5. Contemporary American Christianity. Although the evangelical model of conversion remains predominant, other models of "turning" persist (Peace). Among historic forms of Protestantism (e.g., Lutheran, Presbyterian) where Christianity has had a cultural presence, conversion is understood as a process of socialization. Parents present their children for baptism, the child is raised in a Christian milieu, and at some point as an adult the child commits to the Christian community. There may be moments where Christian commitment is reaffirmed, but little emphasis is placed on the stark contrast found in evangelicalism between a conscious unconverted and converted condition. Within liturgical traditions, the moment of conversion begins with the sacrament of baptism. "Cradle Catholics" and "Original Orthodox" are "born into" or "baptized into" the faith rather than "born again" in an evangelical sense. These traditions, however, have their share of dramatic adult conversions, including intra-conversions. There have been renewed efforts to affirm the importance of conscious conversion, as well. The Catholic Church's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is a catechumenal process that seeks tangible and profound conversions (Gelpi). Also, recent theological attention to conversion has emphasized a holistic dimension of conversion, whereby an initial turn to Christ extends beyond personal benefits to a concern for justice and love of neighbor (Wallis).

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V. Islam

Islam, like Christianity, is one of the world's great proselytizing religions. As had often been the case with Christianity, the initial growth of Islam was driven by converts who deliberately chose to leave their ancestral tradition and birth community behind, exchanging them for a new confessional identity that brought different beliefs, practices, and social affiliations. Further, like Christianity, the spread of Islam cannot be separated from the fact of its association with imperial power. Just as Christianity's success was ultimately ensured by the coercive power of the Roman state after its establishment as the official religion of the empire by Theodosius I in 381 CE, Islam's development into a "world religion" would not have been possible without the tremendous successes of the Arab conquests in the 7th century CE.

Conversion continues to be the driving force behind the growth of both of these religions today, and many of the historic tensions between them seem to be motivated, at least in part, by a rivalry over converts, inasmuch as one often seems to expand its reach and influence at the expense of the other. Further, conversion to both faiths is still deeply imbricated with politics, as is attested by the spread of both religions in former colonial territories in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, or Islam's growth among historically disadvantaged communities in the United States.

1. Foundations. The Qurʾān portrays human life as fundamentally dependent upon an existential choice between belief and unbelief. This choice is often presented as involving a response to the guidance that God perennially offers to people, requiring a "conversion" from a state of sin and disobedience to one of righteousness and gratitude. In qurʾānic anthropology, humans have deviated from a state of original concord with the divine will that was established on the so-called "Day of *alastu*," on which the souls of all humanity were drawn forth from Adam's loins and summoned to attest to God's majesty and universal sovereignty (S 7 : 172–73: *alastu bi-Rabbikum*? ["Am I not your Lord?"]). Thus, following upon the seemingly inevitable fall into error and perversity that so often characterizes earthly life, the "conversion" to righteousness and submission (*islām*) upon which final beatitude depends is often perceived as a reversion to that original state.

This state is usually termed *fiṭra*, the natural disposition to obedience that God has instilled in everyone (cf. S 30:30). This is the spirit animating the well-known Hadith which states that "every child is born with the natural disposition to obedience (*ʿalā ʾl-fiṭra*), then his parents make him into a Jew or Christian or Zoroastrian" (attested in the collections of al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāʾūd, al-Tirmidhī, Ibn Ḥanbal, and many others). The basic idea here is that acceptance of the tenets and rites of Islam rectifies the imbalance introduced by sin and error and returns one to the original state of moral alignment with God that he had intended for humanity all along. Notably, while the mythic foundation for the establishment of the *fiṭra* is Adamic, that for conversion or reversion is conspicuously Abrahamic, inasmuch as the Qurʾān portrays the patriarch as a model for the choice between idolatrous error and monotheistic submission that all people must make (cf. e.g., S 21:51–73). These mythic paradigms would obviously have been readily recognizable to Jews and Christians when Muslims began to preach the faith to them.

In sharp contrast to the highly internalized focus of the qurʾānic discourse on conversion, early Muslim tradition most often focuses on the external social and political circumstances that facilitated the spread of Islam, namely the rapid establishment of the Muslim community's authority throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East after the Arab conquests diminished or demolished the Roman and Sassanian Empires. So closely is the eventual conversion of much of the population of the region from Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and a host of other faiths associated with the conquests that the military "conversion" of a region or polity to Muslim control was termed *fatḥ* – "opening" the country to Islam. On the individual level, a person's entry into the Muslim community is signalled in the historical sources on the conquests simply by the verb *aslama*, "to submit," "to accept Islam."

A number of factors dictated that the Arab conquerors did not impose conversion forcibly upon their newfound subjects, although Christian polemicists have often claimed otherwise (the false notion that Islam was "spread by the sword" survives in many circles to the present day). Classical commentators are virtually unanimous in interpreting the qurʾānic dictum that "there is no coercion in religion, truth having been clearly distinguished from falsehood" (*lā ikrāha fī ʾl-dīn qad tabayyana al-rushd min al-ghayyi*, S 2:256) as prohibiting forced conversion, the choice between true belief and error having been made evident through God's revelation of Islam and the manifestation of God's signs in the world. Further, the Qurʾān is also understood as establishing a policy of full tolerance for the Muslims' fellow scripturaries, the *Ahl al-Kitāb* (cf. S 9:29, "fight the People of the Book … until they pay the *jizya*, being humbled" – the *jizya* being universally interpreted as a poll tax). However, it should be noted that the tolerance granted to Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and other conquered communities was also dictated by a host of pragmatic rather than principled considerations, not least among them the logistical impossibility of the Muslims imposing any kind of conformity with their own observances or acceptance of their worldview upon potentially uncooperative subjects who vastly outnumbered them.

The adoption of an imperial system in which politically subordinate but religiously and socially autonomous communities were allowed to thrive, the so-called *dhimmī* system (after the legendary pact – *dhimma* – of protection established under the second caliph, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, r. 634–44) appears in many ways to be a continuation of Sassanian practices and policies. Although the Sassanian ruling elite was closely allied with the Zoroastrian priestly hierarchy and used the religion to legitimate itself virtually from the time of the dynasty's foundation in the early 3rd century, the Persian Empire for the most part did not persecute or marginalize other religious communities. In contrast, after the time of Theodosius in the late 4th century CE, the maintenance of a militantly Orthodox Christian order in the Roman Empire increasingly involved the subjugation or virtual elimination of alternative systems of belief and practice, especially dissenting (i.e., "heretical") forms of Christianity.

2. Conversion and the Evolution of Muslim Society. While conversion to Islam offered numerous benefits to the conquered populations, not least potential social advancement, the Arab conquerors had strong incentives to maintain the status quo. Not only would this preserve their cohesion as a ruling elite, but *dhimmī* payment of the poll tax proved extremely lucrative for Muslim political authorities. Thus, in the early and medieval periods, not only did Muslim regimes not engage in forced conversion of their Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian subjects, but they actually discouraged it in various ways. Nevertheless, conversion did proceed, gradually at first, and tensions between new converts – called *mawālī* or "clients" due to the requirement for them formally to affiliate with Muslim Arab tribes in order to join the community – and "native" Arab Muslims became increasingly problematic politically. In the later 7th and first half of the 8th century CE, officials of the Umayyad regime struggled to resist the demands of new converts to be fully enfranchised as legitimate members of the community; the myriad complaints of converts against the Umayyad regime seems to have motivated their political mobilization in various opposition movements, especially the rebellion of al-

Mukhtār b. Abī ʿUbayd in Kūfa in 685–86 CE, and subsequently in the upheaval that culminated in the so-called ʿAbbāsid Revolution in 750 CE.

The processes and circumstances under which Islam became the majority tradition in the Middle East were certainly very complex, socially and spiritually; it is impossible to trace all of the threads here, but individual volition and conviction were no doubt only part of the picture, with social pressure, material enticement, intermarriage, migration, and even apathy playing significant roles as well. Bulliet has theorized that the rate of conversion to Islam was initially constrained by the limits of information dissemination after the conquests: simply put, people could not convert to Islam until they had some means of gaining knowledge about it. In the absence of ecclesiastical structures, before the emergence of classical Islam and the institutions we generally associate with the "normative" or "orthodox" tradition, converts were utterly dependent upon local leaders for religious guidance in matters of faith. Inasmuch as the growth of jurisprudence and the Ḥadīth corpus – both of which are characteristically concerned with questions involving the lived, practical realities of religion – was primarily due to the need to provide such guidance, here, as in many other arenas, converts played a significant role in shaping the nascent Muslim tradition.

Not only did the early tradition evolve in response to the practical concerns of new Muslims, but converts undoubtedly acted as the primary conduits through which the lore and learning of older religious traditions passed into Islamic tradition. Muslim sources explicitly credit certain well-known sages such as Salmān al-Fārisī, Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, ʿAbd Allāh b. Salām, and Tamīm al-Dārī as the main transmitters of biblical, Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian "influences" in the early Islamic period. However, without necessarily denying the historicity of these accounts, one might argue that it is more likely that such "influences" were more gradually disseminated and appropriated through the passage of waves of converts into the Muslim fold, who naturally brought their knowledge of their old traditions with them and inevitably used them to shape their understanding of their newly adopted faith. The conception that a handful of knowledgeable individuals were solely or primarily responsible for the communication of outside influences to Muslim circles has often shaped modern scholarly discussions of Islam's "debt" to older traditions; but the role played by these famous converts in the sources seems to have been primarily symbolic, telescoping vast but typically imperceptible processes of cultural development into discrete instances in which particular converts transmitted their knowledge to inquisitive members of the early Muslim community.

3. Contested Identities and the Making of a Muslim Middle East. After the maturation of Islamic society, when a clear majority of the population of the Middle East and surrounding areas had become at least nominally Muslim, a palpable shift in the discourse of conversion occurred. The manifold forms of what is conventionally termed Sufism spread throughout the Islamic world after the 10th century, the turn to pietism likely spurred by a widespread desire to intensify the experience of Islam as an inner state to complement the adoption of a Muslim social identity, praxis, and way of life. That is, the rise of Sufism was primarily due to Muslims' desire to realize the emotive and psychological implications of conversion more fully.

At approximately the same time, the efforts of representatives of various Christian communities living under Muslim rule to stanch the flow of converts out of the church intensified, though this effort would ultimately prove futile (similar efforts were no doubt made in other communities as well). Beginning already in the 8th century, Christian apologists struggled to provide their beleaguered coreligionists with a meaningful explanation for why God had allowed the "Saracens" to establish their dominion over his faithful. Initially, apocalyptic scenarios dominated this discourse, followed in time by more articulate philosophical defenses of Christianity as the sole true faith. As Tolan has pointed out, Christian apologetic and particularly polemic can be readily understood as a coping mechanism for endangered communities, or even as a means of colonial resistance.

The gradual attrition of the Christian communities of the Middle East surely dealt a sharp blow to the confidence of their spokesmen, especially considering that the Orthodox church in particular had been accustomed to political and social dominance in the region for centuries. Whereas at the time of the rise of Islam a strong majority of the world's Christians lived east of Constantinople, after conversion to Islam accelerated, Europe increasingly came to be the heartland of world Christianity. It is difficult to chart the process with any precision, but Islam came to overshadow Christianity in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean, the original cradle of Christian civilization, well before the final destruction of the Byzantine Empire, the last major Christian political authority in the region, in 1453.

Throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period, considerable social and legal constraints would hypothetically have prevented free movement between communities. Nevertheless, recent scholarship has shown that boundary crossing did occur, especially in cosmopolitan and frontier settings, as Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike continually expressed their anxieties about the status of apostates and renegades. Although the rate of conversion from Islam to Judaism or Christianity in

Muslim-dominant societies in this period is impossible to gauge due to the requisite secrecy such a choice would demand, it seems reasonable to assume that movement against the dominant gradient of conversion did take place, for various reasons. Nevertheless, the social status and legal protection that converts to Islam enjoyed in these contexts inevitably dictated that the direction of conversion would favor the Muslim community. The opposite situation prevailed throughout most of Europe, especially in Spain, where there were analogous incentives for converts from Judaism and Islam to embrace Christianity.

There are many surviving accounts by vocal and triumphalist converts to Islam from the pre-modern period. The testimony of such individuals as ʿAlī b. Rabban al-Ṭabarī (who converted under the Caliph al-Mutawakkil [r. 847–61 CE] and immediately wrote a refutation of his former Christian faith) and Samawʾal al-Maghribī (who wrote a well-known polemic against Judaism, *Ifḥām al-Yahūd*, or "Silencing the Jews," after his conversion in 1163) would have been treasured by the Muslim community, since they provided direct vindication of the notion that Jews and Christians would naturally "revert" to Islam if they would only repent of their perverse ways. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that the majority of those who converted and thus enabled the emergence of a Muslim Middle East over the course of centuries were not only obscure, but likely had converted for a multitude of reasons, many of which had nothing whatsoever to do with personal conviction or persuasive arguments. Insofar as many Christian or Zoroastrian peasants would have been largely cut off from their native liturgical traditions with the loss of priestly guidance, from most opportunities for ritual participation, and from public celebration of holidays, the adoption of a Muslim identity may have occurred simply through the gradual accommodation of new customs and rituals centering on Islam instead – in short, due to a passive process some have termed "conversion by slippage." Therefore, the making of the Muslim Middle East was in a very real way the direct consequence of the Arab conquests and the loss of Roman and Sassanian hegemony in the region, despite the conquerors' rejection of spreading Islam by the sword.

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VI. Other Religions

Conversion has always been a major stumbling block in relations between Christians, on the one hand, and Hindus and Buddhists, on the other hand. The biblical injunction to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28 : 18–20) and the call to new life in Christ, salvific in its results (Acts 4 : 12), are deeply offensive to many Hindus. They are seen as a rejection of truth or salvation (*mokṣa*) through their faith. Baptism is regarded both as the symbol of such a rejection and an assuming of Western values in a Westernized church. In an Eastern worldview, something can be this and that, whereas in Western Aristotelian thinking, a thing must be this or that, and a middle way is excluded. Someone must be Buddhist or Hindu or Christian, not Hindu Christian, or Buddhist Christian. Gandhi held a typical Hindu view in regarding conversion as self-purification and self-realization. He asserted that God will ask us not what we label ourselves, but what we are, and that deeds are everything. A biblical understanding of conversion involves a decisive turn in life, an exclusive submission to the lordship of Christ.

For many converts, this has resulted not only in a complete rejection of their Hindu faith, but also of the culture intrinsically bound up with it, including their "Indianness." Much dispute has arisen as to whether this means rejection of caste as essentially part of a Hindu way of life, or whether caste is purely social and can be tolerated within churches. For *Dalits*, so-called *untouchables*, conversion is seen as liberation; "no people" are now "God's people." Such conversions have normally been "group conversions" or "mass movements."

There is much discussion about continuity/discontinuity after conversion. Converts often cite the biblical texts about not putting one's hand to the plow and looking back (Luke 9 : 62) and about being born again of water and the Spirit, as in the challenge to Nicodemus (John 3). But research has shown that there are as many so-called *secret Christians* in Chennai (Madras) as open Christians. In order to maintain cultural continuity they have remained unbaptized and outside of church structures, at least for a time.

While Hindus will normally not have a problem with someone being a Hindu follower of Christ, totally unacceptable is the rejection of the validity of