecting the possibility that people may have strong religious or sacred values that influence their behavior impedes understanding and progress on comprehending and preventing acts of violent extremism, and denies agency to religious adherents of all creeds. This is a point that is equally true for white supremacist groups in the United States and Canada, who have historically incorporated Christian Identity or occult beliefs into their ideology,[314] as it is for Daesh and Al-Qaeda.

This thesis focused primarily on complicating the existing understanding of the problem, but also illuminated several avenues for future research, which include:

- Qualitative or survey research that allows for more rigorous controls and cross-comparison. As discussed above, much of the terrorism research selects on the dependent variable (a limitation of this thesis, as well) and therefore may over or underestimate the importance of some explanatory variables. Additional interviews with non-violent, but radical, converts, or converts in general would be illuminating.[315]

[313] Dawson, "Challenging the Curious Erasure of Religion from the Study of Religious Terrorism."
[314] Tanya Telfair Sharpe, "The Identity Christian Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 4 (2000): 604–23; John Simpson, "Neo-Nazis Hijack Gaming Groups to Spread Hate against Muslims," *The Times of London*, 2019, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/neo-nazis-hijack-gaming-groups-to-spread-hate-against-muslims-hzjnn65th.
[315] One recent paper has demonstrated the utility of this approach: Geelhoed, Staring, and Schuurman, "Understanding Dutch Converts to Islam: On Turbulent Trajectories and (Non-) Involvement in Jihadist Movements."

- The development of a more complete set of data on the roles that converts play within violent extremist movements once they join. Several Canadian converts went on to play important roles in facilitating others to join groups like Daesh, as was the case with Andre Poulin, or developed extensive domestic recruiting networks, like Awso Peshdary. Understanding how religious conversion plays a role in the specific nature of their subsequent involvement or role, would be worthwhile.[316]

- The development of better metrics to measure often referenced but somewhat intangible emotions like zeal or disappointment. This thesis argued that these may be important variables but struggled to articulate a clear way of understanding them. Both the sociology of religion and the general psychology literature is weak on this specific point.

The struggle against *Salafi-Jihadism* is far from over, and while Daesh and Al-Qaeda are not the threat they were three to four years ago, it seems more a matter of when, not if, these groups will re-emerge as a significant national security priority, making the topic of this thesis worthy of further and closer study.

[316] The studies of individuals' roles in terrorist groups is still in its infancy, but there exists several good overviews of research in this area, for example see: Mary Beth Altier et al., "Report on Roles and Functions in Terrorist Groups as They Relate to the Likelihood of Exit" (University Park, PA, 2013), https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/OPSR_TerrorismPrevention_Disengagement-Roles-Functions-Report_April2013-508.pdf.

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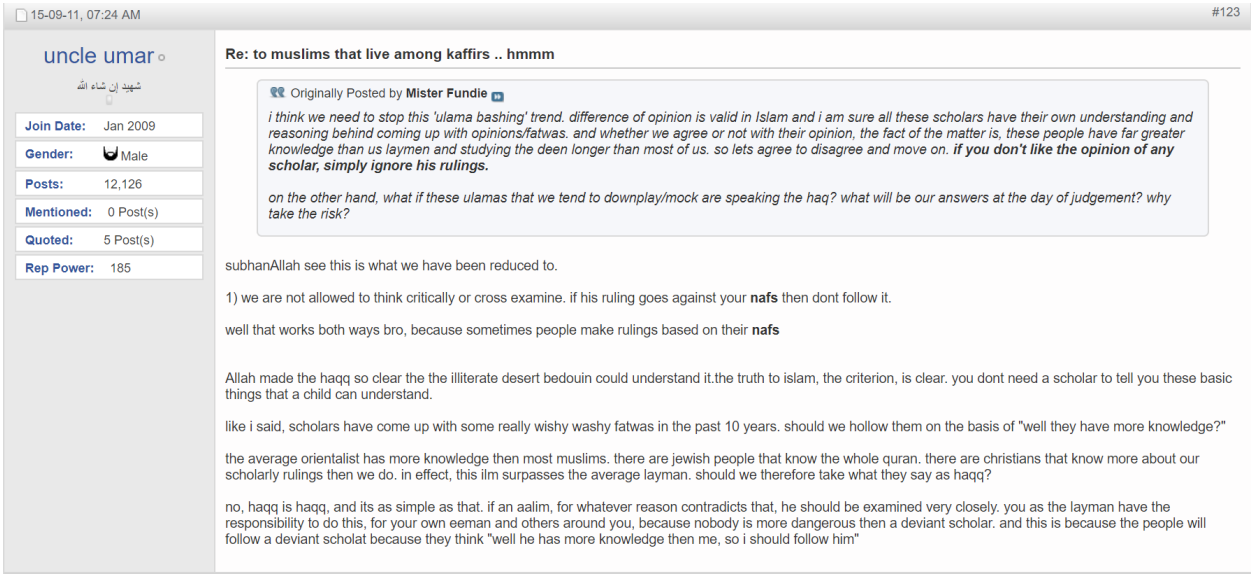
Appendix I: Variables Included in the RCC Dataset

1. Age
2. Location
3. Occupation
4. Previous Religion
5. Divorced or Separated Parents
6. Parents' Background
7. Parent's Socioeconomic Status
8. Individual's Socioeconomics Status
9. Level of Education
10. Level of Support / Activity Engaged In
11. Mental Health
12. Cognitive Opening to Conversion
13. Conversion Process
14. Time Between Conversion and Involvement in Violent Extremism
15. Prior Drug Use
16. Criminality
17. Precipitating Personal Crisis
18. Contact with Muslim Community
19. Level of Religious Knowledge
20. Role as an Authority Figure

Appendix II: Andre Poulin's Post History

Screenshot 1



15-09-11, 07:24 AM #123

uncle umar
شهید إن شاء الله

Join Date: Jan 2009
Gender: Male
Posts: 12,126
Mentioned: 0 Post(s)
Quoted: 5 Post(s)
Rep Power: 185

Re: to muslims that live among kaffirs .. hmmm

> Originally Posted by **Mister Fundie**
> *i think we need to stop this 'ulama bashing' trend. difference of opinion is valid in Islam and i am sure all these scholars have their own understanding and reasoning behind coming up with opinions/fatwas. and whether we agree or not with their opinion, the fact of the matter is, these people have far greater knowledge than us laymen and studying the deen longer than most of us. so lets agree to disagree and move on.* ***if you don't like the opinion of any scholar, simply ignore his rulings.***
>
> *on the other hand, what if these ulamas that we tend to downplay/mock are speaking the haq? what will be our answers at the day of judgement? why take the risk?*

subhanAllah see this is what we have been reduced to.

1) we are not allowed to think critically or cross examine. if his ruling goes against your **nafs** then dont follow it.

well that works both ways bro, because sometimes people make rulings based on their **nafs**

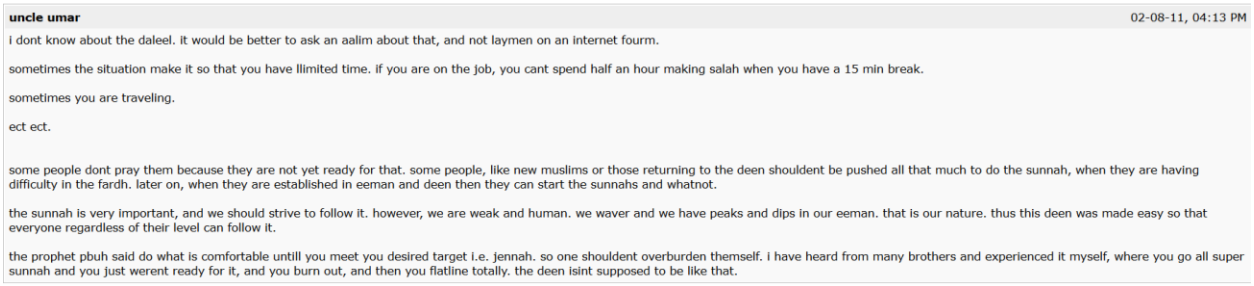
Allah made the haqq so clear the the illiterate desert bedouin could understand it.the truth to islam, the criterion, is clear. you dont need a scholar to tell you these basic things that a child can understand.

like i said, scholars have come up with some really wishy washy fatwas in the past 10 years. should we hollow them on the basis of "well they have more knowledge?"

the average orientalist has more knowledge then most muslims. there are jewish people that know the whole quran. there are christians that know more about our scholarly rulings then we do. in effect, this ilm surpasses the average layman. should we therefore take what they say as haqq?

no, haqq is haqq, and its as simple as that. if an aalim, for whatever reason contradicts that, he should be examined very closely. you as the layman have the responsibility to do this, for your own eeman and others around you, because nobody is more dangerous then a deviant scholar. and this is because the people will follow a deviant scholat because they think "well he has more knowledge then me, so i should follow him"

Screenshot 2



uncle umar 02-08-11, 04:13 PM

i dont know about the daleel. it would be better to ask an aalim about that, and not laymen on an internet fourm.

sometimes the situation make it so that you have llimited time. if you are on the job, you cant spend half an hour making salah when you have a 15 min break.

sometimes you are traveling.

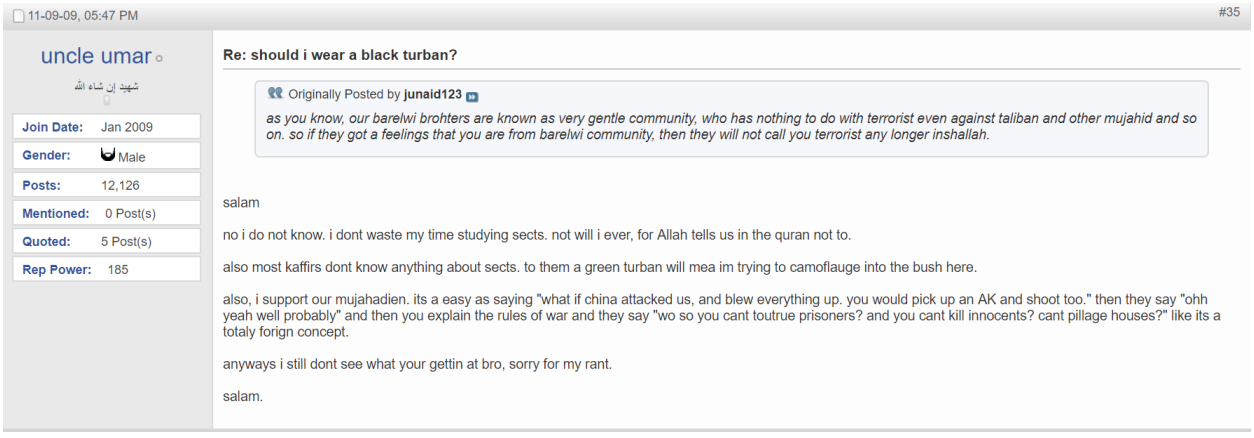
ect ect.

some people dont pray them because they are not yet ready for that. some people, like new muslims or those returning to the deen shouldent be pushed all that much to do the sunnah, when they are having difficulty in the fardh. later on, when they are established in eeman and deen then they can start the sunnahs and whatnot.

the sunnah is very important, and we should strive to follow it. however, we are weak and human. we waver and we have peaks and dips in our eeman. that is our nature. thus this deen was made easy so that everyone regardless of their level can follow it.

the prophet pbuh said do what is comfortable untill you meet you desired target i.e. jennah. so one shouldent overburden themself. i have heard from many brothers and experienced it myself, where you go all super sunnah and you just werent ready for it, and you burn out, and then you flatline totally. the deen isint supposed to be like that.

Screenshot 3



11-09-09, 05:47 PM #35

uncle umar
شهید إن شاء الله

Join Date: Jan 2009
Gender: Male
Posts: 12,126
Mentioned: 0 Post(s)
Quoted: 5 Post(s)
Rep Power: 185

Re: should i wear a black turban?

> Originally Posted by **junaid123**
> *as you know, our barelwi brohters are known as very gentle community, who has nothing to do with terrorist even against taliban and other mujahid and so on. so if they got a feelings that you are from barelwi community, then they will not call you terrorist any longer inshallah.*

salam

no i do not know. i dont waste my time studying sects. not will i ever, for Allah tells us in the quran not to.

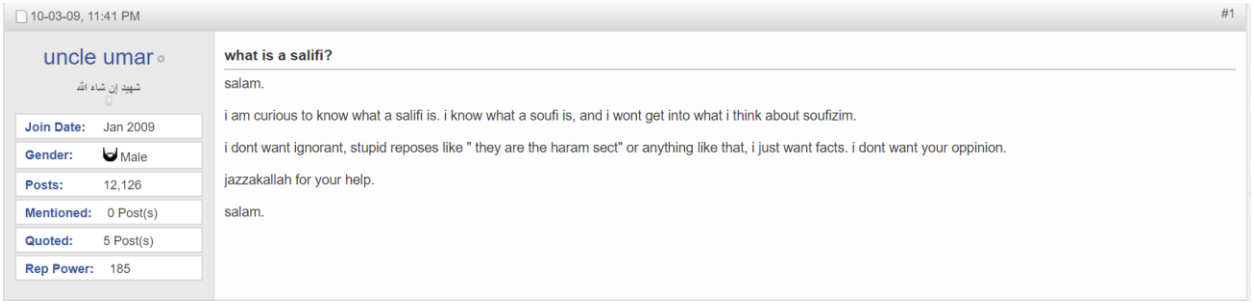
also most kaffirs dont know anything about sects. to them a green turban will mea im trying to camoflauge into the bush here.

also, i support our mujahadien. its a easy as saying "what if china attacked us, and blew everything up. you would pick up an AK and shoot too." then they say "ohh yeah well probably" and then you explain the rules of war and they say "wo so you cant toutrue prisoners? and you cant kill innocents? cant pillage houses?" like its a totaly forign concept.

anyways i still dont see what your gettin at bro, sorry for my rant.

salam.

Screenshot 4



10-03-09, 11:41 PM #1

uncle umar
شهيد إن شاء الله

Join Date:	Jan 2009
Gender:	Male
Posts:	12,126
Mentioned:	0 Post(s)
Quoted:	5 Post(s)
Rep Power:	185

what is a salifi?

salam.

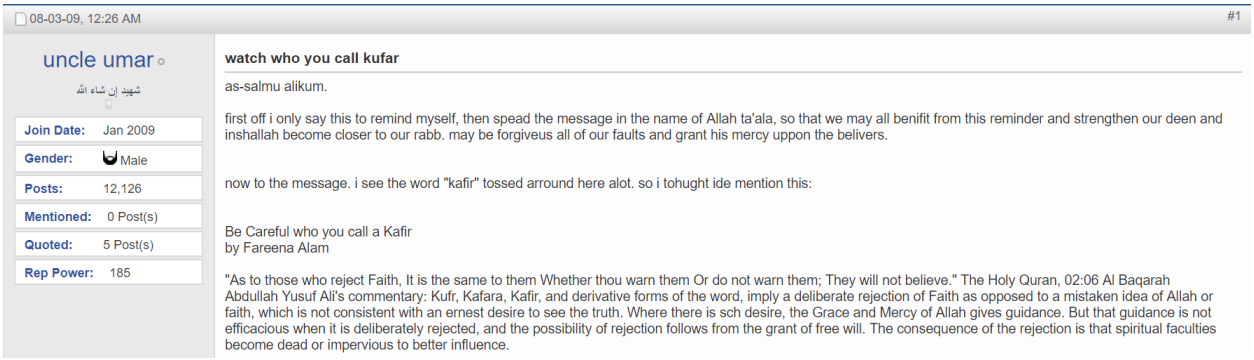
i am curious to know what a salifi is. i know what a soufi is, and i wont get into what i think about soufizim.

i dont want ignorant, stupid reposes like " they are the haram sect" or anything like that, i just want facts. i dont want your oppinion.

jazzakallah for your help.

salam.

Screenshot 5



08-03-09, 12:26 AM #1

uncle umar
شهيد إن شاء الله

Join Date:	Jan 2009
Gender:	Male
Posts:	12,126
Mentioned:	0 Post(s)
Quoted:	5 Post(s)
Rep Power:	185

watch who you call kufar

as-salmu alikum.

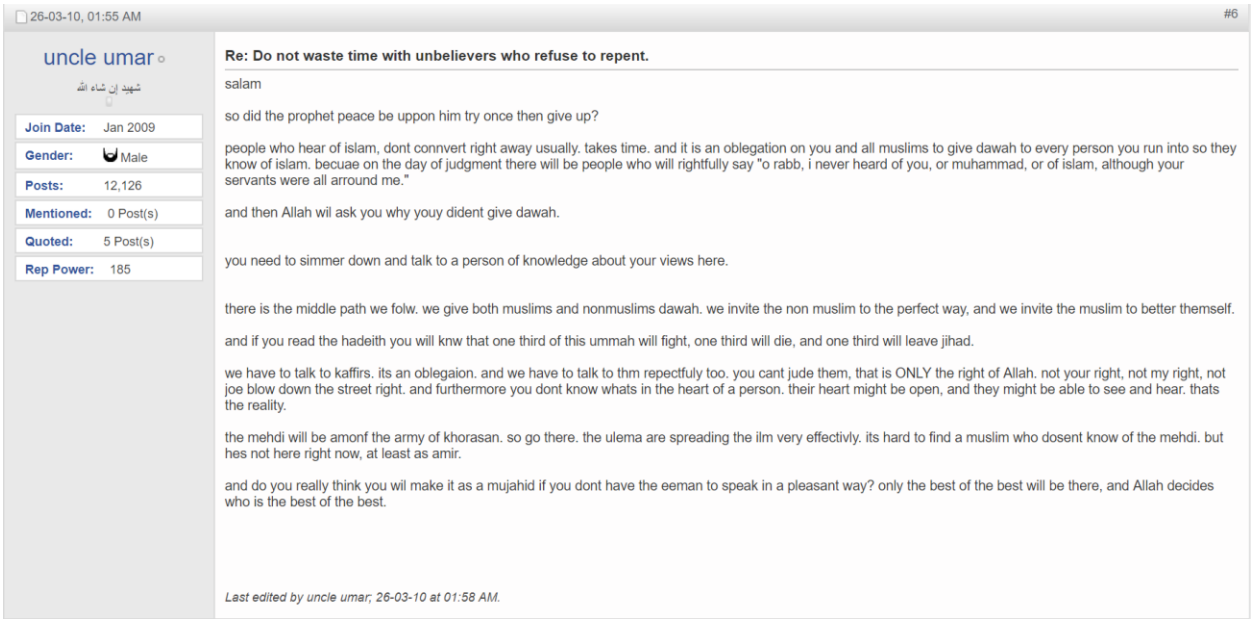
first off i only say this to remind myself, then spead the message in the name of Allah ta'ala, so that we may all benifit from this reminder and strengthen our deen and inshallah become closer to our rabb. may be forgiveus all of our faults and grant his mercy uppon the belivers.

now to the message. i see the word "kafir" tossed arround here alot. so i tohught ide mention this:

Be Careful who you call a Kafir
by Fareena Alam

"As to those who reject Faith, It is the same to them Whether thou warn them Or do not warn them; They will not believe." The Holy Quran, 02:06 Al Baqarah Abdullah Yusuf Ali's commentary: Kufr, Kafara, Kafir, and derivative forms of the word, imply a deliberate rejection of Faith as opposed to a mistaken idea of Allah or faith, which is not consistent with an ernest desire to see the truth. Where there is sch desire, the Grace and Mercy of Allah gives guidance. But that guidance is not efficacious when it is deliberately rejected, and the possibility of rejection follows from the grant of free will. The consequence of the rejection is that spiritual faculties become dead or impervious to better influence.

Screenshot 6



26-03-10, 01:55 AM #6

uncle umar
شهيد إن شاء الله

Join Date:	Jan 2009
Gender:	Male
Posts:	12,126
Mentioned:	0 Post(s)
Quoted:	5 Post(s)
Rep Power:	185

Re: Do not waste time with unbelievers who refuse to repent.

salam

so did the prophet peace be uppon him try once then give up?

people who hear of islam, dont connvert right away usually. takes time. and it is an oblegation on you and all muslims to give dawah to every person you run into so they know of islam. becuae on the day of judgment there will be people who will rightfully say "o rabb, i never heard of you, or muhammad, or of islam, although your servants were all arround me."

and then Allah wil ask you why youy dident give dawah.

you need to simmer down and talk to a person of knowledge about your views here.

there is the middle path we folw. we give both muslims and nonmuslims dawah. we invite the non muslim to the perfect way, and we invite the muslim to better themself.

and if you read the hadeith you will knw that one third of this ummah will fight, one third will die, and one third will leave jihad.

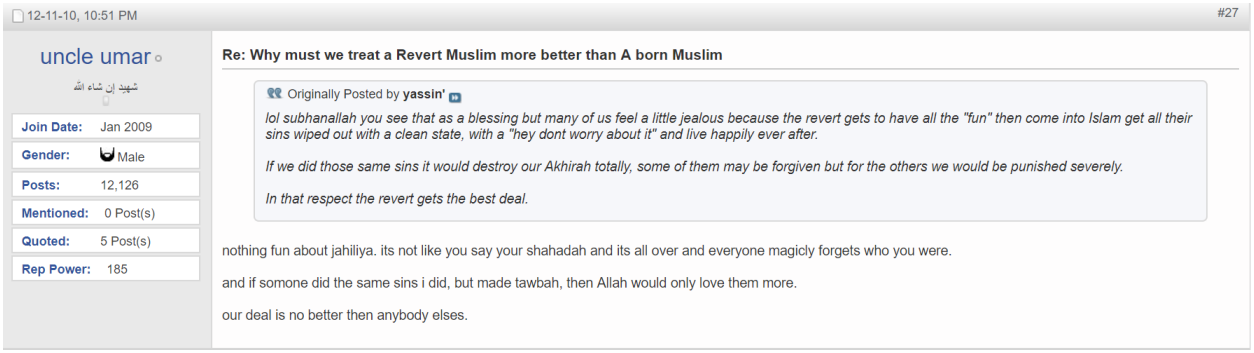
we have to talk to kaffirs. its an oblegaion. and we have to talk to thm repectfuly too. you cant jude them, that is ONLY the right of Allah. not your right, not my right, not joe blow down the street right. and furthermore you dont know whats in the heart of a person. their heart might be open, and they might be able to see and hear. thats the reality.

the mehdi will be amonf the army of khorasan. so go there. the ulema are spreading the ilm very effectivly. its hard to find a muslim who dosent know of the mehdi. but hes not here right now, at least as amir.

and do you really think you wil make it as a mujahid if you dont have the eeman to speak in a pleasant way? only the best of the best will be there, and Allah decides who is the best of the best.

Last edited by uncle umar; 26-03-10 at 01:58 AM.

Screenshot 7



12-11-10, 10:51 PM #27

uncle umar
شهيد إن شاء الله

Join Date: Jan 2009
Gender: Male
Posts: 12,126
Mentioned: 0 Post(s)
Quoted: 5 Post(s)
Rep Power: 185

Re: Why must we treat a Revert Muslim more better than A born Muslim

Originally Posted by **yassin'**

lol subhanallah you see that as a blessing but many of us feel a little jealous because the revert gets to have all the "fun" then come into Islam get all their sins wiped out with a clean state, with a "hey dont worry about it" and live happily ever after.

If we did those same sins it would destroy our Akhirah totally, some of them may be forgiven but for the others we would be punished severely.

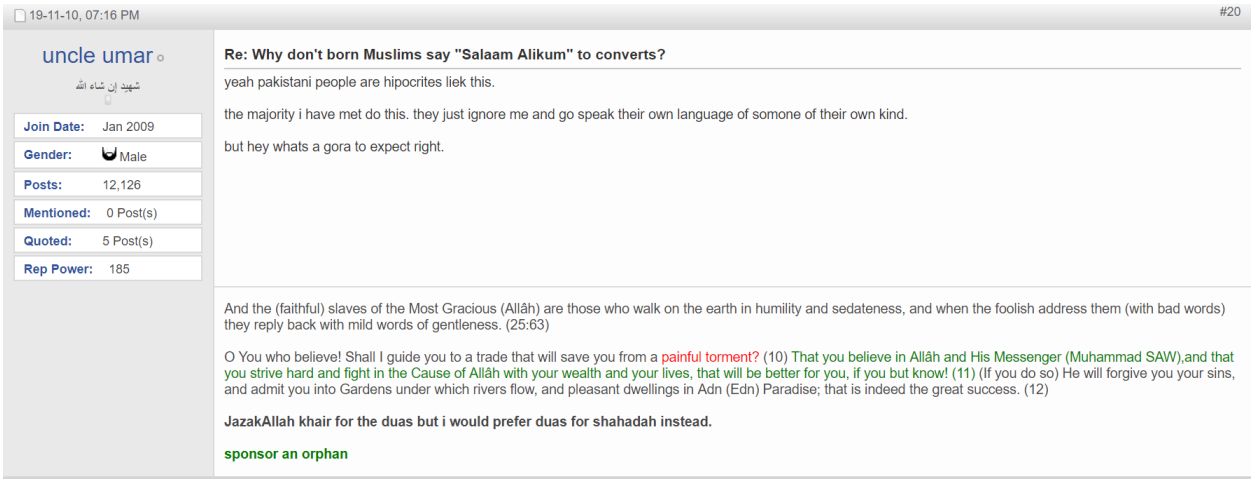
In that respect the revert gets the best deal.

nothing fun about jahiliya. its not like you say your shahadah and its all over and everyone magicly forgets who you were.

and if somone did the same sins i did, but made tawbah, then Allah would only love them more.

our deal is no better then anybody elses.

Screenshot 8



19-11-10, 07:16 PM #20

uncle umar
شهيد إن شاء الله

Join Date: Jan 2009
Gender: Male
Posts: 12,126
Mentioned: 0 Post(s)
Quoted: 5 Post(s)
Rep Power: 185

Re: Why don't born Muslims say "Salaam Alikum" to converts?

yeah pakistani people are hipocrites liek this.

the majority i have met do this. they just ignore me and go speak their own language of somone of their own kind.

but hey whats a gora to expect right.

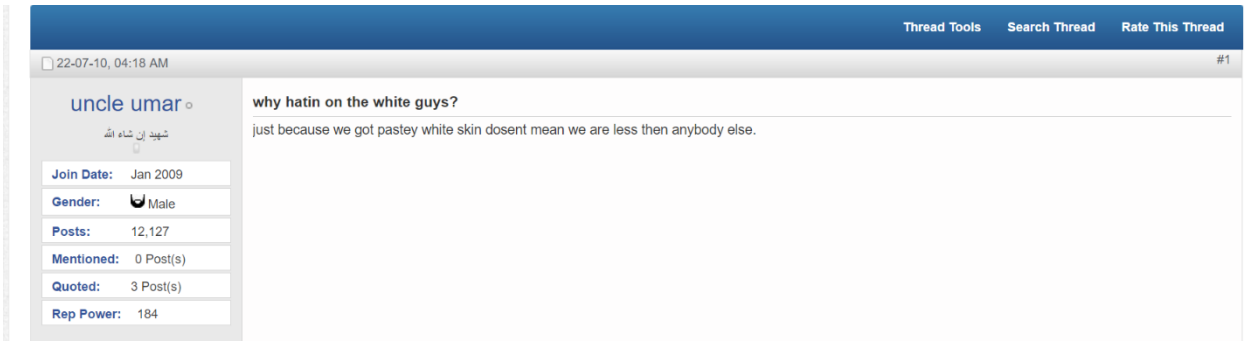
And the (faithful) slaves of the Most Gracious (Allâh) are those who walk on the earth in humility and sedateness, and when the foolish address them (with bad words) they reply back with mild words of gentleness. (25:63)

O You who believe! Shall I guide you to a trade that will save you from a painful torment? (10) That you believe in Allâh and His Messenger (Muhammad SAW),and that you strive hard and fight in the Cause of Allâh with your wealth and your lives, that will be better for you, if you but know! (11) (If you do so) He will forgive you your sins, and admit you into Gardens under which rivers flow, and pleasant dwellings in Adn (Edn) Paradise; that is indeed the great success. (12)

JazakAllah khair for the duas but i would prefer duas for shahadah instead.

sponsor an orphan

Screenshot 9



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22-07-10, 04:18 AM #1

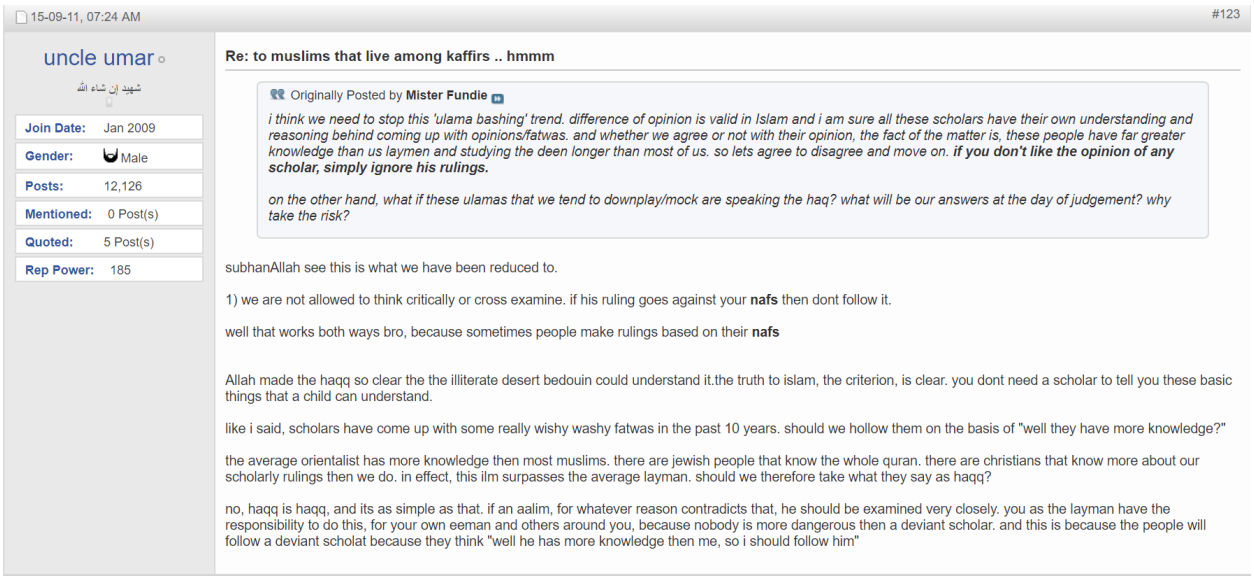
uncle umar
شهيد إن شاء الله

Join Date: Jan 2009
Gender: Male
Posts: 12,127
Mentioned: 0 Post(s)
Quoted: 3 Post(s)
Rep Power: 184

why hatin on the white guys?

just because we got pastey white skin dosent mean we are less then anybody else.

Screenshot 10



15-09-11, 07:24 AM #123

uncle umar
شهيد إن شاء الله

Join Date:	Jan 2009
Gender:	Male
Posts:	12,126
Mentioned:	0 Post(s)
Quoted:	5 Post(s)
Rep Power:	185

Re: to muslims that live among kaffirs .. hmmm

> Originally Posted by **Mister Fundie**
> *i think we need to stop this 'ulama bashing' trend. difference of opinion is valid in Islam and i am sure all these scholars have their own understanding and reasoning behind coming up with opinions/fatwas. and whether we agree or not with their opinion, the fact of the matter is, these people have far greater knowledge than us laymen and studying the deen longer than most of us. so lets agree to disagree and move on.* ***if you don't like the opinion of any scholar, simply ignore his rulings.***
>
> *on the other hand, what if these ulamas that we tend to downplay/mock are speaking the haq? what will be our answers at the day of judgement? why take the risk?*

subhanAllah see this is what we have been reduced to.

1) we are not allowed to think critically or cross examine. if his ruling goes against your **nafs** then dont follow it.

well that works both ways bro, because sometimes people make rulings based on their **nafs**

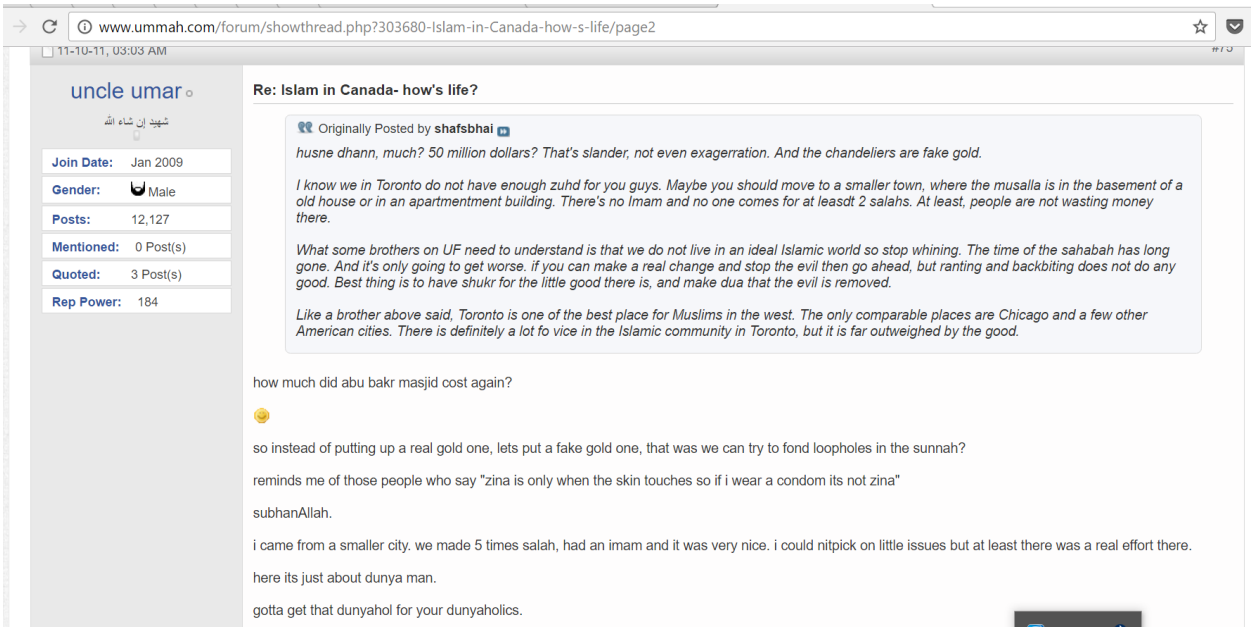
Allah made the haqq so clear the the illiterate desert bedouin could understand it.the truth to islam, the criterion, is clear. you dont need a scholar to tell you these basic things that a child can understand.

like i said, scholars have come up with some really wishy washy fatwas in the past 10 years. should we hollow them on the basis of "well they have more knowledge?"

the average orientalist has more knowledge then most muslims. there are jewish people that know the whole quran. there are christians that know more about our scholarly rulings then we do. in effect, this ilm surpasses the average layman. should we therefore take what they say as haqq?

no, haqq is haqq, and its as simple as that. if an aalim, for whatever reason contradicts that, he should be examined very closely. you as the layman have the responsibility to do this, for your own eeman and others around you, because nobody is more dangerous then a deviant scholar. and this is because the people will follow a deviant scholat because they think "well he has more knowledge then me, so i should follow him"

Screenshot 11



www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?303680-Islam-in-Canada-how-s-life/page2

11-10-11, 03:03 AM #75

uncle umar
شهيد إن شاء الله

Join Date:	Jan 2009
Gender:	Male
Posts:	12,127
Mentioned:	0 Post(s)
Quoted:	3 Post(s)
Rep Power:	184

Re: Islam in Canada- how's life?

> Originally Posted by **shafsbhai**
> *husne dhann, much? 50 million dollars? That's slander, not even exagerration. And the chandeliers are fake gold.*
>
> *I know we in Toronto do not have enough zuhd for you guys. Maybe you should move to a smaller town, where the musalla is in the basement of a old house or in an apartmentment building. There's no Imam and no one comes for at leasdt 2 salahs. At least, people are not wasting money there.*
>
> *What some brothers on UF need to understand is that we do not live in an ideal Islamic world so stop whining. The time of the sahabah has long gone. And it's only going to get worse. if you can make a real change and stop the evil then go ahead, but ranting and backbiting does not do any good. Best thing is to have shukr for the little good there is, and make dua that the evil is removed.*
>
> *Like a brother above said, Toronto is one of the best place for Muslims in the west. The only comparable places are Chicago and a few other American cities. There is definitely a lot fo vice in the Islamic community in Toronto, but it is far outweighed by the good.*

how much did abu bakr masjid cost again?

so instead of putting up a real gold one, lets put a fake gold one, that was we can try to fond loopholes in the sunnah?

reminds me of those people who say "zina is only when the skin touches so if i wear a condom its not zina"

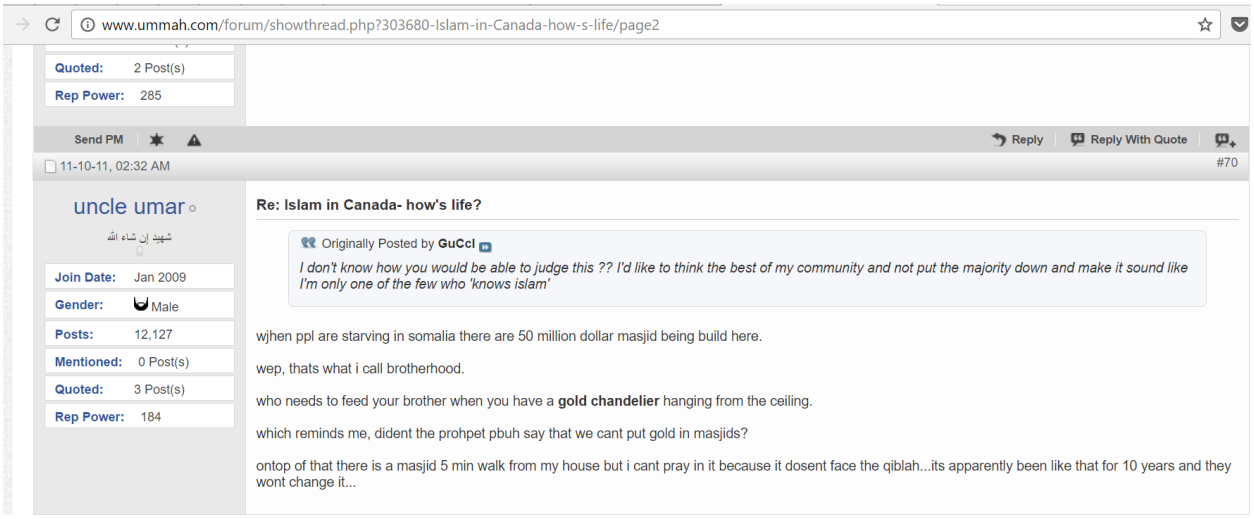
subhanAllah.

i came from a smaller city. we made 5 times salah, had an imam and it was very nice. i could nitpick on little issues but at least there was a real effort there.

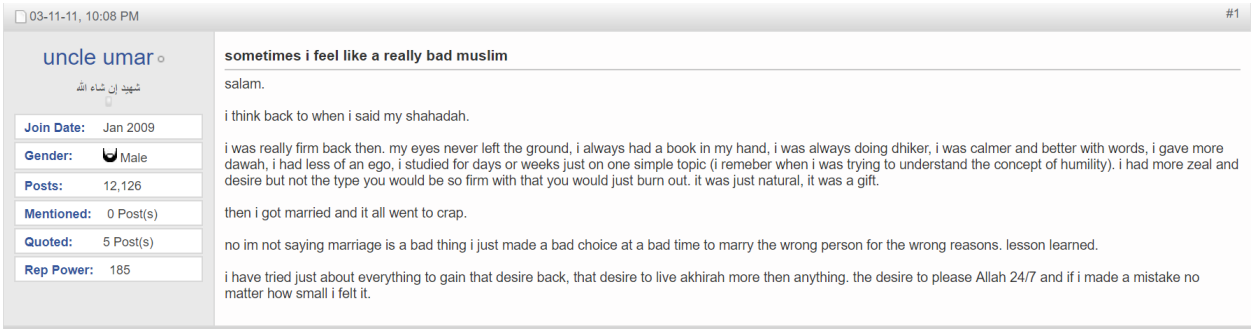
here its just about dunya man.

gotta get that dunyahol for your dunyaholics.

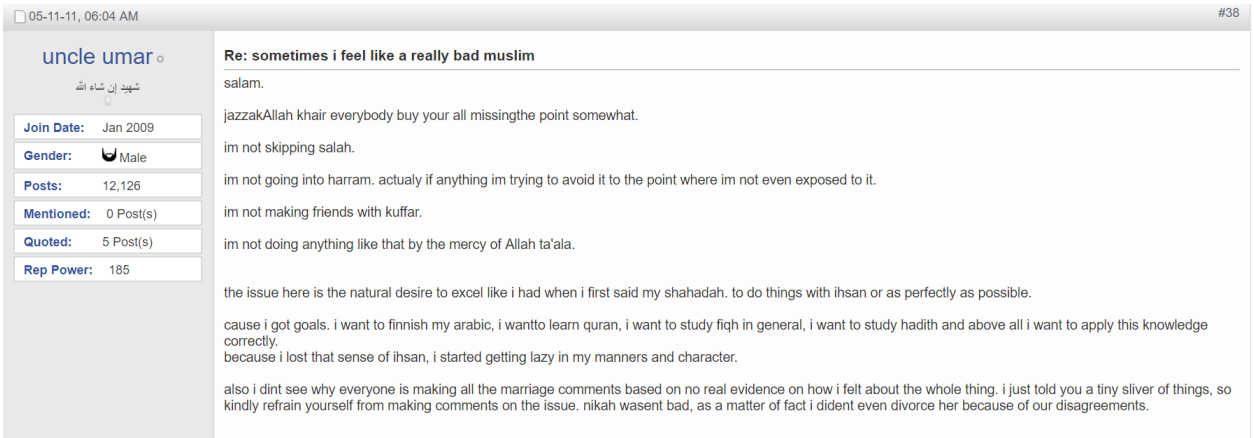
Screenshot 12



Screenshot 13

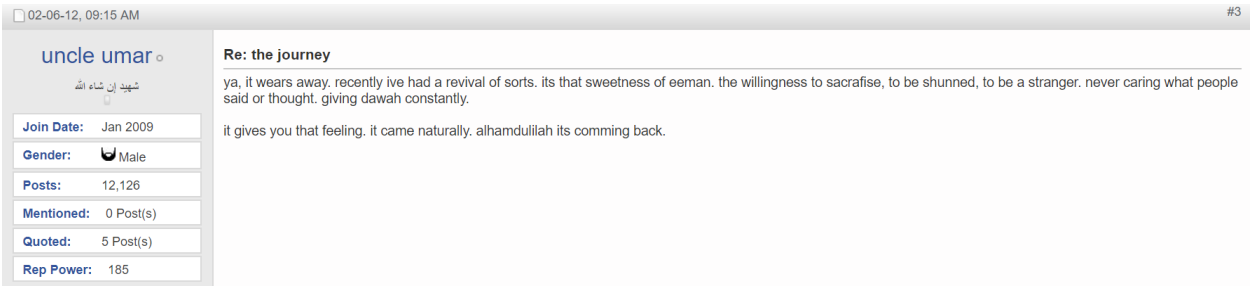


Screenshot 14



Screenshot 15

Screenshot 16



Screenshot 17