

Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity

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Muslims in America: 6-7 million and growing, diverse community.

Identities vary in salience: “As individuals become more committed to a given role, that role will assume higher identity salience. Moreover, the higher the identity in the salience hierarchy, the more likely that identity will be enacted in a given situation, or in many situations. In essence, this probability of invoking a particular identity, whether intentionally or not, defines identity salience and thus commitment to that identity. Although social identities and salience hierarchies tend to be stable, individuals sometimes alter or take on new social identities, shed old ones, or rearrange their identities' relative salience.”

Method: Focus groups, individual interviews and participant observation

Three stages of religious identity development:

1. Religion as ascribed identity: “During this first stage of identity development, study participants reported that they engaged in very little critical reflection when they were children regarding the meaning of ‘being Muslim’ because their religious identity was taken for granted as part of their everyday lives.”

2. Religion as a chosen identity: “[T]he participants in this study reported that as they matured, they began to view religion not as an unquestionable, ascribed characteristic, but as a chosen identity. When the students told stories regarding their identity development, they frequently mentioned various factors that led to their choosing first and foremost to be identified as Muslim.”

Entering college was a key moment of identity transition for many students and a time when they may join social networks and organizations that support a Islamic identity.

3. Religion as a declared identity: Peek’s respondents reported strengthening the religious identity due to 9/11. They learned more about Islam, believed it was important to better explain and demonstrate your faith, and increased group solidarity.

“[T]his research demonstrates that the formation of a religious identity is a dynamic and ongoing process and that religious identity itself is not a static phenomenon. [R]eligious identities are actively constructed by individuals and groups in our social world, in addition to being defined, challenged, accepted, or rejected by other people, communities, and institutions.”