THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

FROM INCARCERATION TO *IMAN*CIPATION:
HOW BLACKAMERICAN MUSLIM MALE CONVERTS ACCESS AND USE NEW RELIGIOUS NETWORKS DURING IMPRISONMENT AND REENTRY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2023

DEDICATION

To each participant,

I am humbled by your trust and intimately inspired by your journeys.

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These men have awoken in me a deeper degree of consciousness, which has allowed me to see the world through a clearer lens and to transcend my former, unconscious self, into this new, awoken, and conscious being. The men in this study have changed me because they have, knowingly or unknowingly, altered my frame of thinking.

They planted the seed and knew it was not their responsibility to watch it grow.

I do hope, however, they know it eventually did.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although this is my formal opportunity to thank the people and institutions that have helped me get to this point, I hope I've made it known—in real time—that their support and belief in me is appreciated.

To begin, I must acknowledge that this dissertation was made possible by support from the Social Science Research Council's *Religion, Spirituality, and Democratic Renewal Fellowship*, with funds provided by the Fetzer Institute. Special thanks to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion for providing funds as part of the 2021 Student Research Grant. My gratitude is not limited to the financial support they offered. They saw the value in a work that magnifies the experiences of people who are often discarded and disregarded. For that, they've earned more than my gratitude; they've earned my respect. Both organizations are filled with individuals that remind me why I continue to do this work, even during my many moments of intense doubt.

The past eight years have been an exceedingly lonely experience. It has been a time filled with pain that often felt all-consuming. As I struggled to put one foot in front of the other, Linda Waite stepped in and has been more than my advisor and dissertation committee chair. She has been my example of strength and perseverance. When it felt like no one else could understand the struggle of remaining focused on the task at hand due to blinding sorrow, she demonstrated a rare vulnerability that has only strengthened my faith. Linda, thank you for being the very person I needed. I will fondly cherish our walks along Lake Michigan and around Hyde Park where I learned more from you than all the eight years of formal learning combined. This is not the end of our relationship, but it is a moment for me to express my deep gratitude for the love you have wrapped me in.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the role Omar McRoberts has played in my academic career. He has been a quiet, yet formidable force that continuously showed up at the most critical stages. Not only is his mind a bottomless treasure chest, but he is also the person I will always pass the ball to as the final seconds on the clock wind down. Thank you for showing up when you had no obligation to. Thank you for removing structural barriers that could have easily ended my journey before it even had the chance to truly begin.

And to Besheer Mohamed. I cannot explain the excitement I experienced when you agreed to serve on my dissertation committee. Knowing that you, someone who's academic and professional career I admire, believed enough in my potential to guide me along this path is humbling. Thank you for exhibiting comradery instead of competition. What may have been seemingly small gestures from you—like attending my many conference presentations around the country—have always been received as immeasurable instances of your encouragement and dedication.

To my brilliant research team: Josh Erched, Manu Sundaresan, and Sophie Tedesco. Working with you all has been one of the highlights of this process. I look forward to seeing what you continue to produce as exceptional scholars and accomplish as conscious members of society. My door to you is always open. Josh, your dedication to fostering a spirit of teamwork and cooperation was critical to this collaborative effort. Manu, I end all our communication with "THANK YOU!" because this dissertation would not be what it is without you. Thank you for your work ethic, flexibility, drive, and passion. I admire your ability to capture the intricacies of social phenomena. I promise to continue "moving in confidence." Sophie, whether it was conducting thorough literature reviews, assisting with data management, providing insightful suggestions, or

volunteering to copyedit the dissertation at the last minute, your contributions have enriched the quality of this venture. Thank you for your continued thoughtfulness and reassurance.

Thank you to Sharon Hicks-Bartlett, Reuben Miller, and Colm O'Muircheartaigh for their help and expertise throughout the various stages of this dissertation. Similarly, thank you to Kristen Schilt and Brett Baker for never making me feel like I ask too many questions, as is my nature. A heartfelt thank you to the individuals who helped connect me to the men that this dissertation intends to honor: Imam Tariq Aquil, Umar Hakim-Dey, Amin Shakier, Donni Harati, Maria Khani, Justin Mashouf, Pearlette Springer, and Jessica Bogner and Mabel Gastelum of Homeboy Industries. Finally, thank you to the people I am blessed to call friends: Reese Bishop, Valentina Cantori, Donia Elmaghrabi, Nadia Hassani, James Longstaff, Andrew McKneely, Ola and Ahmed Noureldin, Sue Obeidi, and the Sindhu-Khosa Family. All of you have played critical roles in the success of this endeavor from engaging with me in the brainstorming process, connecting me with critical contacts as well as potential participants, teaching me how to effectively use the qualitative coding software, to even hosting me in your homes.

As this metaphorical chapter in my life comes to an end, I walk away with a clear vision of what has led to the successful completion of not only this dissertation but this entire PhD journey—*my* social network: Sara and Noura Al-Maashouq, Aline Longstaff, Edward Spencer, and William Terrell. Finally, to the fist of five: my parents, Linda and Hamdy, and siblings, Omar and Lena. Thank you. I love you all deeply.

ABSTRACT

Religion plays a substantial role in transforming the lives of incarcerated people, especially through conversion, which not only consists of a change in religious beliefs and associated behaviors but also social affiliations and networks. This dissertation uses Islamic conversion as an opportunity to study how religious identity change while incarcerated provides access to new networks with associated benefits both during incarceration and reentry. Through examining the conversion process, I pay particular attention to how Blackamerican Muslim converts use their newly acquired religious network to navigate their incarceration and mitigate its effects on the reentry process. Using a comparative qualitative strategy from 130 semi-structured, narrative-style interviews with formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim and Christian men, this dissertation sits at the intersection of religion and incarceration in the U.S. and consists of four parts. The first part situates the convert subsample within a theoretical and conceptual framework. The second and third parts focus on the entry points to and functional uses of the Muslim network during incarceration and reentry, respectively. Findings suggest that formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts use the Muslim network via two primary functions—redemptive and utilitarian—and two functional amplifiers—brotherhood and discipline. While the redemptive function operates uniformly during the incarceration and reentry phases, the utilitarian function is phase dependent. Five (5) distinct functional pathway groups emerge—*isolators*, *beneficiaries*, *maximizers*, *newly religious*, and *prislamists*—each a unique configuration that explains how these men navigate their incarceration and reentry. These pathways demonstrate the connection between identity and narrative formation, where conversion functions as a narrative process leading to the conscious production of identity.

PREFACE

I sit down at my laptop to continue editing Chapter 3 of my dissertation on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts. It's eight o'clock in the morning and I quickly check my email—as is my habit—before I transition into my writing zone. At least, that was my plan.

I have two "NPR Breaking News" emails. The first reads, "SCOTUS HANDS VICTORY TO RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN SUNDAY WORK CASE," while the second reads, "SCOTUS RULES AFFIRMATIVE ACTION UNCONSTITUTIONAL." The timing is too ironic. My first impression is: "Yay for religious groups (i.e., Christianity) but Nay for race (i.e., Blackness)."

As a sociology PhD student, I was often asked to justify my research interests. I was told to undertake the difficult task of convincing scholars, who, frankly, do not see value in understanding the American Muslim experience, let alone the Blackamerican Muslim experience, that this work[1] is "inherently important." "Why should we care?" was the question I was asked most often. "Why should we care about incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts?" If you look closely, you will find the answer to this question.

Anti-Black racism is incarcerating Black men at alarming rates compared to White men and at proportions larger than their size in the U.S. population. While incarcerated, Blackamerican men are reverting to Islam, the religion of their ancestors, who were enslaved and put into captivity, just like they are now.

On to Chapter 3.

[1] I am conscious that intellectualizing the lives of real people can have negative, real-life consequences as it creates faceless statistics. In this dissertation, I do my best to honor the participants' humanity by sharing a glimpse of their world in their own words.

INTRODUCTION

"When I became Muslim, it gave me an identity. That identity gave me the understanding to study to find myself."

— Jayce[1] *[66 y/o, revert[2], unspecified Islamic sect[3]]*

It's February 21, 2022. Tahir answers my call with a warm and sincere, "*Salaam Alaikum*[4]." I return the Islamic greeting and ask him how he is doing. "I'm fine. And you, sister?" Tahir Abdul-Kareem is a 59-year-old formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim revert. He was born Tevin Anderson in Compton, CA, in 1963, as a Baptist Christian whose step-grandfather was the pastor of his church. His tumultuous and violent childhood led him down a path toward becoming a self-proclaimed "swashbuckling thug" who participated in the proliferation of guns and crack cocaine in the Los Angeles area. "I started smoking drugs on the downlow. It led me to lose some things and do more robberies."

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[1] All names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the participants' identity. Since some participants prefer using their religious names, I followed suit to appropriately contextualize their experience.

[2] The terms "revert" and "convert" are often used interchangeably among Muslims, although they are conceptually distinct. Individuals who favor the term "revert"—the act of returning to a previous state or belief—do so from the perspective of Islamic belief that every person is born with an inherent inclination towards God. Yet, the faith tradition (or lack thereof) in which they were subsequently nurtured may differ from Islam. As such, some people perceive their adoption of Islam as a "homecoming" to this initial, unadulterated faith in God. For clarity, I use the normative academic term "conversion" to refer to religious switching of any kind, including individuals who previously did not identify with a religion. In the Islamic context, my use of the term "convert" incorporates both Muslim reverts and Muslim converts. I use the term to refer to all individuals who did not grow up identifying as Muslim or did not grow up in a Muslim household, but now identify as Muslim. The term encompasses all newly identified Muslims regardless of how they came to identify with Islam. While not everyone who engages in Islamic conversion identifies as a "convert"—some identify as a "revert" while others identify as neither a "convert" nor a "revert"—the process of this religious switching is largely the same. Findings illustrate that the primary difference between "conversion" and "reversion" among Blackamerican men relies on how they situate their new religious identity within the broader socio-historical context of Islam. I will use the term "revert" when I am referring to individuals who explicitly identify as a "revert." This terminological distinction will be revisited later.

[3] I provide each participants' Islamic sect—or the lack thereof—for descriptive purposes only since the sect-specific sample size limited significant analysis of themes between various denominational distinctions.

[4] The Arabic, Islamic greeting that translates to "Peace be unto you." This is used as the traditional greeting among Muslims.

After spending 36 years incarcerated in California state prisons, Tahir was released almost exactly five months to the day prior to our interview. At 22, he committed a robbery with a fake gun. “No one was touched. I didn’t touch anyone,” he insisted. “The robbery ended up becoming botched and went into a kidnap. My intent was not to kidnap, but I ended up being a kidnapper too. I took the individual—the woman—and her child with my girlfriend. That’s how stupid I was. I didn’t notice she had a child with her, so when I realized that I said, ‘Oh my God.’ It was hitting me. I thought, ‘What the hell am I doing?’ And then—I’m gonna keep it real. I was rationalizing it. I said, ‘Well, she is a White woman. They got some money, and look what they done did to us.’ I was trying to rationalize my behavior, you know, to get justification. But I still know, man—I better not touch this woman. So, I don’t touch her. I don’t lay so much as a finger on her, right? But she thinks the gun is real. What I did to her caused her trauma because she didn’t know. And so, that was wrong.” Tahir was eventually charged and convicted of armed robbery and two counts of kidnapping. “I’m not happy about what I did then. As a Muslim—as a practicing Muslim—I’m not happy about what I did then, but I didn’t know no better. When you know better, you do better.”

After six years in prison, in 1991, at the age of 28, Tahir reverted to Islam. He explained that Islam initially helped him get out of “fight or flight mode, survival mode” because he became cognitive of his thinking, which led him to change his behavior. “I abandoned my name and took on this traditional name. Two years later, I embraced Islam.” Suddenly, his voice strengthened: “The irony of this is that today is February 21. It’s been 57 years since Malcolm X was killed and we are having this interview today.”

I must admit, I was not conscious of the day’s date and its significance although *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* sat to the left of my desk. “Reading a lot of Malcolm’s work had an impact on me to change and become a better person, seeing that we came from the same type of

background. He became a thug, a conman. But when he went to prison, he found Islam even though it wasn't pristine Islam—only the trappings of Islam. Just the shell of Islam changed this man."

Tahir's voice relaxed. I could feel his energy subdue. "To see the integrity and see what it did to him—even though I never knew this man, I felt some spiritual significance with him just as much as you could almost feel with the Prophet Muhammad, *sallallahu alayhi wa sallam*[5], may the peace and blessings be upon him and his progeny, who the Qur'an was revealed to."

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THE AWAKENING

My doctoral research, thus far, had been on American Muslim immigrants and subsequent generations. Although Muslims have been a vital presence in the U.S. since the sixteenth century, their overall lack of representation has led them to be labelled the "invisible minority" (Curtis IV 2009; Maghbouleh 2017). Public discourse often portrays American Muslims as an imminent threat in both their numbers and propensity for violence. Despite the fear and anxiety that Muslims are taking over the U.S., as of 2015, there were only about 3.3 million Muslims in the U.S., approximately one percent of the total population (Mohamed et al. 2017; Noorani 2017). The association between Islam and Arabs seems quite natural, so much so that Muslim[6] is often conflated with Arab[7] and vice versa. However, the first Muslims of any critical mass in America were Black Africans—not Arabs. Still today, Black Muslims constitute about 20% of the Muslim population in the United States, making them among the largest racial and ethnic groups (Ismail

[5] The Arabic, Islamic phrase that translates to "Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him." The phrase is used when evoking the Prophet Muhammad." (Appendix B provides a glossary of Arabic terms.)
[6] "Muslim" is commonly referred to as a religious category, but more recent conceptualizations have also included cultural, ideological, ethnic, and racial frameworks. This is discussed further in the Introduction.
[7] Arab identity is independent of a religious identity and pre-dates the spread of Islam. Like other cultural identities, it relies on a common culture, lineage, and history, including conflicts and confrontations. These commonalities are regional and in many historical contexts, tribal.

2022; Mohamed et al. 2017; Suswell 2023). Nearly 60-70% of Black Muslims are born in the U.S. and 49% identify as converts to Islam (Ismail 2022; Jamal and Albana 2013). Yet, the term "Muslim" continues to evoke images of an immigrant "other," and in doing so, minimizes the large and growing population of non-immigrant American Muslims, including Blackamericans[8] and converts.

After years of research on American Muslim immigrant communities, I came to realize how relatively little research there is on Blackamerican Muslims[9], despite their historic and contemporary significance to American Muslim communities. For example, Islam was largely introduced to the U.S. during the trans-Atlantic slave trade as West African captives were brought to the shores of the Carolinas and Virginia (Religious Literacy Project 2018; Suswell 2023). Since, it has been the Blackamerican struggle for freedom in America that opened its borders to Muslims from abroad. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which promised equal treatment to Blackamericans, directly led to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, vastly expanding immigration to America from Muslim-majority countries. I did not want to continue my unintentional participation in the academic and intellectual relegation of an already marginalized group. So, I decided to shift my research focus to Blackamerican Muslims.

Blackamerican Muslims sit at the intersection of two marginalized groups. From a racial perspective, Blackamerican Muslims are the religious minority and are often erased from the socio-historical narrative. From a religious perspective, although not the racial minority, they are

[8] I follow Jackson (2011) and use the term "Blackamerican" instead of "African American" or any other variation Jackson (2011:17) argues that to juxtapose "[B]lack Americans" as the counterparts of "[W]hite Americans" is to "strengthen the hand of those who wish to deny or hide [W]hite privilege. [And] to speak of African Americans is to give short shrift to almost half a millennium of New World history, implying that Blackamericans are African in the same way that Italian Americans or Greek Americans are Italian or Greek." Furthermore, by using "Blackamerican," Jackson recognizes and celebrates the African *origins* of Blackamericans while acknowledging that "American history has essentially transformed these erstwhile Africans into a new people…especially so with regard to their *religious* orientation." As such, the Blackamerican category excludes African immigrants and their children.

[9] Blackamerican Muslims consist of both Muslim-born individuals and converts.

excluded from debates surrounding the racialization of Muslims. As such, the Blackamerican Muslim experience is silenced. It is not that I, and possibly some of my fellow sociology scholars studying American Muslims, were actively ignoring the Blackamerican Muslim experience; rather, it was a passive dismissal, an unconscious act. However, upon reflecting, I now realize that this passive relationship with the Blackamerican Muslim experience is rooted in anti-Blackness—an unspoken ideology that is woven into the fabric of American society. Although not a conscious decision, this passivity, arguably, has the same negative impact, if not worse. When dominant groups dominant intellectual debates, it has long-lasting consequences not only for scholarship but, more importantly, for social inequality as these habits and experiences become normative. There is a danger to moving through life unconscious of our implicit biases as it reproduces the centuries of oppression and structural inequality that has left Blackamericans in a precarious social and economic condition.

Bonilla-Silva's (2004) "tri-racial system" posits that the U.S. is moving toward a racial hierarchy with Whites[10] at the top, followed by "honorary Whites," and finally, "collective Blacks" at the bottom. In this system, immigrants (and I would add, their descendants) may ascend to the ranks of "honorary Whites" or dwell among the "collective Blacks." The direction in which they incorporate is predicated upon their willingness to engage in racial prejudice against Blackamericans. My passive oversight of the Blackamerican Muslim experience, I fear, placed me among the "honorary Whites."

The process of this dissertation has led to what I call my "awakening." In my awakening, I now see many of the ugly, uncomfortable truths that expose the prejudice against

[10] Following the MacArthur Foundation, I intentionally capitalize "White"—referring to it as a proper noun—to highlight the way Whiteness functions in institutions and communities. Ignoring the significance of Whiteness contributes to its seeming neutrality, granting it power to maintain its invisibility (Ewing 2020).

Blackamericans—active or passive, conscious or unconscious. Before my awakening, I would never have considered myself an "honorary White." In fact, as the child of an Egyptian immigrant (of sorts), growing up between the MENA region and the U.S., I have always taken pride in my African roots, naively believing that fact protected me from "White" ideology. It did not. This dissertation is my conscious, active attempt to begin the process of remedying my unintentional—yet harmful—participation in the academic and intellectual dismissal of the Blackamerican experience.

THE MUSLIM RACIALIZATION THESIS: ERASING BLACKAMERICANS FROM THE NARRATIVE

In the American Muslim literature, the phrase "Muslim community" has become synonymous with "immigrant community"[11] in the same way that "Muslim" and "Arab" have become interchangeable within the public discourse. As such, there is a need to contribute to the limited, yet important, literature on Blackamerican Muslims (Chan-Malik 2018; Curtis IV 2009; Jackson 2011; Khabeer 2016; Prickett 2021) to prevent further exclusion and erasure from collective memory and reality. In fact, the literature on religion often neglects the Blackamerican Muslim experience whether by generalizing American Muslims as a monolith, focusing solely on immigrant communities, or rejecting the "tri-racial system" logic of the racial structure. Relatedly, literature on the racial structure neglects the role of religion in constructing it (Husain 2017). This does not merely limit the comprehensiveness of academic literature, but also negatively impacts the social positioning of Blackamerican Muslims.

The prevailing description of the stereotyping of and discrimination toward American Muslims is that of Muslim racialization, which has become an increasingly salient issue, particularly in the "West." Omi and Winant (2014:13) define racialization as "the extension of

[11] 63% of American Muslims have been born outside the U.S. (Kohut, Keeter, and Smith 2011).

racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group." Discussions of American Muslim racialization almost exclusively applies to the context of Muslim immigration, media portrayal, and political violence and discrimination; however, for Blackamerican Muslims, the racialization process is rarely in question or development, but rather a concrete fact of American life. Yet still, racialization is a concept that is theoretically underdeveloped with little agreement on the terms of the phenomenon. The unfortunate irony is that in the absence of a unifying theory, many scholars have settled on the inherited paradigm of racial stereotyping from the civil rights era and its successor, Critical Race Theory, all the while ignoring the *Blackamerican* Muslim population. My argument proceeds from the entry point of intersectionality. While Blackamericans may find themselves in a preexisting racial paradigm, becoming Muslim introduces a new question of identity, potentially generating a demographic for whom unique forms of racialization may occur. To be clear, I am not critiquing the theorizing of American Muslim racialization. Rather, I am critiquing the theory's construction and subsequent application. More importantly, I am critiquing the lack of explicit attention paid to Blackamerican Muslim racialization.

Muslim racialization is a bureaucratic and cultural response to political turmoil and involves the ascription of certain racial characteristics to Muslims, which contributes to the stigmatization and marginalization of individuals and communities. This is often exacerbated by media portrayals of Muslims as homogenous and the threatening "other," further reinforcing negative stereotypes that contribute to the spread of Islamophobia, especially after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Racialization has been used to explain and understand Islamophobia as racism toward the American Muslim population, particularly toward Arab and South Asian immigrants, with minimal attention paid to Blackamerican Muslims. The racialization

literature argues that American Muslims are positioned as foreign and designates religion as a factor in race-making today. Racialization operates through a legal machinery that distributes unequal rights to immigrants based on favored and unfavored racial classifications (Bayoumi 2009). These Muslim immigrants and their children—even the ones legally categorized as "White"—face discrimination because their religious identity races them as violent and suspicious and associates them with terrorism. Their religious identities deny them the status and privileges of social Whiteness. Blackamerican Muslims are noticeably absent from this discourse.

Indeed, academic researchers who are engaged in exploring the consequences of racialization pertinent to American Muslims, undertake this task by critically evaluating the shortcomings of racial studies confined within a binary framework of Black and White racial identities. Selod and Embrick (2013:648), for instance, put forward the contention that for investigations focusing on American Muslims, the racialization framework offers an intellectual arena where racial theory can transcend the limitations of the Black-White dichotomy, thereby enabling a discourse about novel racial meanings and racisms arising in unique political, socio-cultural, and economic contexts. Similarly, Rana and Rosas (2006) posit analogous arguments pertaining to these new contexts, stating that the post-9/11 international racial structure is an emergent phenomenon from the historical context of Western conquest, empire, and imperialism, the diffusion of capitalist accumulation and dispossession, as well as the exploitation of racialized and gendered labor. This perspective indicates a movement toward a broader politics of race and racism, one that moves beyond the dominant Black-White binary.

While moving away from a Black-White binary toward a tri-racial system, for example, is progress, the problem remains that, in doing so, scholars tend to focus on South Asian and Arab Muslims, making it unclear whether the racialization thesis holds for other racial and ethnic groups

among Muslims, such as Blackamericans. The conclusion that Muslims are racialized is based on the study of a subset of American Muslims (Husain 2017). Furthermore, the Blackamerican experience is a critical perspective to understand who American Muslims are racialized relative to. Race-making processes are relational and tied to racial structures, which, at the very least, include a concept of Black and White, representing the bottom and top of the racial structure (Husain 2017). This binary structures the racialized American Muslim context and is significant to how they are racially positioned (Husain 2019). Therefore, it is unknown how this racial meaning is constructed relative to other racial(ized) groups in much of the Muslim racialization literature.

Even those scholars who do not directly reject the Black-White binary as a framework to situate the American Muslim context indirectly do so, leading to the same exclusion and erasure of Blackamerican Muslims. For example, O'Brien and Abdelhadi (2020:2) use the term "racialized religious traditions" to denote religious traditions whose "historical development and social status have been strongly shaped by the minority racialized status of their members and institutions." While this definition is broad enough to allow for the inclusion of Blackamerican Muslims, their study perpetuates the problematic generalization of the American Muslim population. Despite using probability samples of American Muslims, they marginalize the racial and ethnic variability of the American Muslim population and do not provide an explanation on how their findings on the relationship between religious conservatism and political allegiances among American Muslims in the contemporary U.S. may differ in the Blackamerican Muslim context. Yet, they use "Black Protestants" as an analytical sample, thereby providing space for Blackamerican Christians but not Blackamerican Muslims. Accepting or rejecting the Black-White binary does not solve this methodological problem as both approaches can still yield scholarship that erases Blackamericans

from the American Muslim narrative, even though the U.S. was formed and continues to prosper off the racialization of Blackamericans.

The racialization of Blackness can be traced back to the slave trade where being African was equated with enslavement. An estimated 15-30% of those enslaved in the U.S. were Muslim (Diouf 2013; Gomez 2005; Husain 2019). This practice of degradation continued in freedom, leaving many free and freed African descendants in continued marginalization (Edwards 2022). Yet, there is insufficient research that explores the experiences of Blackamerican Muslims despite them being the *first* American Muslims *and* constituting among the largest proportion of the population. While scholars call for the need to address and eradicate the racialization of American Muslims, the alarm seems to sound only for American Muslims who can pass as, and behave like, honorary Whites. It appears that the racialization of American Muslims has become a contentious subject only when it negatively impacts *some* American Muslims. Blackamerican Muslims have long been the subjects of discrimination, and worse, based on *both* their racial *and* religious identities. As scholars, we should not have selective condemnation and view racialization as conditionally problematic.

Blackamerican Muslims are a critical demographic for a comprehensive understanding of the American Muslim experience. Not only constituting one of the largest racial and ethnic demographics within the American Muslim community, Blackamerican Muslims contribute to the growing American Muslim population due to their high birth rate[12] and the large number of conversions to Islam, many of which occur in prison. To gain a better understanding of the American Muslim experience, this dissertation focuses on the Blackamerican Muslim experience

[12] In the U.S., the highest average fertility rates (per 1,000 women ages 15-44) during 2018-2020 were to Hispanic women (64.8%) followed by Black women (62.6%) (March of Dimes 2022).

paying particular attention to the experience of formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim converts.

MASS INCARCERATION: BLACK AND MUSLIM IN PRISON

My decision to focus on incarceration among Blackamerican Muslims is intentional. There are staggering disproportionalities among the rates of incarceration of Blackamericans compared to other racial groups, especially Whites. Gearing Blackamericans toward the prison industrial complex begins early. For example, the criminalization of Blackamerican youth, especially boys (Smiley and Fakunle 2016), and the "adultification" of Blackamerican girls (Blake and Epstein 2019) are two prominent forces that strongly lend themselves to the school-to-prison pipeline—a phenomenon where discipline policies in schools push Blackamerican students out of the classroom and into the criminal legal system at alarming rates, especially compared to their White classmates (ACLU 2023). It is no surprise then that Blackamericans are incarcerated at higher rates. The numbers are staggering. Although Blackamericans constitute 13% of the general U.S. population, 38% of people in prison or jail are Blackamericans; the incarceration rate for Blackamericans versus Whites is 2,306 versus 450 per 100,000; and almost half of the people serving life, life without parole, or "virtual life" sentences are Blackamericans (Prison Policy Initiative 2020). These statistics make clear that too many Blackamerican families are touched by mass incarceration. Blackamerican families, regardless of individual involvement with the criminal legal system, lose their loved ones to prisons and jails at higher rates than their White counterparts. The Family History of Incarceration Study conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago in 2018 found that individuals with any immediate or extended family member incarcerated were more likely to be Blackamerican (Yi 2023). Compared to White respondents, Blackamerican respondents were more likely to have multiple family members incarcerated and

over eight times more likely to have had an immediate family member incarcerated for at least a decade. For a thorough investigation of the Blackamerican Muslim experience, employing an incarceration lens is necessary.

The intersection of incarceration and religion is significant, especially among Blackamerican Muslims. Although religion has always been a presence in American prisons—some of the first prisons were established with the help of people of faith to reform those incarcerated—little is known about the religious makeup of state and federal prisons. Among the developed world, the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate where about 1-in-100 adults—approximately 2.3 million men and women—are behind bars (Prison Policy Initiative 2020). Muslims make up nine percent of the prison population, despite constituting one percent of the U.S. population, making Muslims over-represented in prisons (Fadel 2019). Additionally, the Muslim population is growing due to religious conversion, making state and federal prisons major centers for Muslim identity. More conversions to Islam occur in prison than anywhere else in the U.S. (Ammar, Weaver, and Saxon 2004; Feddes 2008). Incarcerated Blackamericans convert to Islam at a rate faster than any other demographic group in the U.S. (Bershidsky 2017), making the American prison system the most fertile ground for Muslim conversion. According to the Pew Research Center, 73% of state prison chaplains say that efforts by incarcerated individuals to convert other incarcerated individuals are either very common (31%) or somewhat common (42%). About three-quarters of the chaplains say that a lot (26%) or some (51%) religious switching occurs among incarcerated individuals in prisons where they work, many of whom report growth in the number of Muslim converts (Lugo et al. 2012; Spalek and El-Hassan 2007; Thomas and Zaitzow 2006). As these statistics demonstrate, many Blackamericans are entering

the prison industrial complex in one form and exiting in another—as a Blackamerican *Muslim*—making incarceration an essential lens from which to study Blackamerican Muslims.

With high incarceration rates among Blackamericans and high conversion rates among Blackamerican Muslims comes high rates of reentry for Blackamerican Muslim converts—the analytical sample of this dissertation. There are strong relationships between homelessness and unemployment and recidivism rates. The rate of homelessness or housing insecurity[13] among the formerly incarcerated is 5,700 per 100,000, while 27% of formerly incarcerated persons are unemployed (Prison Policy Initiative 2022). The 2008 National Former Prisoner Survey found that 15% of currently incarcerated persons experienced homelessness in the year before admission to prison. Additionally, persons experiencing cycles of incarceration and release—the "revolving door" of incarceration—are more likely to be unhoused (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2008). Persons who have been to prison only once experience homelessness at a rate nearly seven times higher than the general public. Persons who have been incarcerated more than once have rates 13 times higher than the general public (Prison Policy Initiative 2022). These persons are twice as likely to be unhoused as those returning from their first prison term. In fact, formerly incarcerated Blackamerican men—the sample criteria for this dissertation—have much higher rates of unsheltered homelessness than White or Hispanic men (Prison Policy Initiative 2020). Being unhoused makes formerly incarcerated persons more likely to be arrested and incarcerated again, in large part due to policies that criminalize homelessness. Law enforcement agencies aggressively enforce "offenses" such as sleeping in public spaces, panhandling, and public urination—not to

[13] The state of not having stable or adequate living arrangements cause by high housing costs relative to income, poor housing quality, unstable neighborhoods, or overcrowding. Residential scholars and advocates classify someone who moves more than once a year as housing-insecure (Harding and Harris 2020).

mention other low-level offenses that are more visible when committed in public—unnecessarily funneling formerly incarcerated people back through the "revolving door."

Data shows that the strongest predictor for recidivism is poverty. Horney, Osgood, and Marshall (1995) showed that large within-individual variations in criminal offending for a sample of high rate convicted felons were systematically associated with local life circumstances, such as employment. Yang (2017) found that those who were released from prison during weak labor markets were significantly more likely to return to prison, which largely impacts Blackamerican releasees and first-time offenders. For the employable, immediately upon release, formerly incarcerated persons earn, on average, 53% of the wages of the average worker (Prison Policy Initiative 2022). The lifetime earnings loss for formerly incarcerated persons averages $500,000 (Craigie et al. 2020). For perspective, the Federal Poverty Level—a measure of income issued every year by the Department of Health and Human Services—for an individual is $14,580 (HealthCare.gov 2023). Homelessness and poverty are inextricably linked; when economic instability increases, so does the risk of being unhoused. Although significant and critically necessary research has been done on the importance of housing security and unemployment to interrupt the recidivism cycle, less attention has been paid to the role social networks—not to mention religious networks—play in achieving this goal.[14] This dissertation uses Islamic conversion as an opportunity to study how religious identity change while incarcerated provides access to new networks that have benefits both during incarceration and reentry.

[14] For research on network ties and tie stability among formerly incarcerated men in the Netherlands, see Sentse et al. 2022. For research on social support in mental health among formerly incarcerated Latino men, see Munoz-Laboy et al. 2014. For research on social networks and prison foodways among incarcerated women, see Smoyer 2014.

FROM INCARCERATION TO *IMAN*CIPATION[15]

Religion continues to be a salient identity in the formation of group membership. Defining Islam and its followers—Muslims—is a complex task given the vast diversity of social, cultural, and geographic contexts in which more than one billion Muslims live. To address this difficulty, I rely on self-identification. In other words, an individual is a Muslim if they explicitly identify as one. I contend that in issues of identity, centering the research participants' ability to self-determine is best practice. It should not be the role of the researcher to generate an "identity checklist" to validate or invalidate participants' religious status. Beyond that, many participants interviewed for this dissertation were specifically resistant to the concept of organized religion, citing it as a method of control. Instead, participants expressed their adherence to Islam and their piety as a lifestyle, discussing their regular prayer and extensive religious studying and learning, all of which speak to a robust form of Islam. Although broad, this approach is appropriate as this dissertation focuses on the ways in which a "Muslim" *uses* their religious network from a membership perspective. More specifically, I pay particular attention to how Blackamerican Muslim converts use their new religious network to navigate their incarceration and mitigate its effects on the reentry process.

Islam is among the fastest growing religions in the world with over one billion people identifying as Muslim. This is not only a consequence of reproduction but also a result of newcomers to the faith, many of which are Blackamerican. The Pew Research Center's 2017 Muslim American Survey found that about half of all Muslim converts in the U.S. are Blackamericans while two-thirds of Blackamerican Muslims are converts (Mohamed et al. 2017).

[15] The word *iman*cipation (as seen in the title) is a play on the Arabic word *iman*, meaning faith, and English word emancipation—the process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions; liberation. Based on Islam's role in transforming the lives of many incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts, their faith journey serves as the process that spiritually liberates them. I believe the metaphor makes for a fitting title.

The concept of religious conversion encompasses a comprehensive transformation involving changes in beliefs, behaviors, social interactions, and affiliations (Paloutzian 2014; Tumanggor 2016). The term "conversion" etymologically originates from the Latin word "conversion," signifying remorse, movement, and change (Tumanggor 2016). Religious conversion was among the first topics scientifically studied by psychologists dating back to the late nineteenth century. In his book, *The Psychology of Religion*, Starbuck (1899) argued that conversion was preceded by a negative psychological state that might include a mixture of anxiety, depression, guilt, aimlessness, doubt, unhappiness, and related feelings. This state could motivate a person to seek a solution to the crisis. Conversion provides an answer as it offers an opportunity for a sense of being new or reborn. For Starbuck, this included giving up one's old self and acquiring a new, complete, and whole self with personal peace. Similarly, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James (1902) argued that there is religion of the healthy-minded and of the sick soul, and the conversion experience belongs to the sick soul. James' view of the conversion process assumes the same negative pre-conversion states that Starbuck described. Through conversion, a divided self becomes unified. More recently, Travisano (1970) defined conversion as a radical reorganization of identity, meaning, and life, highlighting its impact on the converts' self-identity. Rambo (1993) characterizes conversion as a process of change occurring within a dynamic interplay of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations. Contemporarily, conversion is viewed as a profound transformation in one's identity, meaning, and life, or even in one's fundamental reality (Hood Jr., Hill, and Spilka 2018). Conversion represents a significant life-altering change that engenders an identity crisis, leading to the formation of a new identity based on the conversion experience. Both the experience of identity and the experience of conversion influence behavior (Snow and Machalek 1983). Consequently, the formation of a new identity is

rooted in the individual's newfound relationship with God and the faith community, emphasizing the crucial role of the communal context in the conversion process.

Within the field of religious psychology, experts view religious conversion as a radical transformation, highlighting its intrapersonal nature. Psychologists primarily examine changes in personality and perceive conversion as a shift in religious identity that subsequently influences personal changes. They emphasize the individualistic aspect of conversion, which supports the contemporary understanding that religion and conversion are personal phenomena. The conversion process is seen as predominantly driven by self-determination rather than external forces. This paradigm emphasizes the social aspects, particularly the influence of the environment and personal interactions. Conversion is regarded as a rational process involving the search for ideas, people, groups, and rituals. It is a dynamic process, guided by personal experiences and experimentation with religious practices. This model views the transformation as an act of religious significance.

Efforts to establish a widely accepted agreement on the definition of conversion and to differentiate it from other non-conversion changes, have, for the most part, proven ineffective. However, conversion is largely understood as a distinct process by which an individual goes from believing, adhering to, and/or practicing one set of religious teachings or values to believing, adhering to, and/or practicing a different set (Rambo 1993). Although conversion's transformative process may range in time, many scholars argue that it is the distinctiveness of the change that is the central identifying element. In contrast to an individual arriving at a point of belief through the process of socialization and other developmental mechanisms, the convert can identify a time before the religion was accepted and after it was accepted.

Some scholars contend that it is more constructive to understand what exactly changes when someone converts or how meanings are reconstructed (Paloutzian 2014). With this approach,

there is considerable consensus in the literature, which highlights two distinct categories—religion and spirituality. Religious conversion is often associated with spiritual transformation, although it is essential to differentiate between these two terms. While individuals who convert religions may undergo spiritual transformation, those who experience the latter are not necessarily converting religions. Therefore, spiritual transformation holds a more abstract nature than religious conversion. Studies on spiritual conversion indicate that it results in minimal detectable change in an individual's inherent personality characteristics. On the other hand, religious conversion appears to trigger significant transformations in mid-range personality fields like personal objectives and self-identity (Maruna, Wilson, and Curran 2006). Religious conversion, therefore, is a process that employs a new universe of discourse to *reflexively* alter the self.

> Islam resonates because it [is] just so fulfilling. And I just seen what it was doing for me too. And so that's pulling at me more. It's pulling. So first it was just the trappings because I had a spiritual void. But then I said, 'Man, Islam is so deep.' [In] Islam, you could never stop learning, it's just so deep. I seemed to see Islam as perfect and all encompassing. I didn't need nothing else.

In this excerpt, Tahir explicitly speaks to his "spiritual void" and personifies Islam as it continued to "pull" him until it filled this void. I contend that the difference between a spiritual and religious conversion is not merely altered conceptualizations of the self, but also has implications on behavior as well as network membership. For example, religious groups often have prescribed behavioral rituals—praying five daily prayers—and practices—only eating *halal*[16] foods—that members are expected to follow. Furthermore, religious groups often emphasize community involvement and social cohesion as integral parts of their religious practice. As such, I rely on the process of religious conversions and include individuals who do and individuals who do not experience a spiritual transformation.

[16] Food that is permissible to eat according to the teachings of Islam.

RELIGIOUS SWITCHING: ISLAMIC CONVERSION AND REVERSION

As scholars, we tend to speak *about* a people and in doing so, can force our understanding of a subject onto their lived experiences. One such example is the concept of conversion in sociological discussions of religion. The literature routinely refers to Blackamerican Muslim newcomers as "converts" who undergo a religious ideological shift—a conversion—that follows the teachings and principles of Islam in various forms. The religious conversion literature among academic circles is not merely incomplete, it is rooted in an assumption that the process of assuming an Islamic identity is largely the same. However, this is not the case as it concerns Blackamerican Muslims. In fact, many Blackamerican Muslims reject the "convert" and "conversion" terminology and identify as "reverts" to Islam. The difference here is not merely a linguistic preference; rather, it denotes an ideological distinction that is rooted in ancestral identity.

Conversion refers to a transformation of sorts while reversion describes the process of returning to oneself. For many Blackamerican Muslim men, reversion is closely tied with their African heritage and Black nationalism. For "reverts," Islam is not a faith or "way of life" that one finds and adopts. Instead, it is a faith *and* "way of life" that one finds *again*. Blackamerican Muslim reverts consider Islam to be the faith of their African ancestors, thereby evoking an ancestral identity that must be reclaimed. History reveals that many Africans who were captured, enslaved, and brought to the present-day U.S. by the Europeans were Muslim. This enslaved people were forced to claim Christianity to escape brutal beatings and violence (Jackson 2019). As generations passed, their Islamic ideologies and Muslim identities began to wither away. Many respondents wanted to make clear that they did not convert to Islam; rather, their ancestors were forced to convert to the "White man's religion"—Christianity. They, on the other hand, have rediscovered Islam and have thus reconnected a piece of themselves.

Among the converts (n=54), more identify as a *revert* (n=25; 46%) than a *convert* (n=18; 33%).[17] According to the New Oxford American Dictionary, to *revert* is to return to a previous, original state. The following participant quotes capture this process of returning to their original, Muslim state.

> I reverted to Islam. I was born a Muslim. I didn't practice it. I didn't know about it. But when I found out about it, I reverted back to what I was born as I consider myself a revert because the belief system of Islam is that every human being born on this earth is born with the nature [of Islam].
>
> — Kareem *[57 y/o, revert, unspecific Islamic sect]*

> [I'm a revert] because [I'm] going back to [my] natural disposition as a human being. It's like returning back to something that is your nature.
>
> — Embry *[56 y/o, revert, Nation of Islam]*

> I reverted back to my natural state of mind.
>
> — Jayce *[56 y/o, revert, unspecified Islamic sect]*

> [To be a revert] means to reawaken something that has been unknown to you. You're reverting back to who you are.
>
> — Peter *[48 y/o, revert, Nation of Islam]*

> All of us were born Muslims. We just come into an understanding of who we are.
>
> — Antwone *[57 y/o, revert, Nation of Islam]*

The sociological literature on religious reversion is so scarce that, initially, I only asked participants if they identified as converts, not even considering the option of reversion. It was not long before I noticed the pattern of identifying as a revert, many of whom completely reject the term convert.

[17] Those who prefer the term "convert" believe this term is more widely understood, resulting in less ambiguity. Additionally, they find it to be a more robust and decisive term that aptly portrays the conscious decision they've made to embark on a life-altering journey. Although most (n=43; 80%) of the Blackamerican Muslim converts identify as either a convert or revert, some (n=10; 19%)[17] do not identify with either label because they reject labels altogether and consider them "intellectually lazy." Others explain that they were always Muslim but not conscious of it, making it impossible to convert or revert to that state. Finally, only one participant identifies as both a convert and revert.

> I don't want to say [I] converted. I reverted to Al-Islam. When they brought over here in the Middle Passage, from Africa, our way of life, most Africans were Muslims. You had Mali, they were Muslim, Nigeria, Muslim, which my ancestors, according to my research, come from Nigeria.
>
> — Deion *[66 y/o, revert, unspecified Islamic sect]*

Deion's identity as a revert—and his rejection of the term convert—is rooted in his racial/ethnic ancestry. Jackson (2011, 2019) argues that many Blackamerican Muslim reverts, seeking a communal identity in their African roots, believe Islam to be their ancestors' religion and therefore theirs as well.

> When our ancestors arrived here as slaves, they were Muslims.
>
> — Kabir *[59 y/o, revert, shia]*

> [Our] ancestors were Muslims. Once I learned the true history of Black people, my people in the true history of Islam, then I [knew] that my ancestors, in the beginning, were the people that dwell in the Holy Land.
>
> — Alonzo *[66 y/o, neither revert nor convert, Nation of Islam]*

> We came to this country with our own identities that [were] stripped from us and given Christianity.
>
> — Jelani *[49 y/o, revert, Moor]*

Jackson (2011, 2019) contends that, since the eighteenth century, Blackamerican Islamic identity served as a form of resistance to American racism, including resisting conversion to Christianity. Consequently, many Blackamerican Muslims reject the label "convert" because they associate the word with their enslaved, Muslim ancestors who were captured and forced to convert to Christianity—the White man's religion.

> After Islam, they made us Christians and then put a picture of a White Jesus. White supremacy is implemented in the religion of Christianity. It's no good for us. Christianity and White supremacy, they both one and the same.
>
> — Alonzo *[66 y/o, neither revert nor convert, Nation of Islam]*

Alonzo does not simply believe that Christianity is the White man's religion, but also establishes a direct correlation between Christianity and White supremacy. This perspective highlights the importance that racial identity, and its socio-historical context, plays in conceptualizing religious identity. Kareem makes a similar connection between race and religion:

> If Christians are righteous, then how come White people who are Christians are mistreating Black people? That never sat good with me.
>
> — Kareem *[57 y/o, revert, unspecified Islamic sect]*

The intersection of race, religion, and identity is so potent among these converts that several (n=27; 50%)[18] use an Islamic name. Some (n=5; 9%)[19] even legally changed their names to their Islamic name. Elijah Muhammad[20] explicitly encouraged Blackamerican Muslims to drop their "slave" name in favor of Muslim names and use an X to signify that they had lost their identities during slavery and did not know their true name. As such, Alonzo legally changed his name to Alonzo X.

> White supremacy and Christianity…don't value Black life and they show no value [to] Muslim life. They did the Muslims so bad. That's why we don't have our names. So, most of us don't even know who we are. We still call ourselves by the White man's name, right to date. We used to be [the slave master's] property. Just like his pig, his horse, his sheep. So, we was his property. So, that last name meant that you was property. If your last name is Jackson or Jones, that mean[s] that you were property of Mr. Jackson, which was a White man that owned your family. And here we are in 2022, we still carry those names as if it's a privilege.
>
> — Alonzo *[66 y/o, neither revert nor convert, Nation of Islam]*

A revert, Deron captures how the socio-historical context of Blackamerican history has influenced the racial conceptualization of Blackamerican convert religious identity.

> We were born Muslim. Islam was mine before I had any knowledge of Islam. [It] was originally mine from the beginning. I was a convert to Christianity. How are you going to convert to something that was already yours? We were Christian converts. We never [were] Islamic converts. This was ours long before Christianity. But we were robbed of [Islam]. We were robbed of our names, our language, our culture, our religion, our God, our identity. So now as a people, we can charge them for what? Identity theft. They stole everything from us, and then now [they] call us Jones, and Johnson, and O'Reilly, and Culpeper, and Underwood.
>
> — Deron *[64 y/o, revert, Nation of Islam]*

These quotes demonstrate how Islamic conversion aligns with their self-understandings (Maruna et al. 2006), making religious conversion an integral part of identity production.

[18] Out of the 27 converts (54%) who use an Islamic name instead of their birth name, 15 identify as reverts.
[19] Out of the five converts who legally changed their name, three identify as revert.
[20] Elijah Muhammad was a Blackamerican religious leader, Black separatist, and self-proclaimed Messenger of Allah (God). He led the Nation of Islam from 1934 until his death in 1975. Muhammad was also the teacher and mentor to prominent figures like Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, Muhammad Ali, and his son, Warith Deen Muhammad.

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AS IDENTITY CHANGE

Religious conversion is intricately linked to the construction and transformation of identity. When individuals undergo a religious conversion, they experience a profound reorganization of their sense of self, worldview, and life purpose. This transformative process often leads to a redefinition of personal identity in relation to religious beliefs and practices (Hood Jr. et al. 2018). Religious conversion challenges and reshapes existing identities by introducing new beliefs, values, and affiliations. The convert may develop a strong identification with their newly adopted religion or spiritual path, which becomes a core aspect of their identity (Rambo and Farhadian 2014). The conversion experience prompts individuals to question their previous religious or non-religious affiliations, leading to a renegotiation of their self-concept.

Conceptualizing religious conversion as an identity process is appropriate because religious conversion involves a significant reconfiguration of an individual's sense of self and their relationship with the world. Identity is a central aspect of human experience, encompassing the beliefs, values, roles, and affiliations that shape an individual's understanding of who they are. When individuals engage in religious switching, they undergo a transformative journey that impacts their identity in multiple ways.

Firstly, religious beliefs and practices are fundamental components of personal identity. They shape individuals' worldview, moral framework, and understanding of ultimate meaning and purpose (Rambo 1993). Thus, when someone converts from one religion to another, their beliefs and values undergo a substantial shift, leading to the reconstruction of their personal identity. Secondly, religious conversion often involves a renegotiation of social identity (Hood Jr. et al. 2018). Religious communities are social entities that provide individuals with a sense of belonging, shared values, and communal practices. As individuals switch religions, they enter new social

networks and affiliations, necessitating a realignment of their social identity. They may need to establish new relationships, participate in different rituals, and adapt to the norms and expectations of their newly adopted religious community. Furthermore, religious conversion can trigger an identity crisis as individuals navigate the tension between their previous identity and their emerging religious identity (Gillespie 1979). This crisis may involve questioning and reevaluating one's values, beliefs, and self-concept. The process of religious switching often requires individuals to construct a new narrative of self, integrating their past experiences with their present religious beliefs and practices. Additionally, conceptualizing religious conversion as an identity process acknowledges the multidimensional nature of identity. It recognizes that religious identity is not isolated from other aspects of identity, such as cultural, ethnic, or familial identities. When individuals convert religions, they may need to navigate the intersectionality of these identities, reconciling protentional conflicts and renegotiating their place within various social and cultural contexts.

By understanding religious conversion as an identity process, scholars can explore the psychological, sociological, and cultural implications of such transitions. We can examine the internal dynamics of identity construction, the social processes involved in community integration, and the interplay between individual agency and social factors in shaping religious identity transformation. While religious conversion is primarily associated with changes in personal and social identity, there are certain aspects in which it may not be directly related to identity, but rather identification.

Identity versus Identification: Differential Impact on Religious Conversions

Identity and identification are related concepts but have distinct meanings. Identity refers to the sense of self, encompassing various aspects of an individual's self-perception, including

personal, social, and cultural characteristics. It encompasses how individuals define themselves and how they understand their place in the world. Identity involves the internal understanding of who one is, shaped by factors such as beliefs, values, experiences, roles, relationships, and affiliations (Burke and Stets 2023). It is a multifaceted construct that can encompass different dimensions, including personal identity, social identity, cultural identity, or religious identity. On the other hand, identification refers to the process through which individuals associate or align themselves with certain groups, ideas, or characteristics (Tavory 2016). It involves the act of identifying with or ascribing oneself to a particular category, group, or role. Identification is an external process of adopting or taking on specific attributes, values, or characteristics that are associated with a particular identity.

Both in the public discourse and academic scholarship on religious conversion, the normative understanding of the concept is associated with a change in identity *and* identification (Copeland 2017; Feddes 2008; Gillespie 1979; Maruna et al. 2006; Paloutzian 2014; Rambo 1993; Rambo and Farhadian 2014; Snow and Machalek 1983; Wilkinson et al. 2021). However, in some cases, religious conversion is based on a change in identification but not identity. That is, an individual can identify as a Muslim—aligning oneself with a Muslim community—but not necessarily undergo a change in their self-concept. I call these forms of religious conversions, "conversions of utility." Because my definition of Muslim is rooted in self-identification, I also include these individuals in my sample of Muslim converts. However, it is important to note that while these individuals now identify as Muslim, their motivations behind their "conversion" differ from those whose conversion is the result of an altered self-concept. For example, individuals may convert religions for reasons that are more superficial or driven by external factors such as societal pressures, convenience, or a desire to conform. In such instances, the conversion may not deeply

impact the individual's core identity, beliefs, or values. It may be a more surface-level adjustment without significant transformation of identity. Occasionally, individuals may convert for utilitarian purposes, such as social or economic advantages, rather than genuine spiritual or religious motivations. In such cases, the primary driver for the conversion is not related to identity transformation but rather practical considerations.

Tahir's case illustrates the difference between identity and identification in terms of religion. Tahir's religious identity encompasses his personal beliefs, values, and practices related to spirituality and faith. He sees himself as a devoted believer, with a deep connection to Islamic teachings, rituals, and values. His religious identity shapes his worldview, moral framework, and understanding of ultimate meaning and purpose in life. It is an integral part of how Tahir perceives himself and his place in the world. In terms of identification in relation to his religious identity, Tahir chooses to identify himself as a Shiite[21] within the broader Islamic tradition. This identification allows Tahir to connect with fellow Shiites and participate in unique sectarian rituals and religious services.

In this example, identity refers to Tahir's broader sense of self and his personal beliefs, values, and practices related to his religious faith—Islam. It represents his internal understanding and perception of who he is as a Muslim. On the other hand, identification focuses on the specific act of aligning himself with a particular Islamic sect—Shiism[22]. It involves the external process of associating himself with a specific religious community, adopting its practices, and connecting with others who share his religious identification. For Tahir, his religious identity and identification are aligned. That is, Tahir identifies as a Shiite Muslim—his identification—*and*

[21] Shiites are adherents to the Shia branch (or sect) of Islam.
[22] The second-largest branch of Islam. Believers hold that Ali ibn Abi Talib was the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad.

possesses a Muslim identity; thus, involving both the internal and external processes of religious conversion.

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AS SOCIAL NETWORK CHANGE (VIA IDENTITY CHANGE)

Religious conversion brings about changes in social networks in several ways. Religious conversion often leads individuals to join a new religious community or congregation (Lim and Putnam 2010). By embracing a different religious tradition, converts enter a social network composed of fellow believers who share the same religious beliefs and practices. They become connected to a different group of individuals with whom they engage in religious rituals, activities, and social interactions. Because religious conversion often involves adopting a new set of religious beliefs, values, and moral frameworks, this change can impact social networks by connecting converts with others who share similar religious convictions. The shared beliefs and values provide a common ground for forming connections, fostering social cohesion, and engaging in discussions and activities centered around the newly embraced faith. This facilitates the integration of converts into the social fabric of the new religious community. Converts can build social bonds with fellow believers through participation in religious services, study groups, community events, and volunteering efforts (Lim and Putnam 2010; O'Connor and Bogue 2010). These interactions contribute to the formation of new social networks and provide a sense of belonging and support within the religious community.

Through this new religious community, converts can find emotional, practical, and spiritual assistance, creating support networks (Lim and Putnam 2010). Converts can develop relationships with fellow believers who offer guidance, encouragement, and a sense of community, especially during the adjustment period following the conversion experience. These changes can have an impact on a convert's previous social circles. As they adopt a new religious identity, converts may

find themselves distancing from previous social connections that do not align with their newfound beliefs and practices (Everton 2018). Simultaneously, they may actively seek out and form relationships with individuals who are part of the new religious community. These changes in social circles can result in the reconfiguration of social networks, with existing relationships evolving and new relationships being established.

IDENTITY VERSUS IDENTIFICATION: DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

The difference between identity and identification can have several impacts on social networks. When individuals undergo religious conversion, their identity undergoes a transformation as they adopt a new religious belief system, values, and practices. This change in identity can lead to a restructuring of social networks, as converts seek out new connections within the newly embraced religious community. The transformed identity shapes the formation of social networks by aligning individuals with like-minded believers who share similar religious values and beliefs. On the other hand, in the context of religious conversion, identification entails aligning oneself with a specific religious group, denomination, or tradition. It involves adopting a particular religious identification within the broader religious conversion process. Identification can impact social networks by connecting individuals with others who share the same religious identification. These identification-based social networks provide opportunities for communal engagement, shared practices, and social interactions within the specific religious context. This is especially important for both currently incarcerated individuals and formerly incarcerated individuals during the reentry process, as this dissertation will demonstrate.

Identity has a more profound and comprehensive impact on social networks in religious conversion compared to identification (Everton 2018; Jindra 2011). Identity encompasses the overall transformation of a convert's sense of self, which influences various dimensions of their

life, including social connections. The changed identity in religious conversion leads to a restructuring of social networks, fostering deeper connections and a sense of belonging within the newly embraced religious community. Identification, while important, focuses more on the specific religious group or tradition, potentially having a narrower scope of impact on social networks.

Furthermore, both identity and identification can influence the individual's sense of integration and belonging within social networks, but in different ways. In religious conversions, the transformed identity enables converts to connect with others who share similar beliefs, values, and practices. This shared identity provides a sense of belonging and social integration within the religious community. Identification-based social networks also contribute to a sense of belonging, but they are more specific and centered around the identified religious group or tradition, which may limit the breadth of integration and belonging within the broader social context (Buss and Westlund 2018). Finally, another factor related to identity and identification's differential impact on social networks involves social reinvention and disengagement. Due to religious conversion, identity change can include a process of social reinvention, where individuals intentionally shape their social networks to reflect their new identity. They may disengage from previous social networks that no longer fit with their transformed sense of self and seek out new connections that support their changed identity. While identification may lead to the formation of new social networks, it may not necessarily involve a complete disengagement from previous networks if the identified aspect can coexist with the existing social connections.

Once again, Tahir illustrates these differences. By converting to Islam, Tahir experienced a transformation in his identity. He developed a strong sense of being a Muslim and incorporated Islamic beliefs, values, and practices into his daily life. As a result, he sought out new social

networks that would align with his transformed identity. He connected with other incarcerated Muslims, attended worship services, and engaged in study groups, forming social bonds with like-minded individuals who shared his identity as a devout Muslim. These connections became an integral part of his social network, providing support, guidance, and a sense of belonging within the Muslim community.

Within the broader context of his Islamic conversion, Tahir also identified himself as a Shiite. This identification helped him align himself with a particular group and establish connections within the incarcerated Shiite community through sectarian-specific worship activities. Through this identification, Tahir formed social networks centered around the shared practices and beliefs specific to Shiites. These networks provided him with a more focused community of individuals who shared his identification and provided opportunities for deepening his understanding and practice within the Islamic Shiite tradition.

In this example, identity represents the broader transformation in Tahir's sense of self as a Muslim, influencing the formation of social networks with like-minded individuals who share his overall religious identity. Identification, on the other hand, represents Tahir's alignment with the specific Shiite tradition, leading to the formation of social networks centered around the shared practices and beliefs of that identification. Tahir's identity as a Muslim influences his social networks by connecting him with individuals who share similar beliefs, values, and practices associated with Islam as a whole. His identification as a Shiite Muslim, on the other hand, further refines his social networks and provides him with a more specific community of practitioners within the broader Muslim identity. Both identity and identification play a role in shaping Tahir's social networks during his Islamic conversion. Identity impacts the formation of broader networks

with individuals who share his religious identity, while identification narrows down his social connectedness to a more specific group within that broader identity.

However, as previously mentioned, not all Muslim converts' identity and identification align—some Muslim converts possess a Muslim identification but not a Muslim identity. In this dissertation, I argue that the alignment of identity and identification (or lack thereof) depends on the motivation for the conversion, impacting how individuals enter and subsequently use their new religious network, with meaningful differences. As such, I use Islamic conversion as an opportunity to study how religious identity change while incarcerated provides access to new networks that have benefits both during incarceration and reentry.

DATA AND METHODS

This dissertation relies on a comparative[23] qualitative strategy. The data is drawn from a cross-national phone-interview[24] study conducted in the U.S. from December 2020[25] to June 2022. This dissertation puts Blackamerican Muslim converts' subjective experiences at the center of the investigation, and in doing so, answers Garner and Selod (2015) call for "fieldwork-based studies, particularly those in which Muslims are the subject of the interviews." In qualitative approaches, extracting meaning and understanding the processes and mechanisms underlying those meanings are often the most significant findings.

[23] Although the dissertation focuses on formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim converts, I also interviewed formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim-born and Christian men. The Muslim-born and Christian comparisons provided insight that helped contextualize and Muslim convert subsample (n=59) both in terms of race and religion. Although outside the scope of this dissertation, comparisons between the three sub-samples will be made in future adaptations of this project.

[24] Due to COVID-19, I was unable to conduct in-person interviews, and therefore conducted all interviews via phone. Although this dissertation's analytical sample of formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts consists of 59 men, the conceptual framework and subsequent analysis is based off the 130 interviews conducted, which also include formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim-born and Christian men. It is through analyzing the entire sample that the functional pathway framework among the convert subsample emerged.

[25] During December 2020 and January 2021, I conducted a pilot study for this dissertation. The pilot study included designing the interview guide, sample recruitment and contact, two semi-structured interviews, and interview transcription and analysis. The pilot study helped me identify misconceptions and misunderstandings that aided in refining the interview guide design.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING

Interview Guide Design. The interview guide was designed to allow for narrative construction. A narrative-style interview focuses on telling a story. As such, I sought to explore the participants' experience, actions, and thoughts in-depth, rather than merely getting straightforward answers to a series of pre-set questions. The narrative-style interview guide was designed using the following structure: (1) open-ended questions; (2) probing questions; (3) emphasis on personal experience and emotion; (4) reflection; (5) chronological structure; (6) active listening; (7) closure.

I began each interview with an open-ended question to encourage the interviewee to start telling their story. For example, "Please tell me a little about your childhood. What was it like?" If necessary, I asked probing questions to direct the participants toward a particular subject or topic. For example, "What was faith or religion like in your household as a child?" Additionally, as the interview progressed, I asked probing questions to get the participants to dive deeper into their story and describe their experiences more fully. For example, "Can you tell me more about some of the first books you read about Islam before your conversion?" The narrative-style interviews focused on the participants' personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions. I encouraged the participants to share what they were thinking and feeling during the key events they described. For example, "If you can remember back to that time, what was going through your mind when you were first incarcerated?" I also asked the participants to reflect on their experiences, exploring what they learned from them and how they influenced their current perspective. For instance, "Do you see yourself as changed, in any way, since your incarceration?" The narrative-style interview followed a chronological structure, starting from an earlier point in the participants' lives (i.e., childhood) and following their path up to the present. This allowed the participants to weave their

experiences into a coherent and engaging story.

Throughout the interviews, I engaged in active listening techniques, such as summarizing what the participants said and repeating it back to them for confirmation, to ensure I understood the story accurately. This also helped build rapport and trust, making the participant feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. At the end of the interview, I asked the participants to share their experience participating in the interview as well as their perception of the research study and the researcher—me—before the interview began and now that the interview had ended. Finally, I asked the participants what they would like to see happen with this research. The goal of the narrative-style interviews was not just to gather information but also to get a deep understanding of the participants' personal experiences and perspectives. It offered a richer, more nuanced picture of the participants than a traditional question-and-answer interview.

The final interview guide consists of 128 questions and took approximately 90 minutes to complete, on average. It consists of seven sections: a pre-interview screening[26] followed by three interview modules[27] and three survey modules[28]. The interviews were semi-structured and biographical and focused on recounting the participant's life history (Maruna et al. 2006) with special attention to (1) incarceration, (2) religion and conversion, and (3) reentry experiences[29].

[26] The pre-interview screening was intended to determine participant eligibility. For example, if a potential participant had never been incarcerated or a potential participant converted to Islam after incarceration, neither were eligible to participate in the study. Those who were eligible then began the substantive portion of the interview.

[27] This dissertation focuses entirely on the interview modules, which is approximately 75% of the interview guide.

[28] Data from the survey modules—about 25% of the interview guide—were not included in this dissertation but will be used in future adaptations. The three survey modules included: (1) Resiliency; (2) Discrimination; and (3) Demographics. I included the resiliency module as a supplement to the questions on health since resilience is the ability to overcome environmental stress or adversity. Specifically, it is a personality characteristic that tempers the negative effects of stress and promotes adaption (Wagnild and Young 1993). Resilient individuals, therefore, have a relatively positive psychological outcome despite exposure to difficult experiences. Resilience encapsulates multiple qualities; that is, an individual may be resilient in relation to some outcomes but not others. Thus, resilience is measured by individual variations in response to risk exposure (Rutter 2006). Furthermore, threat exposure and the employment of coping mechanisms are key theoretical concepts of resilience. For these reasons, I had a theoretical basis to believe that conversion would result in higher levels of resiliency and therefore included the module for further testing and exploration.

[29] The reentry module included questions on employment, housing, health, and social networks—the original four

The interview guide went through many iterations, especially concerning the questions about names, conversion, and identity. The first iteration included an Identity Module with narrative-styled questions intended to only inform the present construction of personal identity (Maruna et al. 2006). However, after the pilot study, I quickly realized that questions about one's identity were too abstract and left the participants confused. Additionally, after interviewing about a quarter of the sample, I removed an entire section on political views and ideology since almost every participant shared that they did not concern themselves with politics.

Perhaps the most interesting change to the interview guide came after asking the first question: *What is your name?* The following outlines the chronology of the question:

Question 1. Name		
First Iteration	**Second Iteration**	**Third Iteration**
- What is your name?	- What is your full legal name? - Do you go by any other names?	- What is your full legal name? - Was this your name at birth? - Do you go by any other names?

Upon hearing several participants qualify their answers by distinguishing between their "name" and their "full legal name," I decided to track each answer by asking separate questions, as seen in the second iteration. Furthermore, after interviewing about eight converts, I understood that there was a further distinction needed: some converts have legally changed their name to an Islamic name, different from their birth name. As such, I decided to ask all three questions separately. The answers to these seemingly simple questions provided more data than the actual Identity Module. As previously discussed, the naming practices of many converts, particularly the reverts and those part of the Nation of Islam, demonstrate how their religious identity change shifts the way they view their sense of self, including the basis of their identity—their names.

outcome variables.

Another pattern emerged when asked: *What is your religion?* The following outlines the chronology of the question:

Question 9. Religion		
First Iteration	**Second Iteration**	**Third Iteration**
- What is your religion? - Have you always been *(x)*?	- What is your religion? - Have you always identified as *(x)?*	- What is your religious affiliation? - Have you always identified as *(x)?*

Like the questions on names, the reverts made clear that my wording of the question was crucial. In the first iteration, after asking that the participants share their current religion, I proceeded to ask if the participant had always "been" that religion. Like the section on reverts revealed, some reverts explained that there was a different between having "been" part of a particular religion and have "identified" as part of a religion. For example, these men clarified that they had always *been* Muslim but were ignorant to that fact and therefore had *identified* as Christian. Therefore, in my attempt to track religious change, I needed to compose my question within an identity framework to avoid misunderstanding how reverts conceptualized their current and former selves. To keep the question situated in an identity framework, the third iteration changed "religion" to "religious affiliation."

Finally, this distinction between *being* something and *identifying* as something was coupled with another question about religious change. Initially, my conceptualization of religious identity change only considered the process of conversion. However, as previously discussed, many of the Muslim participants who previously *identified* as Christian explained that they reject the term "converts" and instead refer to themselves as "reverts." Yet, the distinction between *being* and *identifying* emerged once again when asked: *Are you a convert or a revert to Islam?*[30]

[30] Although I cannot be sure, it is possible that some participants chose to identify as a revert because I provided them the option, but it is likely that they would have accepted the term convert if no other option was given.

Question 11. Convert versus Revert	
First Iteration	**Second Iteration**
- Are you a convert or revert to Islam?	- Do you identify as a convert or revert to Islam?

Many converts *and* reverts disapproved of my question in its first iteration as they claimed it diminished their Islamic identity. They were adamant that they were neither a convert nor a revert to Islam; they were simply Muslim.[31] However, some did clarify that they do *identify* as a convert or revert to Islam as the question in that form describes the process of coming to their "knowing" of Islam. These three examples reveal the complexity of seemingly simple concepts and highlight the importance of conceptualizing identity versus identification when examining religious conversion. Moreover, while the interview guide underwent many more changes, the changes highlighted here are relevant to this dissertation's claim that reversion is a distinct process from conversion both in thought and practice.

Sample.[32] Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics of the sample. The sample's selection criteria are as follows: at least 18 years of age, male, formerly incarcerated[33], Blackamerican, either

[31] Those who do not use either "convert" or "revert" more commonly refer to someone who has recently adopted Islam as a "new *shahadah*". The *shahada* is the Muslim declaration of belief in the oneness of Allah (God) and acceptance of Muhammad as his final messenger. Reciting the *shahada* is the only formal step in conversion (or reversion) to Islam: "There is no true God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of God." The term, "new *shahada*" serves as a reminder for the community to provide support, particularly from those who can empathize with the challenges of becoming a new Muslim. However, the label applies only for a certain period. As these individuals spend more time learning about and practicing Islam while building relationships within the community, this identity gradually gives way to simply being referred to as "Brother." This transition ensures that the "new *shahadah*" label does not persist as a perpetual marker that distinguishes or undermines them, preventing the kind of stigmatization commonly experienced by new Muslims from those who were born and raised in the faith.

[32] The absence of reliable statistics on Muslim converts in the U.S. makes it difficult to assess the representativeness of my sample. Representativeness is not, in any case, the purpose of this work. Qualitative research is never unbiased. In this research, my goal is saturation, rather than representation.

[33] Due to COVID-19 precautions, access to currently incarcerated individuals was unavailable. However, since a significant number of participants (n=40) were released in the last five years, their participation helped develop consistent and justified storylines in the narratives as opposed to distorted rationalizations. Nevertheless, through the sample of formerly incarcerated men, I embrace narratives as the object of study as they indicate how these men conceptualize their pathway to Islamic conversion and provide insight into the way identity is operating. This dissertation is about identity work with a population that is motivated to explicitly do this work and reflect on it.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Formerly Incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim Male "Converts"
N=59

Variable	Observations									
	Reverts		Converts		Both		Neither		Christian[1]	
	n	*(%)*	*n*	*(%)*	*n*	*(%)*	*n*	*(%)*	*n*	*(%)*
Age	25		18		1		10		5	
18-29	*1*	*(4.00)*	*4*	*(22.22)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(20.00)*
30-39	*3*	*(12.00)*	*3*	*(16.67)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(20.00)*
40-49	*3*	*(12.00)*	*4*	*(22.22)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*2*	*(20.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
50-59	*11*	*(44.00)*	*3*	*(16.67)*	*1*	*(100.00)*	*2*	*(20.00)*	*2*	*(40.00)*
60-69	*6*	*(24.00)*	*4*	*(22.22)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*3*	*(30.00)*	*1*	*(20.00)*
70+	*1*	*(4.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*3*	*(30.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Religious Denomination	25		18		1		10		0	
Sunni	*5*	*(20.00)*	*2*	*(11.11)*	*1*	*(100.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Shia	*2*	*(8.00)*	*1*	*(5.56)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Nation of Islam	*5*	*(20.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*3*	*(30.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Moor	*1*	*(4.00)*	*1*	*(5.56)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
None	*12*	*(48.00)*	*14*	*(77.78)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*7*	*(70.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Prior Religious Affiliation	25		18		1		10		5	
Christian	*19*	*(76.00)*	*12*	*(66.67)*	*1*	*(100.00)*	*2*	*(20.00)*	*1*	*(20.00)*
Jewish	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(5.56)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*7*	*(70.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
None	*6*	*(24.00)*	*5*	*(27.78)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(10.00)*	*4*	*(80.00)*
Times Incarcerated	25		18		1		10		5	
$x = 1$	*12*	*(48.00)*	*12*	*(66.67)*	*1*	*(100.00)*	*2*	*(20.00)*	*3*	*(60.00)*
$1 < x \leq 5$	*12*	*(48.00)*	*6*	*(33.33)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*7*	*(70.00)*	*2*	*(40.00)*
$5 < x \leq 10$	*1*	*(4.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
$x > 10$	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(10.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Total Years Incarcerated	25		18		1		10		5	
$y \leq 5$	*2*	*(8.00)*	*4*	*(22.22)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(10.00)*	*2*	*(40.00)*
$5 < y \leq 10$	*3*	*(12.00)*	*3*	*(16.67)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(10.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
$10 < y \leq 20$	*6*	*(24.00)*	*2*	*(11.11)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*3*	*(30.00)*	*1*	*(20.00)*
$20 < y \leq 30$	*10*	*(40.00)*	*7*	*(38.89)*	*1*	*(100.00)*	*4*	*(40.00)*	*1*	*(20.00)*
$y > 30$	*4*	*(16.00)*	*2*	*(11.11)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(10.00)*	*1*	*(20.00)*
State Incarcerated	25		18		1		10		5	
Arizona	*1*	*(4.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
California	*21*	*(84.00)*	*15*	*(83.33)*	*1*	*(100.00)*	*8*	*(80.00)*	*4*	*(80.00)*
Delaware	*1*	*(4.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Florida	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(100.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Georgia	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(100.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Illinois	*1*	*(4.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(10.00)*	*1*	*(20.00)*
Iowa	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(20.00)*
Missouri	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(10.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Nevada	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(10.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
North Carolina	*1*	*(4.00)*	*1*	*(5.56)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
New York	*1*	*(4.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Ohio	*1*	*(4.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(10.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Texas	*2*	*(8.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Virigina	*1*	*(4.00)*	*1*	*(5.56)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
West Virginia	*0*	*(0.00)*	*2*	*(11.11)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(10.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*
Wisconsin	*0*	*(0.00)*	*1*	*(5.56)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*	*0*	*(0.00)*

Notes: Cell enteries show sample size of each variable with subsequent frequencies in parentheses.

[1]The Christian subsample are individuals who converted to Islam while incarcerated and and left the religion upon reentry.

Muslim-born, a Muslim convert[34], or Christian. Both the Muslim and Christian subsamples consist of 62 men, where the Christian men serve as the control group (Glueck and Glueck 1950, 1968; Laub and Sampson 2003). Like other studies of conversion, the subsample of Muslim converts is purely self-identified without an objective means to quantify a "real" conversion. Since conversion is an inherently subjective phenomenon, the participant, and only the participant, is qualified to decide on the realities of his conversion (Maruna et al. 2006). I apply this same framework to the Muslim reverts. In fact, some Muslims believe that by declaring the *shahada*, a conversion[35] can be performed without any witnesses as they do not consider conversion as a rite of institution but rather as a private commitment to God (Galonnier 2017). Although I pay particular attention to the nature of participation in religious practices, such as praying, fasting, attending worship services, etc. as measures of conversion, I also include individuals who assume a more "spiritual" relationship with Islam which often includes only some aspects of these ritualistic practices.

Each of the three subsamples were initially divided into thirds representing the number of total[36] years incarcerated[37]: (1) less than or equal to five years incarcerated; (2) more than 5 but less than or equal to ten years incarcerated; and (3) more than 10 years incarcerated. These categories representing years incarcerated were derived based on a 2020 report by the United States Sentencing Commission examining the relationship between length of incarceration and recidivism. The commission consistently found that incarceration lengths of more than five years had a deterrent effect. Specifically, incarceration lengths of more than 5 years and up to 10 years

[34] If a Muslim convert, he must have converted while incarcerated.
[35] Although reverts believe they have been Muslim all along, the identification process of "coming to know Islam" also leads to their participation in declaring the *shahada* as a personal, private commitment to God.
[36] Out of the 59 participants, 29 were incarcerated more than once. Thus, I provide the total number of years incarcerated.
[37] Although age was not explicitly used to represent variation in the sample, age is partially captured by the years incarcerated variable since longer prison stays necessitate older ages. Additionally, the sample was not divided based on type of crime because Ammar, Weaver, and Saxon (2004) found that type of crime is not associated with Islamic identification.

were approximately 17 percent less likely to result in recidivism relative to a comparison group sentenced to a shorter period. Furthermore, incarceration lengths of five years or less did not have any statistical significant deterrent effect (Cotter 2020). According to Thomas and Zaitzow (2006), shorter prison stays are insufficient to motivate any significant personal transformation whereas individuals who serve longer sentences have different adaptation mechanisms, such as religious conversions. However, I further broke down the third group—more than 10 years incarcerated—because I found that both converts and reverts to Islam tended to serve sentences much longer than 10 years. For example, 56% of reverts and 50% of converts served sentences longer than 20 years.

RECRUITMENT[38]

To jumpstart recruitment, I created two recruitment flyers, with my contact information, to distribute electronically[39] and began cold-calling faith-based reentry service organizations that I found either through my personal and professional contacts or through a Google search. After calling several organizations and introducing myself and my research, I first found success with a Chicago-based organization named "Transforming Re-Entry Services." After connecting with my first participant, I used a snowball sampling method (Ammar et al. 2004; Copeland 2017; Maruna et al. 2006; Spalek and El-Hassan 2007) to locate other participants. Through this avenue, I was able to connect with two participants total, who each referred me to other men. One of these men invited me to attend the weekly prayer and fasting services, via Zoom, of a Nation of Islam network of mosques in Chicago. After attending and participating in several services, I requested

[38] Most recruitment efforts took place in Chicago and Los Angeles County as I lived bicoastally for several years. Yet, due to snowball sampling, I encountered and interviewed formerly incarcerated Blackamerican men from 15 other states.

[39] Again, due to COVID-19, I was unable to distribute the flyers in-person as many reentry service programs were not open to guests. I did, however, have receive permission to email the flyers for them to print and post on their community bulletin boards.

permission to make a recruitment announcement, which I was granted. However, only one man contacted me for an interview.

I contacted mosques, predominantly on the South Side of Chicago, with active prison ministries and/or reentry aftercare services. However, of all the recruitment routes I took, mosques provided the least access—I was unable to secure a single interview—likely due to a distrust of researchers, particularly ones considered "outsiders." [40] Finally, I asked personal contacts to reach out to friends and family who qualified, which led to twelve participant interviews.

I repeated this recruitment approach in Los Angeles, where I came across Homeboy Industries—the largest gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world. Homeboy Industries has a formal process for researchers who are interested in gaining access to its members. After completing the application process and a meeting with the Research and Data Manager, Homebody Industries sent out several recruitment emails to its membership with my recruitment flyers and contact information, resulting in six new participants, each referring an average of two other eligible participants. Despite continued interest, I stopped recruiting once I reached 130 participants due to time and financial constraints. In fact, 26 men asked to be placed on a waitlist and contacted if I ever decided to reconvene the interviews.[41]

Recruitment was an on-going process that continued throughout the interviewing stage. To incentivize the interviews, I began by offering $25 for each interview, based on my budget at the time. However, after receiving a Religion, Spirituality, and Democratic Renewal grant from the

[40] My positionality in this dissertation is a delicate one. Although Muslim, as a non-Black female, studying Blackamerican men who carry the stigma of incarceration, I inevitably cause hesitancy and unintentionally trigger the historical baggage that many Blackamericans carry regarding "scientific" research. At the end of each interview, I asked all the participants what their initial impression of the study was, as well as their initial impression of me, the researcher. "Exploitation" was a word I heard often. One participant shared: "[Research exploits] not just the struggles of my people but my personal life as well." This feedback was a social lesson about racial inclusivity and historical sensitivity.

[41] I was fortunate to have an excess of willing participants as this allowed me to select participants based on certain demographic characteristics, such as length of incarceration, to satisfy my selection criteria.

Social Science Research Council, I was able to increase that incentive to $100[42], which was more appropriate for a 90-minute interview. Unsurprisingly, this increased incentive brought more interest and aided with the recruitment process. Finally, once recruitment seemed to reach a plateau, about four months into the interviewing process, I began to offer a $25 referral fee[43]—I would provide an additional $25 to any participant whose referral resulted in another participant interview. The $25 referral offer was only paid out upon completion of the referral interview.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Due to COVID-19 protocols, as well as the fact that many participants lived in various states across the country, all interviews were conducted by phone.[44] With the permission of each participant, all interviews were recorded via the iPhone app "Call Recorder," for data collection accuracy and convenience (Maruna et al. 2006). By recording the interviews, I was able to focus my attention on the interview itself, asking necessary follow-up and clarifying questions instead of rushing to take pertinent notes and significant quotes. As per the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Chicago, I created an informed consent document outlining the purpose of the research study, the participation procedures and activities, risks/discomforts of being in the study, benefits of being in the study, confidentiality of data and limits to confidentiality, use of research data, voluntary participation and right to withdraw, and contact information for research questions and rights. I requested and received verbal consent for each section of the informed consent document. Each interview lasted an average of 90 minutes and concluded with the $100 incentive payment (along with the $25 referral offer to the appropriate participants). Almost all

[42] After securing additional funding, I went back and paid and additional $75 to all participants who only received the initial $25.
[43] Like the $100 interview compensation, I went back and paid $25 to all participants who had successfully referred participants.
[44] The main limitation to phone interviews was my inability to observe material symbols such as religious attire.

130 participants requested an electronic transfer via Cash App or Zelle. A few requested a check, which was sent and confirmed upon delivery.

Data Analysis

Analyzing narrative-style interview data is a complex process that involves interpreting and understanding participant experiences. Qualitative researchers use several methods to analyze this data, but the common goal is to identify patterns, themes, and insights that emerge from the narratives. The first step is to transcribe the interviews, converting the spoken words into text. The interviews were sent to a third-party transcription service—www.gotranscript.com—and transcribed for analysis. This text became the data I analyzed. The transcription included non-verbal cues such as pauses and laughter. Next, I thoroughly familiarized myself with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts, gaining an overall understanding of the narratives, and began to identify recurring themes or patterns. With the help of my research assistant, the transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti. The analyses followed thematic trends[45] and were thematically coded to note patterns across the diverse sample, and place them within a broader theoretical framework and social context (Maruna et al. 2006; Spalek and El-Hassan 2007). Coding is the process where labels are assigned to sections of the data that represent different themes, concepts, or ideas. I employed a narrative analysis to analyze how the narrative is structured and what this structure reveals about the participants' experiences and perspectives. Once the theme and structure of the narratives were identified, I began to interpret the data. The first part of the analyses follows inductive reasoning—I use the specific observations to generate my theory of functional pathways. The second part of

[45] The themes discussed throughout this dissertation appeared rather consistently, although some participants were more explicit and vocal than others. Throughout the data analysis process, I explicitly searched for counterexamples and provided them when relevant and appropriate.

the analyses relies on deductive reasoning where I use the interview data to assign a functional pathway to each participant. My research assistant helped with the data analyses, verifying and validating my interpretations. Qualitative analysis of narrative-style interviews is often iterative, requiring moving back and forth between the different stages. The ultimate goal is to understand and interpret participant experiences, views, and actions as they themselves perceive and articulate them.

All findings, analyses, and conclusions drawn here are based on my sample and are not meant to generalize to the larger Blackamerican population. However, although the narratives presented are unique, patterns and characterizations of the larger groups may indicate population-level differences and methods of interacting with their faith for the formerly and soon-to-be formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim converts.

CHAPTER OUTLINE AND SUMMARY

Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive overview of key concepts and theoretical frameworks related to identity and religious networks within the context of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts. It explores the evolution of identity theory, including social identity theory and identity control theory (ICT), with a focus on the intrapersonal component of ICT in the context of religious conversion. The chapter also delves into the significance of religious networks in identity formation and the role of these networks as sources of social support and coping resources. It introduces the primary network functions of the redemptive function and utilitarian function, as well as the functional amplifiers of brotherhood and discipline. The chapter concludes by introducing the concept of functional pathways and their unique utilization by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts.

Chapter 2 delves into the theoretical foundations of the redemptive function, beginning with the concept of identity change and its application to prison religious conversions. It examines the role of personal narratives in constructing and sustaining identity, highlighting their interpretive and constitutive functions. The chapter explores the influence of narratives on actions, particularly deviant behavior and punishment, and discusses the rejection of prevailing punitive narratives by incarcerated individuals. It then focuses on religion as a counter-narrative, emphasizing its impact on the criminal legal system and the ties between religious narratives and criminal desistance. The chapter also examines the conversion narrative as a coping strategy and discusses the bifurcation of selfhood through religious conversion. Additionally, it addresses the appeal of Islam to incarcerated Blackamerican Muslims, highlighting its significance as a comprehensive way of life that provides spiritual liberation and reduces the likelihood of recidivism. Overall, the study reveals how religion acts as a counter-narrative within the redemptive function during incarceration, particularly among incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts.

Chapter 3 examines the utilitarian function of the Muslim network in prison, focusing on its instrumental support for incarcerated individuals. By identifying as Muslim, inmates gain access to the network's benefits without undergoing a complete identity change. The utilitarian function provides protection from violence and access to opportunities within the prison social structure. Brotherhood amplifies protection, while the intrinsic discipline of Islam opens doors to otherwise inaccessible opportunities. The prevalence of violence in prisons is explored, highlighting the need for protection. Racial conflicts and group affiliations are significant factors of prison violence. The Muslim network, known for its militancy, offers protection and instrumental support, serving as a crucial utility for incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim men. The

chapter also examines different functional pathways and the motivations behind conversion for utility purposes. Personal accounts provide insights into the significance of the Muslim network in navigating the prison environment and ensuring safety and security.

In chapter 4, I examine the concept of redemption after incarceration and the role of the Muslim network's redemptive function in facilitating this process. The importance of redemption after incarceration is explored, highlighting the potential for a new life perspective. The chapter begins by discussing the significant number of people released from prisons each year, with a focus on Blackamerican men comprising a substantial portion of those released. The initial stages of reentry are crucial for establishing support networks, both formal and informal, which provide emotional and practical assistance. The role of religion and redemptive narratives in the lives of formerly incarcerated individuals is emphasized, with prison chaplains acknowledging the criticality of religious support for successful rehabilitation. The establishment of faith-based organizations is highlighted as a resource for spiritual rejuvenation and identity transformation, with personal testimonies demonstrating the transformative power of faith. Religion is viewed as a protective shield, preserving human dignity in the dehumanizing conditions of incarceration. Redemptive narratives are examined as a source of hope, motivation, and community support during the reentry process.

Chapter 5 highlights the utilitarian function of the Muslim network during reentry. Religion is discussed as providing institutional support and fostering a socialized mindset, particularly for isolated individuals seeking integration into broader social contexts. The chapter acknowledges the challenges of resource management, specifically securing housing and employment, faced by formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslims. The housing section explores the assistance provided by religious networks, including temporary shelter programs, affordable housing

initiatives, and transitional housing solutions. It also addresses the advocacy and support offered in navigating housing processes, such as assistance with bureaucratic procedures, mediation with landlords, and mentoring in finding stable housing. The employment section discusses job training and placement programs available through religious communities, focusing on vocational training, job readiness skills, and connections to potential employers, with specific programs targeting individuals reentering society from prison. The chapter explores the support for entrepreneurial opportunities within the Muslim community, including resources for starting *halal* businesses and access to networking opportunities and mentorship. Finally, the chapter emphasizes the crucial role of religious networks in resource management for formerly incarcerated individuals, acknowledging the variability of experiences based on available resources, local community strength, and intersectional identities. It emphasizes the need for continued support and comprehensive solutions to address systemic barriers faced by this population.

PART 1

FRAMING

CHAPTER 1

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

"Islam saved my life."
— Walter *[63 y/o, convert, unspecified Islamic sect]*

It's Friday, July 4, 2008, in Cepeda State Prison as Tahir paces back and forth, touching the four cold, stone walls as he circles his 4 by 6 feet prison cell. He has shoelaces wrapped around his waist to keep his unintentionally oversized pants up—a uniform that is two sizes too big for him—and rubber bands around his ankles to keep the pants' legs from dragging on the concrete floor.

In one corner is the metal toilet that he shares with his cellmate, a constant reminder that his privacy is one of the many freedoms that has been taken away from him for a crime he insists he did not commit. Above the lidless toilet sits a small sink with an even smaller, leaky faucet, dripping drops of water every couple of seconds. The droplets hit the bottom of the shallow sink, creating a familiar rhythm that Tahir has learned to tune out over time. The opposite corner features a barred window only large enough to hold the two vertical and two horizontal iron bars anchored in front of it. At this time of morning, the window lets in an orange haze that fills the otherwise dark cell.

Tahir breaks his pace to pick up his self-annotated Qur'an—his prized possession—possibly only second to the cherished photos of his teenage daughters, which he keeps hidden throughout the pages of the religious text. As he gently sifts through the pages, he rereads his barely legible remarks and commentary, all thanks to the now almost inkless blue pen that operates as both a writing utensil and bookmark. With the Qur'an in hand, he passes the dented metal locker

and approaches the austere desk, unadorned and stark, positioned alongside a bare chair, both solidly anchored to the unyielding wall and rigid floor, creating an image of permanence. He begins to sit when he hears unexpected footsteps grow louder.

Chaplain Abdel-Aziz quietly walks up to Tahir's cell, smiles, and gently nods his head once as if to say, "I believe in you, brother." It's *Jumu'ah*[1], the most blessed day of the week for Muslims around the world. Every Friday, all believing men are expected to attend the weekly *Jumu'ah* prayer at the mosque—a shortened prayer where only two instead of four *rak'ahs*[2] are performed. Before the prayer, the *imam*[3] gives a sermon on any subject ranging from theological ordinances to social justice issues in the community. Today, Tahir will stand up in front of his Muslim brothers in the prison's prayer hall and give the sermon he has spent the past three weeks preparing.

"It wasn't my idea," Tahir insists as he recalls the day, a memory that has stayed with him since it happened almost a decade and a half prior. "I was never—I'm still not the type to want to stand up in front a bunch of people and speak. It's not like I have a fear of public speaking, I just never thought anyone cared to hear what I had to say." Tahir's voice softens. "I was beyond honored. Frankly, I couldn't believe it—maybe it was shock."

As the eldest of five siblings, Tahir always felt responsible for the beatings he watched his mother endure. "My stepfather was very abusive, so I used to always try to jump in and help my mother and tell him to beat me up. 'Don't hit on my mama!' I'd demand." He continued to witness this trauma for the next seven years until his stepfather went to prison. "When he was in prison, my mother thought she found some newfound freedom, but she was so messed up and had been

[1] The Arabic word for Friday. The day of congregational prayer.
[2] A *rak'ah* is a single iteration of prescribed movements and supplications performed by Muslims as part of the prescribed obligatory prayer.
[3] A Muslim religious leader who often leads others in prayer and worship.

using pills to help her cope with him—with the beatings still." Tahir's mother resorted to stealing to feed her addiction when she began dating a man who was more abusive than her incarcerated husband. "He left my mother for dead. Both arms broke. Leg. Ribs. He bit plugs out of her face." Although Tahir did not witness the beating, he did describe the pain of its aftermath. "Watching my mother and not being able to recognize her—that was a terrible thing. She was such a beautiful woman. That's when I made a vow to God, at nine years old, that when I grow up, I'm gonna deal with these people. I gotta get big quick so I could take care of my brothers and sisters and my mama." Over the next two years, Tahir's mother was arrested several times for theft and other similar crimes. She ended up jumping bail and was arrested again. This time she became incarcerated as well. "When my mother did some time, that was when that innocent child that I was—that was rejected, and the gangster and outlaw thing became my lifestyle."

Cepeda State Prison is a California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation maximum security state prison for men, known for housing a number of notorious individuals. It is among the oldest prisons in the state and among the most well-known prisons in the nation. In California state prisons, there are two formal subsets that house incarcerated individuals: the General Population (GP) and the Sensitive Need Yard (SNY). The latter houses sexual predators and individuals who cooperated with police investigations or worked with prison administration as informants, frequently referred to as "snitches." SNY individuals are typically those who face threats from those in GP, often the more dangerous of the two. Tahir was housed in GP in the highest security level unit.

"I had this one Arab brother in prison with me. He was mad because the Muslim Chaplain asked me to give the *khutba*[4] one Friday. It was July 4th, 2008, at Cepeda State Prison. I still

[4] A sermon given by an *imam* on Fridays at noon prayer.

remember." I could hear Tahir's smile from the other side of the phone. "I gave the *khutba* about the ones who oppress themselves—the *jihad*[5], the struggle, of the lower self." He quickly noted that nothing was "inflammatory or seditious." "But the Arab brother, Mostafa, decided not to come. I thought we were alright. I prayed behind him several times." After the *Jumu'ah* prayer, Tahir learned that Mostafa told the other Egyptian Muslims not to come because he was giving the *khutba*. While this was confusing and hurtful to him, Tahir did not expect what happened next. "He went to IGI, the Institution of Gang Investigators, telling them all types of lies on me. And they locked me up in solitary." This was not the first or last time Mostafa would falsely report a Blackamerican Muslim with the hopes of expelling him from practicing Islam in prison.

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COLLECTIVE IDENTITY? A FANTASY FOR AMERICAN MUSLIMS

Identity has been a prominent analytical tool in the social sciences with its beginnings in symbolic interactionism, which includes thoughts about the importance of meaning in defining identities as well as how they function. Identity consists of a set of meanings that define who we are in terms of the groups or social categories to which we belong. It is a multi-dimensional condition and classification—a label—that indicates how individuals and groups are differentiated in their interactions with other individuals and collectives (Jenkins 2014). The construction of identity most often involves reestablishing both norms and opposites—who one "is" involves identifying "others" who are "not." The process of "othering" entails a dialectic of both inclusion and exclusion (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Identity is used by individuals to make sense of themselves, often in relation to others, focusing on what they share or how they differ from others.

[5] The Islamic concept of the struggle within oneself against sin. It can also refer to a struggle with a noble aim.

Identity is not a singular concept; individuals carry multiple identities that are arranged in a hierarchal system. Burke and Stets (2023) suggest that a stronger commitment to one identity over another means there are more and stronger ties to others because of that identity. They argue that we normally choose behaviors whose meanings are consistent with our most salient identity. For example, Mostafa's racial identity is positioned above his religious identity. He actively chose to miss the religiously mandatory Friday prayer, and encouraged other Arabs to do the same, because he could not accept Tahir—a Blackamerican man—giving the sermon or *khutbah*. This not only highlights Mostafa's identity hierarchy, but also illuminates his racial hierarchy and allegiances.

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND IDENTITY CONTROL THEORY

Identity theory has gone through several iterations since its introduction in the 1970s by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner. Their social identity theory describes the cognitive processes related to social identity and how it impacts intergroup behavior. It provides the basis for a systematic investigation of the relationship between social categories and an individual's self-definitions and perceptions. Social identity theory examines how membership in groups affects one's sense of self by focusing on intragroup dynamics and the processes by which membership is defined and describes the modes of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of a member (Chan-Malik 2018; Hogg, Terry, and White 1995). More contemporarily, collective identity[6] focuses on the identity of the group as a whole and is often expressed through the group's cultures and traditions. Even more recently, identity control theory (ICT) focuses on the nature of people's identities and the relationship between their identities and their behavior within the realm of their social structure. I will begin by applying collective identity followed by ICT to the Blackamerican

[6] The term "collective identity" was coined in 1989 by Alberto Melucci in *Nomads of the Present*.

Muslim case to better understand the process of their conversion and how they navigate their newly acquired social network.

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Collective identity implies strong notions of group bondedness and homogeneity, suggesting that minority groups are bound together by race, nationality, religion, culture, a common history, and similar experiences of discrimination and social disadvantage, all of which serve to strengthen ingroup solidarity and to enhance consciousness of their minority membership (Hutnik 1992). This bond results in a stark distinctiveness from non-members, ultimately creating the insider-outsider divide. Although sizeable research has focused on social identities based on race (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey 1999), gender (Jetten et al. 2014), and nationality (Bond 2006), fewer studies have investigated the psychosocial implications of a religious identity. The Blackamerican Muslim case serves as a critique to collective identity due to the racial hierarchy that exists within the American Muslim community and the use of race as an organizing unit within mosques.

Existing literature that examines American Muslim identity has largely relied on collective identity from a religious lens. However, I argue that by emphasizing its racial variability, the American Muslim population challenges the concept of collective identity. The Tahir and Mostafa example confronts the idea that group bondedness results from a shared social category and exposes it as overly simplistic. The shared religious orientation between the two men did not outweigh the racial differences between them due to the ordering of Mostafa's identity hierarchy—race over religion. Collective identity is only meaningful if it does not violate the identity hierarchy of the individuals involved. Tahir's Blackness violated the positioning of the collective identity—

race over religion—in Mostafa's identity hierarchy, thereby deeming the collective identity unmeaningful.

Another limitation of collective identity is its emphasis on homogeneity. Homogeneity is not a suitable framework to understand collective identity among American Muslims. Walk into most any mosque in the U.S. and you will likely find the organizing unit is not simply religion, but also race, ethnicity, or national origin. According to the 2020 U.S. Mosque Survey, approximately three-fourths of mosques have one ethnic group that dominates the mosque (Bagby 2021). The relative racial homogeneity of mosques—the center of collective identity for American Muslims—demonstrates the inadequacy of the framework as it applies to not only Blackamerican Muslims, but the larger American Muslim population.

IDENTITY CONTROL THEORY

A more suitable—and novel—approach to understanding identity processes among Blackamerican Muslims is that of ICT. In ICT, behavior is premised on a labeled world where people in society name each other and themselves in terms of the positions they occupy (Burke 2006). These positional labels and the expectations attached to them become internalized as the identities that make up the self. These self-labels define persons in terms of positions in society and these positions carry shared behavioral expectations. Finally, these positions are relational in that they tie individuals together. This reflects James (1902) notion that people have as many selves as they have relationships to others. Thus, through their identities, people are intimately tied to the social structure (Burke 2006).

In ICT, each identity is viewed as a control system with four components (Burke 1991). One of the components of identity is the *identity standard*, where the set of meanings of any identity is held. Along with the identity standard, an identity contains *perceptions* of meanings in

the situation that are relevant to our identity, mostly from the feedback from others. A *comparator* functions to compare the perceived meanings with the meanings in the identity standard. Finally, the output function of the comparison is called an *error* or *discrepancy* that represents the difference between the perceptions and the identity standard. As a function of the error or discrepancy, there is meaningful behavior enacted in the situation that conveys meanings about our identity. Burke argues that if the discrepancy is zero, that is, the perceived meaning by others is congruent with the meanings in an individual's identity, then the individual will continue to do what they have been doing. If the discrepancy is not zero, the individual will either change their behavior or challenge the standard in such a way as to counteract the disturbance and reduce the discrepancy back toward zero (Burke 2006).

While ICT appropriately explains how behaviors come to change in interpersonal interactions, the theory does not explain how changed behaviors come about from *intra*personal reflections. In this dissertation, I expand upon ICT by incorporating an intrapersonal component where religious conversion provides an opportunity to explain how a discrepancy between an individual's identity standard and their *perception* of that identity (via the behavior enacted in a situation that conveys meanings about their identity (Burke 2006)) creates a need for self-reconciliation, manifesting in the form of self-reflection. These reflections can lead to personal or spiritual awakening that results in identity change via religious conversion.

THE POWER OF NETWORKS

Social network research most commonly relies on the "interdependent web of relationships connecting individuals" (Kreager et al. 2016; Wellman and Berkowitz 1988). Network analysis incorporates measures of social relations such as friendship and resource exchange, that connect all individuals within a setting. However, I contend that unlike other *inter*personal networks such

as family and workplace networks, a religious network also includes an *intra*personal component—a relationship between the self and a higher power. As this dissertation is fundamentally about identity change, I follow Walker and Lynn (2013), and use a social networks approach to identity theory. As such, I conceptualize a religious network as both the *intra*personal relationship that an individual has with himself as a function of their relationship with a higher power as well as the *inter*personal relations among other faith adherents. This conceptualization establishes a relationship between the network, the religion, and the individual.

An individual's network identity constitutes three levels of self—individual, relational, and collective (Moser and Ashforth 2021). Brewer and Gardner (1996) distinguish between the three levels of self. The *individual* self is one's personal identity (e.g., hard-working). An individual is said to have a *relational* identity when they internalize a dyadic bond as an aspect of self. Finally, the *collective* level of self is where one defines oneself in terms of a group—their social identity. My conceptualization of a religious network emphasizes the relational and collective levels. The relational level is the relationship between the individual and himself, as a function of God, while the collective level is the relationship between the individual and the other religious adherents.

Most work that relates identity to social networks explains how networks lead to identity creation (Badini, Moradi, and Bahmani 2023; Best et al. 2018). While this relation may be true, I posit that religious networks also provide evidence of the reverse—identity creation leads to new networks. It is not that an individual who assumes a new identity (e.g., a Muslim convert) *creates* a network; rather, the individual now has *access*[7] to that network. As a result of their new Muslim identity, Blackamerican Muslim men who convert to Islam while incarcerated now have access to

[7] Access refers to the ability to engage with, participate in, or utilize the resources and opportunities offered by a social network. In this context, access to a social network primarily refers to the ability to form and maintain relationships with the members of the network as well as using provided resources, both abstract—emotional and informational—and tangible—instrumental.

the Muslim network, with both relational (i.e., himself) and collective (i.e., Muslim community) aspects. Therefore, identity change leads to a new network. Specifically, conversion leads to a new *religious* network.

NETWORKS AS FUNCTIONAL ENTITIES

A religious network operates as derivative and functional entities of the shared religious identity. Identity, in this case the shared Blackamerican Muslim identity, is an abstract concept. However, the network—a derivative of this identity—is a functional entity with tangible outcomes on both the relational and collective levels.

INTRAPERSONAL AND INTERPERSONAL COMPONENTS OF RELIGIOUS NETWORK

Sociological theories of self and identity generally view interpersonal social relationships as an essential factor in the formation of self and role internalization (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934). Although many theories imply the importance of interpersonal social ties, Stryker's (1980) identity theory is perhaps the most explicit about the relationship between social ties and the self. Identity theory argues that role expectations are internalized into the self-concept through commitments to role-based groups. Commitment is defined as social and emotional attachment to a role-based group, or the extent to which an individual's relations to others are contingent upon possessing a particular role and identity. In the case of a religious network, the role expectations are that of the "believer" and are internalized into the self-concept, functioning via their relationship with the higher power. Evidence from the participants confirm this conceptualization:

> The physical means nothing but when you connect with something on a spiritual level.
> — Antwone *[57 y/o, revert, Nation of Islam]*

> It's definitely like I'm having conversations with God.
> — Jerome *[36 y/o, convert, Moor]*

> I fear the chastisement of Allah. That's how strong my faith is.
> — Deron *[64 y/o, revert, Nation of Islam]*

These examples emphasize one part of the religious network—the metaphysical relationship that results from a religious identity. Here, the network has a centralized node (i.e., God) and the self—an individual's own reflective consciousness. This is the *intra*personal component of a religious network—the *relational* level. It is this component that allows for the intrapersonal reflections—my expansion of Burke's (1991) identity control theory—that appear in the form of a personal or spiritual awakening that leads to an identity change via conversion. For example, incarcerated Blackamerican men who convert to Islam can now situate their identity within the Islamic principles of mercy, forgiveness, and justice.

> I've gained new friends and new associates that I can relate to, that's on the same path that I'm on. And that's about freedom, justice, and equality and about raising the standard of living for the least among us.
>
> — Jabreel *[55 y/o, revert, Nation of Islam]*

Jabreel's example demonstrates how converts (and reverts) situate their conversion (and reversion) within larger frameworks of redemption and marginalization.

The *inter*personal component of a religious network—the *collective* level—follows a more traditional model. Here, the network is structured between actors—individuals or organizations—indicating the way people and organizations are connected through various social familiarities. In the case of a religious network, the social familiarity is the shared religious identity. The benefit from the new religious network is not solely theological in nature (i.e., the principles of Islam versus Christianity); rather, it is a function of the *advantage* it provides. Through conversion, individuals are actively choosing to assume a new identity.

Although established in prison, this newly formed interpersonal network goes beyond the prison walls, as Deron demonstrates:

> [There] are brothers…that I write constantly every week. I make sure that they have the things they need for their spiritual growth and their spiritual development because that, to me, is very important.

The relationships between these individuals are so strong that, even after release, the relationships that developed in prison are continued and maintained during reentry. This bond is strengthened by the multiple shared social familiarities among the men—a shared religion and conversion status, incarceration status, race, and sex. Deron continues:

> [O]ne of the things I learned about being incarcerated is that we need to be connected with that world so that when they come out, they have a better way of thinking, they have a better way of acting. But if you don't have anything or anybody to connect with on the outside, then when you come outside, you still have the same mentality that you have when you [were] there.

Deron makes clear the importance of the interpersonal network by highlighting its impact on formerly incarcerated individuals' mindset during reentry. Its significance demonstrates that the interpersonal network that derives from the religious identity change can operate as a driving force for meaningful change during incarceration and reentry.

NETWORKS: SITES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND COPING RESOURCES

Substantial research has provided evidence documenting social support networks as buffers against physical and mental health impacts of stress exposure (Cohen and Janicki-Deverts 2009; Ertel, Glymour, and Berkman 2009; Lu 2011; Uchino 2004; Umberson and Karas Montez 2010). Stress management is often facilitated through a reliance on social and personal characteristics, often known as coping resources, with social support being a key example of such a resource (Schooler and Pearlin 1978). This type of support has been noted to protect victims of disaster from negative impacts on their physical and mental health (Norris et al. 2002). In this dissertation, I employ incarceration as a site of stress exposure where religious networks function as a form of social support that significantly mitigate feelings of fear and vulnerability, consequently reducing behavioral and psychological distress and alienation.

Thoits (2011) refers to *social ties* as connections to and contacts with other people through primary and secondary groups. *Primary groups* tend to be smaller in size and examples include

family members, relatives, and friends, while *secondary groups* are often larger with more formal interactions, such as networks. The primary-secondary distinction is similar to Granovetter's (1973) differentiation between strong and weak ties, where tie strength depends on the amount of time spent together, the emotional intensity of the relation, the intimacy of mutual disclosure, and the reciprocity in services provided. Furthermore, the degree of an individual's *social integration* is determined by their connection to a spectrum of primary and secondary groups, encapsulating the structural attributes of their interpersonal relationships, or in other words, the organizational patterns of these relationships (Berkman and Glass 2000; House, Landis, and Umberson 1988; Seeman 1959). *Social support*, such as *informational*, *emotional*, and *instrumental* support, conventionally pertains to the roles executed for an individual by significant others. The availability of these support functions hinges on having one or more structural ties with others. The cohesion of a person's social network, and the nature of the relationships within the network, significantly influence the receipt of various kinds of support. The influence of religious networks on the receipt of social support among incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts will be revisited throughout this dissertation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This dissertation began as a study of triple marginalization and religion's impact on reentry outcomes—employment, housing, health, and social networks (Harding and Harris 2020). However, not too long after beginning fieldwork, I realized that the idea of adding a third marginalized identity—Black, incarcerated, and now, Muslim—was, for the vast majority, a non-factor. In fact, not even one of the Christian-born participants, who did not end up converting to Islam, mentioned marginalization as a reason they decided not to convert. Among the participants who did convert to Islam, only two of the 59 participants mentioned any hesitancy, which they

ultimately overcame due to their faith. When asked if the fear of being marginalized, yet again, because of their newly assumed Muslim identity was of any concern, one of the two participants, Bryson, shared:

> I was thinking about…the perception. I'm in my head by how people are gonna perceive me because I'm the odd man out over here praying, and I'm like, 'Wait a minute. Is it better that I fear Allah[8] or fear what they thinking?'
>
> — Bryson *[67 y/o, convert, unspecified Islamic sect]*

Bryson's hesitancy was ultimately squashed as he put his alliances in perspective. Similarly, Abdul-Malik expressed his initial fear of acquiring an additional marginalized identity, but remained steadfast in his faith:

> I really did [fear it]. [But], I put [my] trust in…Allah. And I had a lot of confidence in the actual display of…Islam. When you allow it…you submit.
>
> — Abdul-Malik *[47 y/o, convert, unspecified Islamic sect]*

For the remaining 57 converts, the potential of being religiously marginalized was of little significance to them. In fact, some participants welcomed the marginalization as they viewed it as a blessing while others considered it an act of worship.

> If anything, [chuckles] the exact opposite would be true. I'd be like, '*subhanAllah*[9].' I say it all the time. I'd rather be dead than be *kufr*[10]. I would rather be dead than return to a life without faith.
>
> — Darnell *[52 y/o, revert, Sunni*[11]*]*

> It's really a privilege to me and an honor to be Muslim.
>
> — Alonzo *[66 y/o, neither revert nor convert, Nation of Islam]*

> I [wear] it on my sleeve. I [don't] care about the marginalization because if I'm being marginalized for Allah, that's what [counts] to me.
>
> — Tahir *[59 y/o, revert, Shia]*

[8] The Arabic word for God.

[9] The Arabic, Islamic phrase that translates to "Glory be to God."

[10] The Arabic word that translates to "non-belief." In Islam, it means one who does not believe in God and His Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad.

[11] The larger of the two main branches, or sects, of Islam. It differs from the Shia branch in its understanding of the *Sunna*—the traditional portion of Islamic law based on the Prophet Muhammad's words or acts—and its conception of religious leadership, and its acceptance of the first three caliphs.

I was so taken by the participants' rootedness in their new religious identity, I began to wonder if this identity change had any impact on how they navigated their reentry. I decided to modify my focus by dropping the marginalization hypothesis and instead, exploring the effects of this religious identity change on reentry outcomes.

The second adaptation of the dissertation came upon realizing my conception of social networks as an outcome variable measure was flawed. It did not take long—only about 15 interviews in—that I began to rethink the role of social networks in the reentry process. Initially, I conceptualized social networks as one of the four outcome variable measures of interest, along with employment, housing, and health. However, through the participants' experiences, it became increasingly clear that social network did not depend on identity change (i.e., the predictor variable) in the same way as housing, employment, and health. In fact, social networks seemed not to function as an outcome variable measure at all; rather, it seemed to *impact* the housing, employment, and health measures. Through this finding, I reconceptualized social networks as a mediator variable—a variable that explains the relationship between the predictor and outcome variables, as seen in Figure 1.

Relationship between Variables: Muslim Network as Mediator Variable

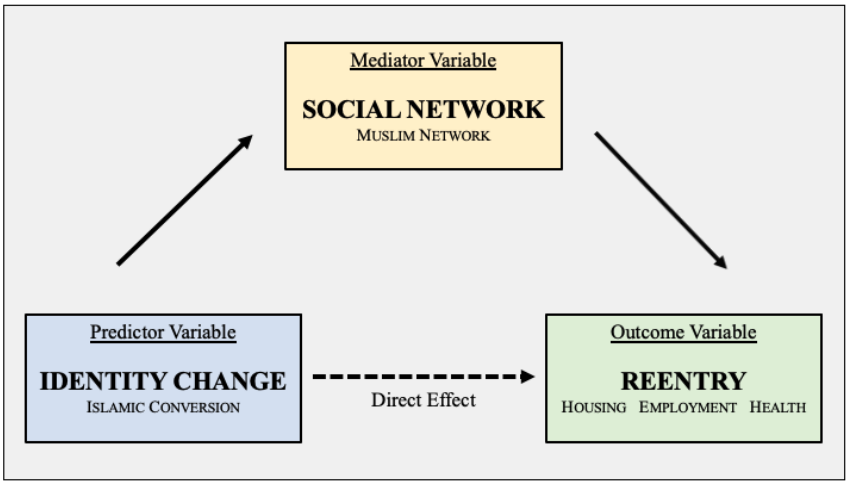

Figure 1

With this finding, I adapted this dissertation one final time. Through conversion, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim men undergo an identity change, specifically a religious identity change, which creates access to a new social network (i.e., a Muslim network, in the broadest sense, but more specifically, a Blackamerican Muslim network). In addition to operating as a mediator variable, the new social network also acts as the common thread that connects both the incarceration and reentry phases. During incarceration, many of the Blackamerican converts utilized this new religious network and created a new life perspective, aiding the reentry process. During reentry, these men secured—or attempted to secure—housing and employment. As such, I decided to narrow the focus of the dissertation to the relationship between Islamic conversion (i.e., identity change as the predictor variable) and the Muslim network (i.e., social network as the mediator variable). In doing so, I center the dissertation on formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts' *use* of their new religious network to *navigate* their incarceration and reentry.[12] While this dissertation is not a network study in the traditional sense, that is, it does not focus on patterns of relationship among individuals and groups, it is an identity study about networks.

I created the following conceptual framework based off my findings of 130 formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim and Christian men. The primary network functions apply to all three subsamples—Muslim converts, Muslim-born, and Christians. However, the specific functional pathways *only* apply to the Muslim converts.[13] I argue that the alignment of identity and identification (or lack thereof) have implications for the motivations to convert, which impact how individuals enter and subsequently use their new religious network. As such, I use Islamic

[12] The impact of this use and network navigation on reentry outcomes is the focus of a future study that builds off this dissertation's findings.
[13] Developing a functional pathway model that compares all three religious subsets is a future project.

conversion as an opportunity to study how religious identity change while incarcerated provides access to new networks that have benefits both during incarceration and reentry.

PRIMARY NETWORK FUNCTIONS AND FUNCTIONAL AMPLIFIERS

The religious network consists of two primary functions—*redemptive* and *utilitarian*—and two functional amplifiers—*brotherhood* and *discipline*. While the primary functions tell us what the network provides—the network's benefits—the functional amplifiers situate and strengthen these benefits. The brotherhood amplifier establishes a communal structure while the discipline amplifier organizes this structure. Each primary network function operates in two phases: the incarceration phase and the post-incarceration phase—reentry. Figure 2 provides an overview of the primary network functions and functional amplifiers.

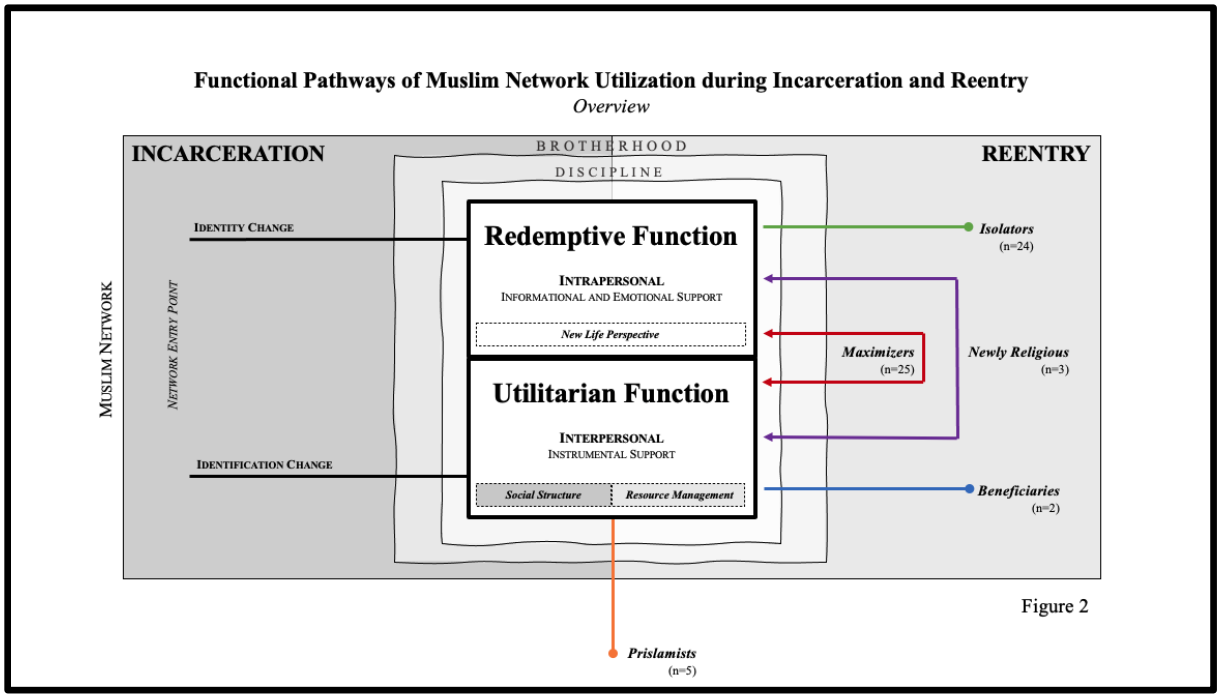

Figure 2

REDEMPTIVE FUNCTION

The first primary network function is the *redemptive* function. The redemptive function—the intrapersonal component and relational level of the network identity—consists of the relationship with the self as a function of God. Through the redemptive function, religion provides

incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Blackamerican male converts informational and emotional support. Informational support involves the provision of facts or guidance that can aid in problem-solving, which can also encompass appraisal support that provides feedback about an individual's perception of a situation and guidance on potential action courses, while emotional support encompasses expressions of affection, esteem, encouragement, and sympathy (Cohen and McKay 1984; Weiss 1995). Although the normative understanding (Lin and Westcott 1991) posits informational and emotional support as a derivative of primary groups and/or secondary groups, I contend that, in a religious network, these support categories do not function as an interpersonal, but rather as an *intra*personal component, offering incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Blackamerican male converts a reason to change their life perspectives with a framework to do so. Instead of paying off their "debt to society," these men now do it for God and not man. The redemptive function operates in the same manner regardless of the phase. That is, whether during incarceration or reentry, the redemptive function is used to create a new life perspective. This new life perspective is possible as these men align their Muslim identity with their Muslim identification, positioning their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors accordingly. Finally, a brotherhood is created out of the Muslim network in prison—a type of Muslim *ummah*[14]. Brotherhood is a key tent of Islam that emphasizes solidarity, mutual support, and communal responsibility among Muslims. The brotherhood amplifier provides converts a faith community to seek spiritual guidance from as well as an opportunity to participate in faith-based activities in a communal setting, while the discipline amplifier structures the community's time and focus through religious studying, prayer, and fasting. Both amplifiers magnify the informational and

[14] The whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion.

emotional social support of the redemptive function, which largely operates through religious narratives—the focus of Chapter 2.

There is limited research on how formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts use religious narratives during incarceration and reentry. Religious narratives are critical tools used by many formerly incarcerated individuals during their reentry process, regardless of race or religious affiliation (Maruna 2001). They serve as powerful mechanisms for personal transformation, redefining identity, making sense of the past, and envisioning a different future. These narratives allow individuals to distance themselves from past identities and actions, fostering a transition from a former "wrong-doing self" to a current "law-abiding self" (Maruna 2001). In the context of Muslim converts, narratives can be shaped by core Islamic teachings of repentance, forgiveness, and redemption. The Qur'an (39:53) encourages individuals to repent sincerely for their mistakes and assures them of God's boundless mercy and forgiveness. Such tenets are often incorporated into their narratives of transformation, with an emphasis on repentance, divine forgiveness, and the possibility of a new, righteous path. Although religious and redemptive narratives are used to conceptualize a positive transformation conducive to reintegration, there is still another use of religion in prison.

UTILITARIAN FUNCTION

The second primary network function is the *utilitarian* function—the interpersonal component and collective level of the network identity. Many formerly incarcerated Blackamerican men explain how religion provides phase-dependent access to resources through instrumental social support, including behavioral or material help with practical tasks or challenges. Due to Islam's positionality within the prison social structure, the Muslim network primarily provides protection from violence although other utilities include religious specific

accommodations. (This is discussed in Chapter 3.) Like with the redemptive function, brotherhood operates as an amplifier. Brotherhood stands as a protective mechanism within the prison social structure and functions as a type of armor for prison violence, allowing for the reclamation of power against other groups, including prison authority. Relatedly, the intrinsic discipline of Islam amplifies the social positioning of incarcerated Blackamerican Muslims within the prison social structure by providing typically inaccessible opportunities resulting from protected religious accommodations.

The sense of belonging to a faith community can offer essential social support and practical resources during the reentry process (Braman 2007). In the reentry phase, the utilitarian network provides access to resource management via the brotherhood amplifier. As Muslim converts, they can gain access to the support of local Muslim communities, thereby leveraging a network of connections that might assist with practical reentry needs. It is through this brotherhood that recently released converts can navigate reentry to secure permanent housing and stable, legal employment (Visher and Travis 2003). Discipline structures this process by providing a template of best practices for success. This sense of community can also provide a form of social validation for their transformed identities, reinforcing their redemptive narratives. Both the redemptive and utilitarian functions of the religious network, along with their amplifiers, are critical to positive reentry outcomes.

MUSLIM NETWORK ENTRY POINT

The five functional pathway groups—*isolators*, *beneficiaries*, *maximizers*, *newly religious*, and *prislamists*—each have an entry point into the Muslim network upon their conversion to Islam. These entry points are either at the redemptive or utilitarian function. The redemptive function is accessed through an *identity* change while the utilitarian function is accessed through an

identification change. The latter is an external process while the former consists of internal work and can also include a change in identification. Either function can serve as the entry point to the network. For example, the redemptive function is the entry point for the *isolators,* the *beneficiaries,* and the *maximizers* while the utilitarian function is the entry point for the *newly religious* and the *prislamists.* Regardless of the entry point, once a Blackamerican Muslim convert enters the network, they have access to the advantages provided by both the redemptive and utilitarian functions. How they choose to use the network functions determines their functional pathway.

The entry point determines the motivation for conversion. For example, if an individual enters the Muslim network at the redemptive function, then his conversion motivation is rooted in a desire for religious or spiritual transformation. On the other hand, if the entry point into the Muslim network is the utilitarian function, then the Islamic conversion is a function of some worldly gain. However, it is important to note that the Muslim network entry point and Islamic conversion motivation is not indicative of how an individual uses the network. The entry into the Muslim network opens *access* to the network and both of its primary network functions. Once an individual enters the Muslim network, there are various paths they can follow. In other words, how individuals *use* the network depends on their functional pathway. For example, Figure 3, which maps out the functional pathways during incarceration and reentry, reveals that the *maximizers* enter the Muslim network at the redemptive function—indicating their motivation to convert—but now have access to both the redemptive *and* utilitarian function, which they use concurrently.

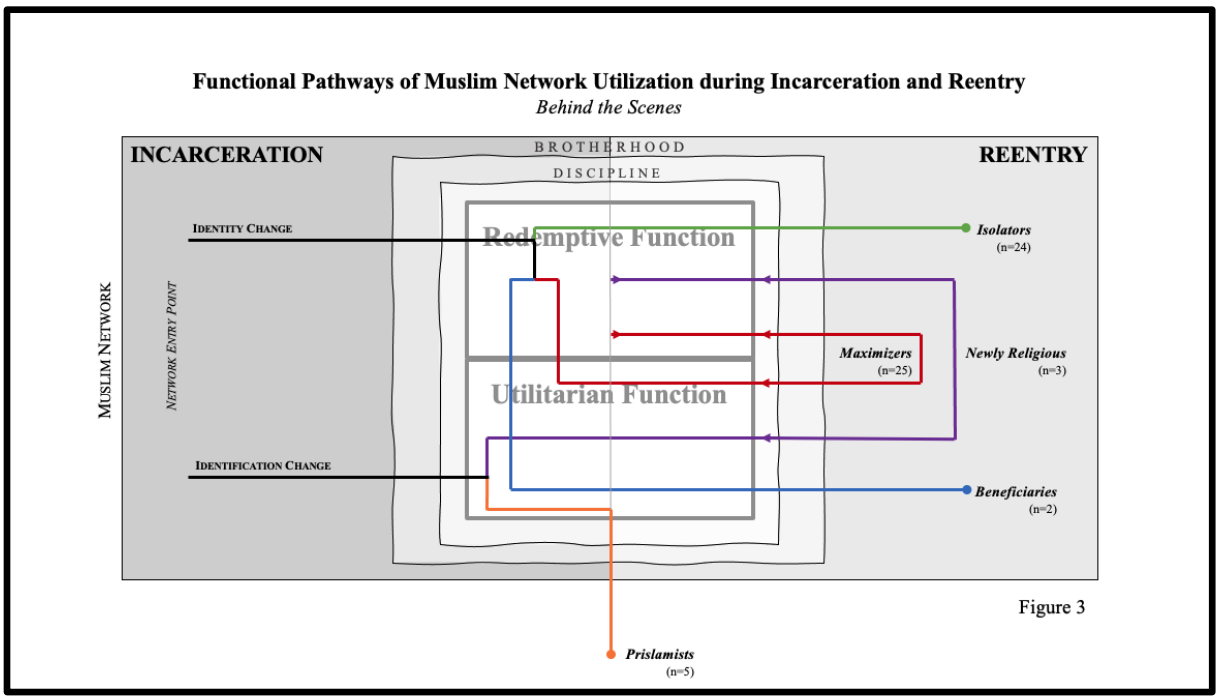

Figure 3

Just because an individual enters the network at a specific network function does not mean they only use that function. As the *maximizers* demonstrate, once in the network, individuals can use both the redemptive and utilitarian function. The reverse is also true. The *newly religious* enter the Muslim network at the utilitarian function but begin to use the redemptive function during reentry. These functional pathways will explain how incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts use their new religious network.

FUNCTIONAL PATHWAYS[15]

Findings indicate that formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts use their new religious network differently. The way these men navigate their incarceration and reentry

[15] Despite the small sample size for some functional pathways, understanding the various pathways used to navigate the Muslim network during incarceration and reentry is meaningful. Representativeness is not the purpose of this conceptual framework. The nuance of the pathways is about each as a holistically examined progression. Recognizing there are two notable ways Islam manifests in incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts' lives, backed by an exploration of existing scholarship—abstract (redemptive) and tangible (utilitarian)—is sufficient. When coding interviews, patterns and themes emerged, which were consolidated into pathways. Finally, I laid out particular incarceration and reentry measures (e.g., spiritual shifts and desire for change) and grouped individuals across both phases.

results in five distinct configurations, which I call functional pathways.[16] Despite all having access to the new religious network, each group navigates the primary network functions using a distinct pathway. Figure 3 maps out the functional pathways of the convert subsample.[17]

ISOLATORS[18]

The green arrows represent the *isolators*—the first functional pathway, consisting of 24 Blackamerican Muslim male converts, the most of the five functional pathways only after the *maximizers*, which consists of 25 men. These individuals enter the network via the redemptive function during incarceration—signaling their motivation to convert—and remain there throughout their incarceration and upon reentry. As their name implies, these individuals generally navigate the Muslim network in prison alone, secluded from other Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Although, they may occasionally engage in study groups or certain religious communal practices, such as the weekly *Jumu'ah* prayer, they often give up privileges like "yard" to reduce violent interactions. In both phases, the *isolators* do not often utilize network advantages, despite their access to them. Yet, these men do benefit from the brotherhood and discipline that amplifies the redemptive function.

BENEFICIARIES

The blue arrows represent the functional pathway with the fewest number of Blackamerican Muslim male converts—two men. Like the *isolators,* the *beneficiaries* enter the Muslim network at the redemptive function but eventually transition to the utilitarian function.

[16] I am not arguing the particulars of the conceptual framework I've created. Rather, I argue that this framework captures what is occurring at each of the critical and discrete phases—incarceration and reentry. The nuance of the pathways is about each one as a holistically examined progression.

[17] Table A in Appendix A provides the demographic characteristics of the convert subsample, including their functional pathways.

[18] Being an isolator does not mean one is not religious. Rather, it refers to how they navigate the network, in general, using only the redemptive function.

Upon reentry, they remain in the utilitarian function, utilizing resource management primarily for housing and employment security and never transition back to the redemptive function, often prioritizing their Muslim identification over their Muslim identity. As such, they stand to benefit from the Muslim network during reentry, explaining the meaning behind the pathway's name.

MAXIMIZERS

The red arrows represent the largest of the functional pathways—the *maximizers*, which consist of 25 converts. They are the third and final functional pathway to enter the Muslim network at the redemptive function. During their incarceration they also access the utilitarian function—often for protection from violence—and then oscillate between the redemptive and utilitarian functions. Upon reentry, they continue to take advantage of both network functions simultaneously. As their name implies, they maximize their use of their network access.

NEWLY RELIGIOUS

The purple arrows represent the functional pathway of the *newly religious*, which consist of three men. Unlike the previous three groups, these converts enter the network via the utilitarian function during incarceration, likely out of immediate necessity for protection from prison violence. As such, the impetus for their Islamic conversion designates it as a "conversion of utility." Like the *maximizers*, the *newly religious* use their access to both the redemptive and utilitarian functions upon reentry. Being among the *newly religious* does not necessarily mean that these men have higher levels of religiosity compared to the *isolators* and *maximizers*. Rather, the name refers to these men using the redemptive function during reentry *after* only using the utilitarian function during incarceration. As such, the *newly religious* enter the network through a change in *identification* but eventually undergo an *identity* change during reentry.

PRISLAMISTS

The orange arrows represent the functional pathway of the *prislamists*, which consist of five individuals. Like the *newly religious*, these individuals enter the network via the utilitarian function during incarceration, largely for the need for protection from prison violence, designating it a "conversion of utility." At no point during their incarceration or reentry do they interact with the redemptive function. Instead, once the need for protection dissipates upon reentry, they exit the network completely. As such, the *prislamists* enter the network as Muslim converts, but leave the network as non-Muslims. Four out of the five *prislamists* returned to their pre-incarceration Christian identification upon leaving the network during reentry, while one began to identify as a Buddhist. While the exact origin of the term "prislamists" is unknown, the name is a portmanteau phrase "prison Islam," which refers to a form of Islam in which individuals convert to Islam in prison but stop identifying as Muslim upon release. In recent years, this version of Islam has been described as a movement to prime terrorists (Hilton 2011). Los Angeles Police Department Deputy Chief Michael Downing told the United States House Homeland Security Committee that "prislam" was a threat and described it as an extremist "cut and paste" version of Islam practiced by incarcerated individuals (IPT News 2011). However, my findings do not support this theory.

Although the *isolators*, *beneficiaries*, and *maximizers* all enter the Muslim network at the redemptive function while the *newly religious* and *prislamists* enter at the utilitarian function, what marks the differences between each functional pathway that shares an entry point is how they use and subsequently navigate the network. This dissertation will highlight these differences. Through the analytical mapping of the functional pathways onto the Muslim network's primary network

functions during both incarceration and reentry, this dissertation examines how incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Blackamerican male converts access and use their new religious network.

PART 2

INCARCERATION

CHAPTER 2

THE REDEMPTIVE FUNCTION DURING INCARCERATION

> "The Qur'an says something that would touch their very soul. I learned how to do that because our people could be very, very rough and difficult to deal with. So, you can't talk to their minds. You have to enter that heart. With the help of Allah, you will enter their heart and you could talk to that soul. And that's why a lot of them became Muslim, from brother Safeer."
>
> — Safeer *[69 y/o, neither revert nor convert, unspecified Islamic sect]*

"It seemed to be a methodology and it will systematically put order into your life. That's what I really loved." As he shares his experience about his introduction to his faith, I can hear the excitement mixed with awe in his voice. "So that resonated with me because you have to do the five prayers. You got the same for the month of *Ramadan*[1]." I quickly try to do mental math to figure out how long it's been since his reversion because I am surprised to hear his wide-eyed enthusiasm. It's been 31 years since Tahir reverted. "Islam resonates, because it was just so fulfilling. Then I just seen what it was doing for me, too. And so that's pulling at me more. It's pulling…"As Tahir continues to passionately profess his love for Islam, I feel my thoughts drifting away.

As a Muslim-born, Arabic speaker, I was embarrassed to admit to myself I did not understand some of the Arabic words he beautifully wove together with English as if creating a new language. "…*an-nafs al-ammarah*[2], and now you're dealing with *an-nafs al-luwwamah*[3], and

[1] The ninth month of the Islamic calendar. It is considered the holiest month and is marked by a period of fasting, one of the Five Pillars of Islam.
[2] One of the three principal stages of self in Sufism, also mentioned in various verses in the Qur'an. In this stage, the self is primitive and incites people to commit evil.
[3] The second principal stage of self, also known as the self-accusing self. In this stage, the conscience is awakened and repents for listening to its ego.

so hopefully, you can get to that stage of *an-nafs al-mutma'innah*[4]." I quickly repeat "*an-nafs al-ammarah, an-nafs al-ammarah, an-nafs al-ammarah…*" as I transliterate the Arabic phrase into my Google search bar while doing my very best to stay focused on the conversation. Wikipedia gives me all the information I need for the moment. "*NAFS* IS AN ARABIC WORD OCCURRING IN THE QUR'AN, LITERALLY MEANING 'SELF.'" I feel my heart race as I realize Tahir is speaking on the very foundation of this project—identity—and I can't keep up. This is not something I expected.

"I wore it on my sleeve, being a Muslim." I believe him. "*AN-NAFS AL-AMMARAH* IS THE *NAFS* OF THE LOWER SELF, THE BASE INSTINCTS." I skim the bright white Wikipedia page and thank myself for the decision to record all interviews. 'I'll be coming back to this one,' I think.

There was a natural pause in the conversion. I took the opportunity to ask an unscripted, impromptu question. "Do you mind if I ask you where you learned to speak Arabic?" My voice hesitated as I realized my own implicit bias. All I could hear was silence on the other end of the phone. Seconds later, Tahir's voice reappeared. This time, it was more matter of fact. "The Prophet Muhammad, *sallallahu alayhi wa sallam*, said, 'You are not Arab by birth, but you're Arab by your tongue.' My nationality is Muslim."

*****

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE REDEMPTIVE FUNCTION

Identity is not static but ever evolving. Burke (2006) outlines three conditions under which identities change: (1) changes in a situation that make situational meanings incongruent with identity-relevant standard meanings; (2) conflicts between two (or more) identities activated in an individual; and (3) conflict between the meanings of people's behavior and the meanings in their

[4] The third principal stage of self where the self is at peace. This is the ideal stage of ego for Muslims. On this level, one relieves itself of all materialism and is firm in faith.

identity standard, that is, between who they are and what they do. I argue that Burke's (2006) first condition, followed by the third are two factors that lead to many religious conversions in prison.

In this chapter, I expand upon Burke's (2006) identity control theory (ICT) to demonstrate how an intrapersonal component of identity change leads to religious conversion by providing emotional and informational support. I begin with Burke's (2006) first condition, illustrated by incarcerated individuals' rejection of punitive narratives. Punitive narratives can trigger an incongruence between an incarcerated individuals' situational meaning (i.e., their incarceration) and their identity standard. For example, some individuals reject punitive narratives as they see themselves not as "criminals" but as people who did what they had to do to survive. The process of assessing the congruency between one's situational meaning and one's identity prompts self-reflection. Through this self-reflection, individuals attempt to reconcile their identity with their behavior: I am not a bad person, but I have done bad things—Burke's (2006) third condition. For some, reconciliation finds a home in religious narratives, especially ones that emphasize forgiveness and mercy, resulting in conversion. Within this framework, incarcerated individuals can now reconcile their identity with their behavior.

NARRATIVES OF THE INCARCERATED SELF

Narratives play a crucial role in constructing and maintaining personal identity. They extend beyond a simple recollection of past events and behaviors, requiring individuals to actively select and interpret these events to create a coherent self-story. Narratives attribute significance to past experiences, giving them meaning within the context of one's identity. The process of narrating one's story is dynamic, involving decision-making and a selective filter, which evolves over time to incorporate new experiences (Ellis 2020). Narratives serve both interpretive and constitutive functions, as they mediate the past and contribute to a sense of coherence in their

retelling. Personal narratives are shaped by integrating narratives derived from culture, institutions, organizations, and peers, creating a composite narrative that reflects one's identity.

While narratives shape human action, sociologists often perceive narratives as post hoc justifications for prior actions, rather than as catalysts for action. However, recent scholarship argues that narratives not only provide justifications for past actions but also motivate individuals to pursue a consistent course of future actions (Ellis 2020). Individuals strive to align their actions with the self-conceptions they have narrated, as narratives serve as frameworks for understanding how the world operates. Drawing on narratives, individuals make sense of their actions alongside other experiences, guiding their future behavior in areas such as violence and criminalized activities. However, the understanding of how narratives influence a wider range of behaviors related to deviance and punishment remains limited. This chapter describes how the religious narratives of formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts are rooted in redemption, motivating them to reinterpret carceral narratives and recreate a new incarcerated self.

PUNITIVE NARRATIVES

The late twentieth-century increase in incarceration rates, driven by economic and political interests, had a profound impact on narratives surrounding the incarcerated self. Contemporary prison narratives perpetuate the notion that incarcerated individuals are inherently flawed, blameworthy, and possess a pathological "criminal" identity that sets them apart from law-abiding citizens. These narratives downplay the role of structural disadvantages in crime and punishment (Ellis 2020). Several of the participants rejected these punitive narratives by explaining that being a "criminal" is not always about "choices" but about "survival." Deion admitted, "I didn't feel I did anything wrong because the law of the street is survival." Kareem, a 55-year-old revert, part

of the Nation of Islam, asserted that "people commit crime in America to eat." Dontrell, a 37-year-old revert explained the desperation that ultimately led to his incarceration:

> [I had] no foundation, no money, extreme poverty. That was the driving force to [the] crimes that I committed. It wasn't for me [but for] my older family members, my stepfather. Growing up, everything was just money-money-money-money-money, by any means necessary.

Damien, a 32-year-old Sunni convert, shared this perspective as he explained he had no choice but to engage in crime so he "did what [he] had to do." To him, choice is a valuable commodity; he hopes that his new lifestyle, post-incarceration, will give his daughter more choice so that she can have a better life than he did. A 57-year-old revert, Cornell explained that his entire existence revolved around obtaining necessary resources. "I gotta be able to provide. I gotta be able to take care of myself." However, after embracing Islam and having a "real knowledge" of it, he left his survival mindset behind.

These examples demonstrate two things. First, because some incarcerated individuals see their incarceration as a function of necessity and not choice, they reject punitive narratives as these narratives oppose their identity standard.[5] Second, because the process of assessing the congruency between one's situational meaning and one's identity prompts self-reflection, for some, Islam operates as a disruptor to the survival mentality by providing a non-material, spiritual *choice* that allows for congruency between their identity and behavior. Tahir's account reveals how Islam functions as a catalyst for self-reflection:

> [With] Islam, it's the [constant] self-checking. Once you reach a certain [mental] state, a Black man becomes conscious and moves away from the thuggery and [being a] womanizer and all these other backwards activities, unprincipled activities. No more drugs, no more smoking, no alcohol, no nothing. He becomes a clean, refined man.

[5] Even among the formerly incarcerated men who were unwavering in their commitment to their innocence routinely shared that although they may not have committed the crime they were convicted of, they have done "other bad things." Therefore, they, too, search for a reconciliation between their identity and behaviors amidst punitive narratives.

Tahir's self-reflection is illustrated by his constant "self-checking." Through this self-reflection, Tahir attempts to reconcile his behavior with his identity by becoming "conscious." Instead of a "thug" and "womanizer" he is now a "clean" and "refined" man. The following section will demonstrate how religious narratives provide an avenue for Tahir's reconciliation of his identity with his behavior.

RELIGION AS A COUNTER-NARRATIVE

For incarcerated individuals, religious narratives develop as a rejection of the punitive narratives assigned by public discourse, allowing individuals to reconcile their identity with their (new) behaviors post-conversion. Emerging research highlights the significance of religion as an institution connected to the criminal legal system, suggesting its potential implications for carceral narratives. Despite the contemporary separation of U.S. prisons from their religious origins, religion continues to hold a central role in the prison experience. The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 constitutionally mandated religious freedom for prisoners, resulting in faith-based programs becoming one of the few activities available to the entire incarcerated population. This shift occurred alongside a decline in funding for secular programs. In fact, existing research indicates that religious narratives can contribute to gang disengagement and criminal desistance among incarcerated men. My findings on formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim converts support this claim.

Religion holds relevance for punitive narratives due to its emphasis on forgiveness for past crimes. Research indicates that religious narratives generate feelings of moral worth and purpose among incarcerated individuals, providing a contrast to punitive state narratives that portray those incarcerated as pathologically deviant (Maruna et al. 2006). Religious narratives, often referred to as "redemption scripts," provide emotional support by offering a cognitive shift away from deviant

identities and reshaping perspectives on the meaning of past crimes. Furthermore, religious participation is accompanied by tangible behaviors such as prayer, fasting, and abstinence from alcohol and tobacco, such as in Tahir's case. These religious narratives facilitate prosocial community engagement and activism, integral to the process of demonstrating a transformed identity adhering to conventional social norms. Prior research suggests that religion operates as a counter-narrative to punitive prison narratives, influencing interpretive frameworks and demonstrating practical implications for prosocial future action (Ellis 2020).

When an incarcerated individual's identity standard is challenged, they often become more open to religious ideologies as their self-identity is put under pressure, tested, or put at risk (Ellis 2023; Maruna et al. 2006). Gillespie (1979:93) posits that the intense tension derived from "wishing you were one thing and knowing you were another" could find resolution in the religious conversion experience. This conversion process provides a distinct and socially endorsed route to escape this identity crisis. In the context of incarceration, religious conversion can be perceived as a survival tactic to navigate psychological turmoil and integrate a once disjointed self (Maruna et al. 2006). Religious conversion serves as a method of managing feelings of shame as well as a coping mechanism. The narrative crafts a new social identity to replace the stigmatizing labels of "prisoner," "inmate," or "criminal." It imbues the experience of being imprisoned with a sense of purpose and value, and empowers the mostly powerless incarcerated individual by transforming him into an instrument of God's will. Furthermore, it supplies him with a language and structure for forgiveness, and endows a sense of control over an unpredictable future (Ellis 2023; Maruna et al. 2006).

According to Smith and Watson (2016:70), the conversion narrative "develops through a linear pattern—descent into darkness, struggle, moment of crisis, conversion to new beliefs and

worldview, and consolidation of a new communal identity." Through his intrapersonal, spiritual reflection, Tahir reconciles his identity standard—"clean and refined"—with his behavior—"no more drugs, no more smoking, no alcohol, no nothing." Religious conversion involves the bifurcation of selfhood where the old, sinful, and unenlightened self is separated from the new, repentant, and enlightened self (Rolston 2011). As such, Tahir uses a religious narrative to create a congruency between his identity standard and his perception of that identity as a function of his behavior.

The Islamic Appeal. People who are strongly opposed to their sociocultural environment are more open to a religion opposed by the surrounding culture. The Christian church is often depicted as part of the problem—not the solution—to Blackamerican suffering. Muslims, whether Black Nationalist or mainline, accentuate the church's past complicity with slavery (Feddes 2008; Poston 2001). However, White churches are not the only ones faulted; Blackamerican churches, too, have deficiencies—perceived or real—that prompt some Blackamericans to search elsewhere. Some middle-class Blackamerican churches blame people's failure on individual behavior rather than on structural impediments and are seen as focusing too much on suffering and not enough on empowering. This repels those Blackamericans who still see a system designed to keep them down and view Christianity as part of that system (Feddes 2008).

Islam, however, has a special appeal to the oppressed and unprivileged. Blackamerican Muslims are drawn to Islam because they are operating from the position of a disenfranchised minority and oppose the terms that the majority sets up, designed to maintain the status quo. Part of the lure of Islam among Blackamericans includes being African or connected to Africa, being independent of Whites (unlike Judaism), having a new language—something they lost during slavery and made them more susceptible to becoming a new people—a reputation of resistance, a

glorious history of a "colored" people, a conservative social ethic, a commitment to retributive justice, no religious hierarchy, and a simple theology (i.e., *Tawhid*[6] versus the Trinity) (Jackson 2019). Darnell, a 52-year-old Sunni revert, described the moment when "everything clicked" for him. He had always struggled with the Christian concept of the Trinity, which was resolved by the "simple act of taking [Jesus] out of God. Taking [Jesus] away from Him made everything make sense to me. And that's when I became a Muslim." When he was first incarcerated, Jayce, a 66-year-old revert, "preach[ed] the gospel. He used to talk to other incarcerated individuals and inspire them with "the Spirit, the Holy Ghost, the blood of Jesus." After being convicted on a murder charge and sentenced to 36 years to life—his third time incarcerated—Jayce was sent to a Level 4, maximum security prison where he met a Muslim brother.

> Me and him used to have debates. Good debates, too. And in majority of them, I considered myself the winner, but as I look back on there, I was truly a loser. But he just had so much patience with me.

Finally convinced, Jayce attended a *Jumu'ah* prayer and began reading the Qur'an when he became disillusioned with the Trinity.

> How could Jesus be God? Just mathematically, it can't be divided. You can't divide three into one. Three can't be divided into one. You can't do that. Let's use common sense. Try to divide three into one without adding a zero. Just do it. You can't. You have to add a zero. You have to add a zero and then it's gonna be fragmented. It can't be. God is not fragmented. The reason why He can't have a son is because there's no way you can grab God and put him up on a cross and He yells: 'Oh God, oh God. You've forsaken me.' What would God do forsaking himself? It's ludicrous for you to think like that. So eventually, I took my *shahada.*

The view of Islam is not limited to a belief system with theological notions. Rather, the connection between many converts and Islam is evident in their conception of the faith with eighteen converts describing Islam as a "way of life" and tool to navigate one's life. Darnell shares:

> I consider Islam to not be a religion. Though, technically it would fall into that definition, but I consider it absolutely to be a way of life, and it's a way of life that I have adopted, that I live, that I embrace fully, there can be no separation between me and this way of life

[6] Islam's central and single most important concept, which declares the indivisible oneness of God.

> because I can't see myself functional without it. I don't understand the world without it. I don't know where I could be, where my place would be without it.

A case study of incarcerated Muslims, the majority of which were Blackamerican, in the Ohio state prisons found that a large proportion (69%) of those in the sample converted to Islam while incarcerated (Ammar et al. 2004). Mufti (2001) suggests that the egalitarianism of Islam is especially attractive to incarcerated individuals because of its simplicity, comprehensiveness, and emphasis on justice and mercy, as well as the brotherhood of its community. Islam helps to redefine the conditions of incarceration and is seen as a vehicle for spiritual liberation amidst physical incarceration. Islam provides Blackamericans with a moral framework from which to rebuild one's life (Spalek and El-Hassan 2007). Islamic identity means a fresh start, often symbolized by the choice of a new name (see the Introduction), modifications in physical appearance, and an emphasis on prayer. Adhering to the five daily prayers helps to structure an incarcerated individual's day, keeping him mentally and physically active, which in turn assists with completing the prison sentence (Ammar et al. 2004; Spalek and El-Hassan 2007; Thomas and Zaitzow 2006). Islam reduces an individual's return to crime and imprisonment because it provides incarcerated Blackamerican men a reason to change their lives and provides a framework to do so.

FUNCTIONAL PATHWAYS OF THE REDEMPTIVE FUNCTION DURING INCARCERATION

While the knowledge gap concerning the role of religion among incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslims is narrowing, less is known about the ways in which these Blackamerican Muslim converts, for example, use redemption narratives to navigate their new religious network. Religion as a counter-narrative was abundantly evident among my sample of formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts. Throughout my conversations, these men articulated their conversion as a turning point in their lives, highlighting the critical role faith played in positively transforming their mindset. Throughout the interviews, a variety of themes

emerged. These themes emphasized the ways in which the participants related to Islam and subsequently led them to change various aspects of their lives, particularly relating to their mindsets and followed by their behaviors.

The previous sections demonstrated how, from an intrapersonal perspective, when the situational meaning is incongruent with the identity standard and subsequent behavior, the individual engages in self-reflection often situated within a religious narrative, leading to conversion, which reconciles one's identity and behaviors. I call this entire process the redemptive function of the Muslim network during incarceration. The following sections will illustrate how three functional pathway groups—*isolators*, *beneficiaries*, and *maximizers*—use the Muslim network via the redemptive function during incarceration.

MUSLIM NETWORK ENTRY POINT

As discussed in the Introduction, I argue that the alignment of identity and identification (or lack thereof) indicates the motivation for the conversion, impacting how individuals enter and subsequently use their new religious network. The *isolators*, *beneficiaries*, and *maximizers* all enter the Muslim network at the redemptive function, where incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim converts' identity and identification are aligned, indicating their conversion motive—to make amends through a new life perspective. Darnell*(isolator)* illustrates how his conversion aligned his identity and identification: "There's no separation between who I am and how I move about the world in my faith. There's no separation between that. I have a belief. My belief comes from Allah."

All three groups have individuals whose desire to connect to their racial and ethnic roots is a point of magnetism to Islam. For some converts, Islamic conversion is credited for providing an "identity" and "nationality" rooted in Blackness. Similarly, Jelani's*(isolator)* conversion brought up

discussions about Man and God being one, where the Black Man is divine. He explains this as one of his major attractions to Islam. Like many other Blackamerican Muslim converts who converted to Islam during incarceration, Justin's*(beneficiary)* resonance with Islam is rooted in his identity exploration as a Blackamerican.

> Islam kinda resonated with my knowledge of Black history about where we were in Africa, and we got kidnapped and we were brought over to the shores of American to become slaves of a people that were savages that wanted only to use our labor for their benefit. The humanity of it was off the board. So, when I researched and found out that it was true and found out that during the course of slavery and the process of slave history taught me that Christianity wasn't my religion when I was in Africa. That was introduced to me when I go over to the shores of America. So that's what interested me to the point that I start studying [Islam.]

Justin noted that his first introduction to Islam was rooted in Black nationalism, and after he conducted further research, he "embraced [Islam] totally." Like the *isolators* and *beneficiaries,* the theme of searching for an unknown identity is also present among the *maximizers*. For example, Deion's*(maximizer)* deep dive into Islam originated with a Bible verse that referenced slavery, leading him to question Christianity as an institution. "It wasn't until I started reading the Qur'an that the Qur'an just made sense. It was rational and appealed to my intellect because I didn't see any of that White supremacy in the Qur'an that I saw in the Bible.

> Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one of you for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours in heave, and there is no favoritism with him. [Ephesians 6:5-9]

"That's not a revelation. That's something that White supremacy inserted." For a Blackamerican man, and an incarcerated one at that, this discussion of slave and slave master did not sit well Deion, propelling him into searching for other religious texts that aligned with his experience as an incarcerated Blackamerican man.

For many, Islam is seen as providing meaning to individuals' sense of stolen identity, especially as it relates to their ethnic history and origins. In fact, many participants who entered the Muslim network at the redemptive function shared that Islam offered an opportunity to "know oneself." Rooting Islam as an identity marker is especially significant for Blackamerican men. Often, they have no direct sense of their lineage or family origins and struggle to claim a sense of belonging to a society that has an explicit history of discrimination—slavery and segregation—along with present-day stratification and inequality—with nothing being more personal to them than the disproportionate conviction and sentencing of Blackamerican men within the prison industrial complex.[7] For example, Cornell*(isolator)* demonstrates how present-day discrimination results in a lack of rootedness among Blackamericans and how Islam filled this void by "saving [his] life:

> I grew up in south-central LA. I have friends that had got killed in different things and streets and just things like that. So, [I was] just reckless about being an African American in America. The discriminatory practices, knowing what my family, what my mother, father, the things they went through. 'Cause they're from the south, the discrimination, racial bias, things like that.

The theme of Islam as a transformative power was abundant, often leading to perspective shifts that not only aligned converts' identity with their identification, but also reconciled their identity and behavior.

[7] According to the *Race and Wrongful Convictions in the United States 2022* by the National Registry of Exonerations, Blackamericans are seven-and-a-half times more likely to be wrongfully convicted of murder in the U.S. than are Whites, and are about 80% more likely to be innocent than others convicted of murder (Gross et al. 2022). These numbers remain stable across all major crime categories except for white collar crime (Equal Justice Initiative 2022). Racial disparities are even worse for sexual assault crimes, where Blackamericans are eight times more likely to be wrongfully convicted than a White person for a crime involving sexual violence. Racial disparities are most extreme in cases involving drug crimes. Blackamericans are 19 times more likely to be wrongfully convicted of a drug crime than White people (Equal Justice Initiative 2022). While much of academic literature and public discourse on disproportionate conviction rates focus on wrongful convictions, it is equally important to note that, regardless of innocence, Blackamerican males receive sentences, on average, 20.4% longer than similarly situated White males. While it is critical to identify narratives that continue to perpetuate the image of Blackamerican as "guilty," it equally critical to reject the notion that "guilt" warrants the dehumanizing treatment that is prison.

NEW LIFE PERSPECTIVE

Most *isolators* and *maximizers* viewed their religious conversion as a catalyst for positive change. For Jerome*(isolator)*, his Islamic conversion—the alignment of his identity and identification as a Muslim—transformed his life. Now, he understands that he was "put on this earth for a reason." This sentiment reveals the transformation of his self-concept, leading to a perspective shift where his current, purposeful self is juxtaposed against a self that was aimless and lost. Similarly, Cornell*(isolator)* describes that perspective change that accompanied his conversion:

> [I] definitely changed because before [my conversion], I didn't have no purpose. I don't have no understanding of life. [I was] basically reckless, self-hate and different things like that. Once I [found] Islam, it saved my life. Because I had an understanding, and I had a purpose. Before that, I really wasn't concerned whether I lived or died.

Now, Cornell identifies his purpose as "[serving] Allah." For him, finding redemption in Islam led to a new life perspective where his previous, self-sabotaging self was replaced with purpose and spiritual conviction. Demetrius*(isolator)* seconded this: "I changed a lot because of my religion while I was incarcerated. My religion made me think. It made me a [purposeful] thinker. I think consciously. But my religion helped me change more. It matured more than anything [else]." Roscoe*(maximizer)*, shares how his experience finding Islam completely altered not only the way he viewed himself but also his sense of purpose, which ultimately allowed him to make peace with his wrongful conviction:

> The more I went to [the prison mosque], the more I wanted [to go]. I started to pray and just believe in Allah. And during that time, all the stress that I had of being innocently locked up, and all the worries, and all the loss of hope and all the anger, everything just started to dissipate. And I started to feel better. I started to feel good about myself waking up, even though I was in prison. It was like Islam took over me so much that I felt free in prison. I was just so happy to wake up and be able to praise Allah. I just turned into a totally different person. People would ask me, 'Why you smile so much inside the prison?' and 'I want some of what you got.' And so, Islam had penetrated me, penetrated my whole being. I got to the point where I just lived to wake up to worship Allah and to do the right things and to be the best person that I can be that day. I had lost track of trying to really complain about 'I'm innocent' and 'Help me get out.' I just put it in Allah's hands. And right now, eight years later, I still love Allah like I loved Allah then. I'm trying to love him more. And

> Islam has really changed my life. It's just like my heart and my mind is just connected to Allah. And even though I spent all them years in prison, I think when I accepted Islam—since that day, I have felt so energized and motivated just to be a good person and try to change other people's lives. When Allah finally opened my mind to the danger that I was to myself and to humanity, I started to really feel remorse and really started to care about my life and about others.

Roscoe's testimony is remarkable: "It was like Islam took over me so much that I felt free in prison." The significance of that quote cannot be overstated. Islam transformed Roscoe's mindset to the extent that he can accept his wrongful imprisonment with a *life* sentence *and* is able to center himself in his faith where he has the capacity to and capability of feeling free despite being "handcuffed and shackled down," unable to know if he would ever truly be free again.

These transformative experiences accompanied lifestyle changes. In its simplest conception, the redemptive function offers a new life perspective that "reforms" individuals. Justin*(beneficiary)* believes that Islam is what "got [him] out of prison" because it "reformed [him]." Through his Islamic reversion, he "became a strong believer that we are accountable for our deeds and actions and that we are responsible for the decisions we make." Jordan*(isolator)* and Damien*(isolator)* see their improved mindset and mentality as an example of how finding Islam in prison changed them. Jordan is now "more easy, more at peace, more understanding, and more patient," while Damien no longer "think[s] impulsively" and is "more at peace, calm, positive, and goal oriented." He explicitly attributes this change to Islam: "I really needed to get my head right and change my life and [Islam] is a major part of it. [Islam] made me change my whole perspective." Cornell*(isolator)* shares in this perspective shift: "Worship to Allah kind of put everything in perspective for me." These examples illustrate how Islamic conversion often leads to a perspective shift where individuals can transform their lives and reconcile their identity with their behavior. Jerome's*(isolator)* new perspective came in the form of shifting his desire to do "wrong" versus "right." Before, Jerome would pray because that's what he thought you were supposed to do, but did not have belief behind the prayer. Now, he has intention in his prayer.

"Now, I'm praying for a reason, and I know Allah hears me. I'm having conversations with God. I don't want to do nothing but the right thing. I don't want to do anything wrong anymore." Alonzo's*(isolator)* brief yet powerful account captures these sentiments: "I was on a path of destruction. I didn't care. I was angry. Islam [gave me calm]. It gave me perspective. Islam reforms the Black man. It makes one clean." Finally, Kalvin*(isolator)* views his reversion as an act of raising one's consciousness and making a vow to improve his life by "accepting a higher plane of existence."

With these new life perspectives and subsequent lifestyle changes, many men were inspired by the Islamic value of forgiveness, which they attempted to emulate. For example, Jelani*(isolator)* was attracted to Islam because of this value. Despite his difficult upbringing which included multiple stints in juvenile detention as well as two adult prison terms, he decided to let go of any animosity he had with anyone, highlighting his ability to forgive and grant mercy to those who have wronged him. Similarly, Safeer*(isolator)* shared how forgiveness prompted him to forgive the two men who "snitched" on him, leading him to serve 27 years of a 53-year prison sentence.

> Every time I would go to classification, they would tell me, 'Oh, I see you have two enemies.' That's the two snitches. I [tell them], 'No sir, I don't have any enemies…I might be their enemies, but they're not my enemy, sir.' Allah changed my heart.

Safeer's upbringing as well as incarceration caused him to develop a disdain for authority; however, his efforts to embody Islamic values allowed him to let go of that disdain, even developing the ability to find blessings in his incarceration:

> I didn't keep [the disdain]…Islam allowed me to let it go. Let Allah deal with my enemies…my conversion was for the benefit of my own soul. Prison was a blessing in disguise for me. I don't regret going to prison. It helped me become who I am now to this day.

Safeer was not the only convert who successfully changed their relationship to his incarceration. In fact, several men spoke about how Islam allowed them to accept their incarceration. This acceptance allowed them to successfully cope and navigate their time in prison, which included

changing previous behaviors to prevent "catching cases" that extended their incarceration. For instance, Islam provided Damien*(isolator)* an opportunity to release things outside of his control, allowing him to accept his present reality:

> They say things happen for a reason—something led me here. I had to sit down and face reality about being in prison, and it put [me] on to Islam. I feel my problems [are] going to be handled one way or another. If I can't [control something] I have to let them things go. Give it to the Lord and gotta keep pushing. Give the Lord your problems [and] you just control what you can handle. Anything past that, let it be. If it was meant to be, it'll be. If it's not. Let it go. [I told myself], 'Man, it's going to get better. Just believe. Put it in Allah's hands and what is meant to happen is going to happen.'

While Damien spoke to accepting God's will, Kalvin*(isolator)* described how the basic Islamic tenets helped him navigate his time in prison:

> Just by practicing the fundamental principles of practice—praying, fasting, charity—actively fighting the demons and dragons within my own mind, based on the five fundamental principles of belief, that's what helped me navigate and that was my guidance through that cold, impersonal world.

Demetrius*(isolator)* shared how Islam helped him cope with his prison sentence:

> It was easy because I just constantly had something to do mentally. I had to worship God. I had to find out the right way to worship God and not do this for anybody but for myself. I did it with ease. I did it all in the name of God. So, because I did it in the name of God, it was easy for me.

Deion*(maximizer)* used Islam as a tool to help improve himself with the goal of getting out, and staying out, of prison:

> I committed myself to learning as much about [Islam] while I was in prison, so that when I got outta prison, I would be able to stay out. And it was through my commitment this *deen*[8], and this way of life—see, Islam is a way of life, and you cannot practice Islam without changing. If your *nia*[9] is pure and you want to be better—in my case, I wanted to be better. I wanted to be a matter man when I got outta prison than I was when I went to prison. So, through practicing Islam, it made me better.

Jayce*(maximizer)* explained how he believed Islam was his best chance out of prison:

> I'm living in a place that is dealing with brutality. And I'm just simply trying to find a place where I can have some humility, without killing anybody. You know, without somebody always trying to kill me. I'm tired of seeing brothers get killed. I'm tired of

[8] The Arabic word for religion, although it often refers to worship in a comprehensive sense that includes all aspects of human life.

[9] The Arabic word for intention. Intention is highly valued in Islam as it is believed to be the foundation of every deed, upon which individuals will be judged by God.

> being in prison. I'm just trying to get out of prison now. And I believe this is my best way of getting out of prison.

The ability to accept, navigate, and cope with incarceration was instrumental in providing mental space for these men to start anew. As such, several other men described their conversion experience as a rebirth in which Islam saved them from themselves. Before Islam, Cornell*(isolator)* did not have a purpose. He did not value his own life. "[Islam] saved my life because I [now] had an understanding and I had a purpose. Before that, I really wasn't concerned whether I lived or died. Islam saved my life." Darnell*(isolator)* shared this view: "Islam saved me from me," while Kalvin*(isolator)* shared that he had been "reborn" because of Islam. This rebirth led Kalvin on a path of "perpetual improvement," "growth," and "development." Demetrius'*(isolator)* account demonstrates the extent to which Islam fully consumed his life in prison:

> Religion helped me survive in prison. My religion became my life in prison. That was really a major factor in my life. I lived in the *deen*. I read the *deen*. I talked the *deen*. I drank the *deen*. The religion, religion, religion.

For many, this rebirth was the first step on the path toward lifestyle changes driven by a new perspective on life. Kabir's*(maximizer)* account captures the intensity of such transformations:

> I consider myself a brother that experienced an internal revolution. My background comes from the urban ghetto where there's a very negative subculture and those values are deep-rooted in those of us that grew up in that neighborhood. It's not something that can be purged or that can be relinquished overnight. It takes years to get that stuff out of you. So, I consider myself to be a brother that has not only experienced this internal revolution but have broken the chains of psychological slavery.

Kabir attributes his "complete transformation or metamorphosis" to his reversion to Islam. The process that aligns identity and identification and reconciling identity with behavior is common among all three functional pathways who enter the Muslim network at the redemptive function. Similarly, there is much overlap in their introductions to Islam, which operate through brotherhood as a functional amplifier.

BROTHERHOOD AS A FUNCTIONAL AMPLIFIER

For a comprehensive understanding of the redemptive function during incarceration, it is important to understand how these men came to find Islam in the first place. Often, incarcerated Blackamerican men are introduced to Islam by another Muslim—a prime example of informational support provided by the redemptive function. This finding stresses brotherhood as a functional amplifier—intensifying the communality of Islamic conversion—which operates in the same manner for all three functional pathways. For example, Safeer*(isolator)*, Kareem*(beneficiary)*, and Kabir*(maximizer)* were all introduced to Islam by another incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim. Safeer*(isolator)* shared the story of his introduction to Islam by another Blackamerican Muslim:

> I had to come in here and try to get adjusted to prison. I had to figure out how to even go to the yard. Eventually, I did. I went to the yard and that's when I met this brother. He started teaching *Zuhr*[10]. Every time he saw me, he taught me. I didn't understand what he was doing. Just every day, I would look at this brother, you know, Rodney X, every day I'll go look for Rodney X and he'll find me. I'll sit there like a student, and he would teach me, he would teach me, he would teach me. It's all about study, study, study, study. And I had this young brother with me on my team telling me what to read, what not to read. I don't ask why I can't read that. I didn't ask that. I just follow his example. I'm 31 years old man, and this man's 21 years old. I'm impressed with his knowledge. 'How the heck?' And he's got life. I mean, he don't have no date, but either way though, I took my *shahada.*

Safeer was not only a student, but eventually a teacher.

> My conversion to Islam was beautiful. I can tell you that. I met a lot of beautiful brothers, more knowledgeable than me. I had to get to that point. I was a student for many years, but after I became a *sheikh*[11], I was quite knowledgeable. I taught brothers the tenets of Islam. As I say—since we speaking frankly, I have brought a lot of niggas from being niggas to Muslims. I understand how to do that.

Jerome*(maximizer)* and Jabreel's*(maximizer)* first contact with Islam came as a result of being invited to the prison's mosque by another incarcerated Muslim. Dontrell*(isolator)* came to Islam through his Muslim cellmate. Together, they began attending *Jumu'ah*, a common entry point into the Muslim network. Darnell*(isolator)* was introduced to Islam by two other Muslims in prison.

[10] The second of the five daily, mandatory Islamic prayers that takes place around noon.
[11] An honorific title often reserved for senior Muslim leaders.

> I was very curious, so I was asking all these questions about the differences between this individual from the [Nation of Islam] and this individual who was a Sunni Muslim, and I was intrigued by all the differences. My exposure to Islam was through the conflicting and competing ideologies of Sunni Muslims as opposed to the [Nation of Islam].

Brotherhood is such a powerful amplifier that it even extends past incarcerated individuals as Cornell*(isolator)* and Deion*(maximizer)* were introduced to Islam by *imams* who gave them their first Qur'an to read. In fact, sharing Islamic resources (e.g., Qur'ans, books, pamphlets, etc.) was a quite common occurrence among the participants. These sharing of informational resources often led to informal study groups where incarcerated Muslims would gather to learn from one another. Alonzo*(isolator)* remembers the importance of these study groups in the early days of path to conversion. He recalls one fellow incarcerated Muslim telling him what to read and what not to read. Their relationship was so strong that they are still in contact years after both were released. Finally, brotherhood amplifies the redemptive function in these ways during incarceration, but has less impact during reentry. Jelani*(isolator)* shares, "There's always opportunity to practice [in prison]. Whether it was amongst my [Muslim] brother—if I had a [Muslim] brother in my dorm—or going over to the [mosque] or even just self-study and self-reflection." Jerome*(maximizer)* echoes this. Since his release, he longs for the same type of brotherhood he experienced in prison: "When I was incarcerated, it was probably 25 of us and it felt more powerful. At home if [my wife] is not up for studying right now, then I got to do it by myself."

While their introductory experiences to Islam are primarily driven by the brotherhood amplifier, differences do emerge among the three functional pathways. For example, the *isolators* spend much of their days alone, opting out of privileges like "yard," where incarcerated individuals often spend time exercising, playing basketball, or socializing. However, this type of gathering carries some risk as disputes and assaults can erupt at any moment. To prevent engaging in these ordeals, *isolators* tend to isolate themselves in their cells, spending their days alone while

increasing their knowledge of Islam. Marcel*(isolator)* shared, "I'm one of them guys that [is] a loner. I don't hang with anybody. I stay by myself pretty much. I did study and stay with it by myself." Damien*(isolator)* "stayed to [himself] all the time," and Jerome*(isolator)* made a conscious decision to only spent time around his "cellie" since prison is a violently unpredictable environment. Like Jerome, Walter*(isolator)* actively prevented the volatility of prison by isolating himself:

> Today it could be alright, [but] tomorrow it could be chaos. You're in the cell with someone that you hardly know of, if you know them at all, and you don't know the mental aspect of this individual who is taking up some of the space. And he might decide that he wants to take his aggression or his anxiety or his animosity out on you. So, all of this goes with having the strength of mind, the strength of body, mind, and soul to go through what they take you through and survive.

Demetrius*(isolator)* breaks down this logic among the *isolators*:

> Sometimes we were close being I need [the other incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim men] to be part of the *ummah*, but there were often times I knew I didn't need them because I had Allah. It was like walking by myself, the beat of my own heart. It was just between me and God.

While their interaction with other incarcerated individuals is minimal, especially compared to the *maximizers*, the *isolators* will occasionally join study groups with other incarcerated Blackamerican Muslims. Their participation in communal religious activities, such as the weekly *Jumu'ah* prayer, is often the extent of their involvement.

On the other hand, the *maximizers* are greatly involved in many aspects of Islamic life in prison and thrive off the brotherhood and community aspects. Unlike the *isolators*, the *maximizers* spend much of their time around other incarcerated Blackamerican Muslims. In addition to the study groups and *Jumu'ah* prayers that the *isolators* attend, the *maximizers* are often the ones organizing the activities and taking leadership roles, like Tahir, who was asked several times to deliver the *khutba* at *Jumu'ah* prayer. In the redemptive function during incarceration, the *beneficiaries* operate in a similar manner as the *maximizers*. Their differences become apparent

during the reentry phase, discussed in chapters 4 and 5. Many of these similarities and differences between the *isolators* and *maximizers* also occur with the second functional amplifier—discipline.

DISCIPLINE AS A FUNCTIONAL AMPLIFIER

One of the ways Islam aided in the creation of a new life perspective was through lessons on discipline—the second functional amplifier. Through their dedication to Islam, these men were then able to implement their new life perspectives. For example, Demetrius*(isolator)* shared that religion was a big part of his life in prison, guiding him through 25 years in prison. "It was my discipline," while Safeer*(isolator)* asserted that he is in "control" of who he is because he is "under God's guidance" and therefore must "continue and still be an example for other people to follow." Other men explicitly tied their practice of Islam, and its inherent discipline, to the process of generating a new life perspective and subsequent behaviors. Cornell*(isolator)* shared that through the discipline of Islam, such as through fasting, he learned to control his anger and emotions, resulting in less altercations with other incarcerated men and prison staff. Adhering to the tenets of Islam was a common theme among the three functional pathways. Jayce*(maximizer)* described how the rules and requirements of the faith structured and regulated his life during incarceration:

> I definitely had regulation. Now I can't fornicate. Now I can't commit no adultery. Now I can't go commit no robbery. I can't drink. I can't eat no pork. I gotta pray on time. I gotta pray five times, find a way at work or at my two jobs to pray. I gotta pray to God. I gotta make the *Hajj*[12]. I don't fail to fulfill that. I gotta fulfill all those [five] pillars of Islam. I have to do that. Why? 'Cause there are regulations on my way of life. They regulate my life.

Similarly, Bryson*(maximizer)* was able to come to terms with hurting others by vowing to make a change by "follow[ing] the tenets of Islam."

> I had to come to an understanding and conclusion that, all of the time that I did [in prison], what I did was for selfish reasons. It was for me trying to do something that I wanted to do for me. And so, what I did was I rededicated my time to doing for others, my family—number one—the people that I hurt—number two—and then the people that were in my immediate environment. How does that translate? How do you help them? So, what I do

[12] The Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of the faith, that must be carried out at least once in an individual's lifetime by all adult Muslims who are physically and financially capable of undertaking the journey.

> is, I do what's right. I follow the tenets of Islam. I practice it. I don't gamble. I don't drink. I don't do anything that's going to get me caught up.

These examples demonstrate how the discipline is rooted within the foundation of Islam, providing these men an opportunity to seek redemption for past mistakes and structure for an improved future.

For Da'vion*(maximizer)*, the strong sense of purpose and direction is what led him to gravitate toward the Muslims and ultimately led to his conversion:

> I had to get out of that mindset, stop dealing with them people that's thinking about coming back, that's always talking about whatever my [parole officer] say, 'I'm not going. When I get out, I'm doing this and that.' I had to get away from all the people. That's why I gravitated toward the Muslim brothers because they had their heads on right.

Here, discipline can be seen as an underlying factor in the transformation of mindset mentioned by Da'vion. He acknowledges his need to distance himself from individuals with negative mindsets or worse. By gravitating toward the Muslims, Da'vion demonstrates a desire for discipline and structure in his life. He continues: "Prayer is what helps me because it's also kind of like a form of meditation, but me addressing and understanding what triggers me." Alonzo*(isolator)* recalls a similar discipline: "Study, study, just study. That was my therapy in prison. That was my peace of mind." He explains that the discipline required to practice Islam was a contributing factor in ending his cocaine and alcohol use. Referring to himself as an "ex-extremist," Alonzo relied on his faith and made a pact with God that if he were to get out of prison, he would never do drugs again.

Like the brotherhood amplifier, the three functional pathways primarily differ in how they use this discipline. For example, among the *isolators*, Islam seems to occupy the space that idle time in prison once took up since "idle time is the devil's time." Time was often used as a commodity to learn and practice Islam: "there's always an opportunity to practice," Jelani*(isolator)* noted. In fact, Rashaad*(isolator)* admitted it was easier to practice Islam in prison because the

"controlled environment" was conducive to the discipline Islam requires. He continued, "it was easy for most people to stick to their prayers. You don't have the everyday rigors of society that do distract you from your obligations."

While discipline amplified the *isolators'* solitude, it simultaneously amplified the *maximizers*' public-facing nature. Deion*(maximizer)* used discipline as a training tool to help him climb the Islamic leadership ranks in prison.

> It was that kind of discipline I was groomed under and it ended up taking me far, far, far, far, in this *deen* in prison because I rose from not knowing how to pray—I rose from going to *Jumu'ah*, not knowing how to pray, to reading [Islam], to going to *Jumu'ah* where *imam* Saadiq gave me the Qur'an and Qur'anic reader, to teaching the prayer class for *imam* Saleh, to being in charge of the [*Eid*[13]] banquets for *imam* Talal and *imam* Faisal, to doing *Jumu'ah* services for *imam* Faisal.

Deion's participation in religious affairs also extended to his official role in prison:

> They put me in charge when we got the *halal* meats in prison. They put me in charge of the *halal* meats to make sure that each facility—'cause we have three different facilities at Davenbrook. Davenbrook Central is the largest facility, then Davenbrook North and then Davenbrook South. So, I had to distribute the *halal* meats to each facility, and then for Central, I had to cook the *halal* meats.

Bryson*(maximizer)* shared that he was not a passive believer, but rather someone who often had the honor and privilege of leading the prayer, a role he took seriously. Similarly, the *beneficiaries*, like Kareem, assumed a similar public-facing mentality while holding other incarcerated Muslims accountable:

> You have to discipline each other. You have hardcore prisoners who are looking at you and that some of them eventually embrace Islam because they see the level of commitment and checks and balances.

Examining the redemptive function's entry point to the Muslim network as well as the brotherhood and discipline amplifiers, demonstrates how the first three functional pathways—*isolators*, *beneficiaries*, and *maximizers* all operate in a similar manner with slight differences surrounding

[13] Two official holidays celebrated within Islam. One marks the end of *Ramadan* while the other honors the willingness of Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his son Ismail (Ishmael) as an act of obedience to God's command.

their level of interaction with other incarcerated individuals. The next chapter will introduce the last two functional pathways—*newly religious* and *prislamists*—and discuss how the functional pathways interact with the second primary network function, the utilitarian function. Here, we begin to see greater variation among the functional pathways' navigation of the Muslim network.

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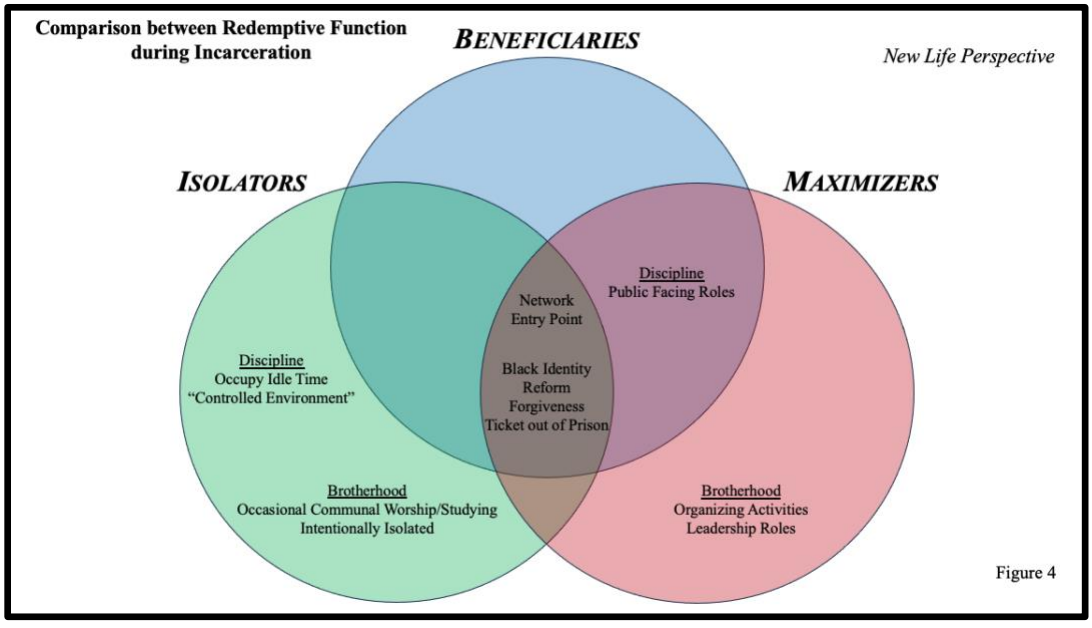
SUMMARY

This chapter discusses the theoretical foundations of the redemptive function, specifically focusing on the role of identity change and religious conversion in prison. I expand upon Burke's (2006) identity control theory and emphasize two conditions that lead to religious conversion in prison. These conditions include changes in situational meanings that conflict with identity-relevant standard meanings and conflicts between individuals' identities and the meanings of their behavior. Narratives are significant in constructing personal identity. Narratives go beyond recollection of past events and play a role in actively selecting and interpreting experiences within the context of one's identity and contribute to a sense of coherence. Punitive narratives perpetuate the belief that incarcerated individuals are inherently flawed and possess a criminal identity. Some incarcerated individuals reject these punitive narratives, viewing their criminal actions as a matter of survival rather than choice. Religion presents a counter-narrative to punitive narratives, allowing incarcerated individuals to reconcile their identity with their new behaviors post-conversion. The incongruence between the situational meaning (i.e., incarceration) and the identity standard prompts self-reflection, and for some, religious narratives, particularly those emphasizing forgiveness and mercy, provide a framework for reconciliation between identity and behavior. Furthermore, religious narratives offer emotional support, reshape perspectives on past crimes, and promote prosocial community engagement. Religious conversion is perceived as a coping strategy

to reconcile psychological discord, handle feelings of disgrace, and establish a sense of command over what lies ahead.

Incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim converts use redemptive narratives to navigate their new religious network and transform their lives. Three functional pathways—*isolators*, *beneficiaries*, and *maximizers*—enter the Muslim network seeking redemption and aligning their identities with their newfound faith. The transformative experiences and lifestyle changes resulting from their conversions lead to new perspectives on life and behavior. Islam helps them accept their incarceration, cope with their circumstances, and find forgiveness, ultimately providing a path toward personal growth and a sense of purpose. The participants view their conversions as a rebirth, with Islam playing a central role in their lives and guiding their actions. Figure 4 compares the functional pathways' use of the redemptive function during incarceration.



The redemptive function sheds light on the role of brotherhood as a functional amplifier. Brotherhood plays a crucial role in introducing incarcerated individuals to Islam, fostering a sense of community, and facilitating the formation of study groups and informal learning opportunities.

By sharing resources and providing informational support, incarcerated Muslims amplify the redemptive function in prison. The *isolators* prioritize self-study and isolation to navigate the prison environment and avoid potential conflicts, while the *maximizers* actively engage in communal religious activities, taking leadership roles and organizing events within the Muslim community. The findings underscore the significance of brotherhood as a means of support and community building for incarcerated Blackamerican Muslims. Brotherhood provides a sense of belonging, amplifies the transformative power of Islam, and offers a supportive network for individuals navigating the challenges of incarceration.

Similarly, discipline emerges as a significant functional amplifier. Through their dedication to Islam, Blackamerican Muslim converts can cultivate discipline and implement it in various aspects of their lives. Religion serves as a guiding force during incarceration, providing structure, regulations, and a sense of purpose. The participants recognize the transformative power of disincline, attributing it to their ability to control their behaviors, emotions, and actions. By adhering to the tenets of Islam, such as prayer, fasting, and abstaining from prohibited activities, they develop a new perspective on life and strive to make positive changes. Discipline becomes an integral part of their daily routines, regulating their choices and guiding them toward redemption and self-improvement. The *isolators*, *beneficiaries*, and *maximizers* demonstrate different approaches to utilizing discipline. The *isolators* see Islam as occupying the space previously filled by idle time in prison, utilizing the controlled environment to focus on practicing their faith. The *maximizers*, on the other hand, embrace a more public-facing nature, utilizing discipline to assume leadership roles within the Muslim community and actively engage in religious activities. Discipline is an important underlying factor in the transformative process experienced by incarcerated Blackamerican Muslims. It facilitates their navigation of the

challenges of prison life, instills a sense of self-control, and allows them to break free from negative habits and behaviors. Discipline, rooted in Islam, provides these individuals with a framework for personal growth and facilitates their journey toward redemption.

CHAPTER 3

THE UTILITARIAN FUNCTION DURING INCARCERATION

"I had seen more death in prison than I ever did on the street."
— Payne *[63 y/o, former Muslim convert]*

"I refrain from using violence unless there was an emergency condition that required it. Sorry—I'm getting off track." Tahir described how he navigated prison. Suddenly, I could hear the self-consciousness in his voice. "No, no, please continue. This is all very helpful." I, too, was conscious of how I was being perceived. I did not want Tahir to think I viewed him with judgement. I did not. I wanted to understand his experience. "I was careful because when I first went to prison, I had a cardinal rule that I had set for myself. Actually, there were three cardinal rules." Tahir paused as if to give me time to prepare for what he was about to share. "One of them was to never put all your trust in nobody. That was the first one." Although he could not see me, I found myself nodding in agreement. "The second one was don't borrow nothing on yo—I'm gonna spell out my thought pattern, but forgive me if it sounds kind of crude." "It's ok," I softly replied. "Please speak freely." Something in my voice, or possibly my choice to use the word "free," seemed to put Tahir at ease as he began to speak for the next several minutes straight. "Don't borrow nothing. Don't borrow nothing on your ass, okay? And the third one was, don't join no prison gangs or prison organizations. Now, I lived by those rules for the whole 36 years I was in prison."

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THE UTILITY OF THE MUSLIM NETWORK IN PRISON

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how the intrapersonal component of the network can spark a religious conversion. While the Muslim network has a redemptive function that

benefits its members, there is also a utilitarian function of the network—the second primary network function—that can provide benefits to its members. In fact, some incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim men convert to Islam solely for the utility the network can provide (i.e., a change in identification but not identity) resulting in a "conversion of utility." In this chapter, I demonstrate how the interpersonal component of the Muslim network—the collective level—provides benefits through instrumental support for its members. With a Muslim identification, incarcerated individuals have access to the primary network functions. Unlike the redemptive function, which necessitates a change in identity, a Muslim identification is enough to gain access to the Muslim network's utility. During incarceration, the utilitarian function of the Muslim network is the network's position within the social structure that offers protection from violence and access to opportunities—a function of protected religious accommodations—that would be otherwise unavailable. Protection from violence is amplified by the brotherhood aspect of the network while access to typically inaccessible opportunities is amplified by the intrinsic discipline of the religion.

VIOLENCE IN THE PRISON SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Violence is the informal organizing structure of prisons in the U.S. where incarcerated individuals, often with their own histories of victimization and trauma, are frequently exposed to its dangers. Violence can include stabbings, beatings, broken bones, and attacks with makeshift weapons, and can result in death. One participant referred to prison as "gladiator school." Another described it as an "excruciating" place where you must "watch your back when you're sleeping, and you have to sleep with one eye open." A third explained the extreme danger: one facility experienced so many murders in the dayroom that all common areas were shut down. Data

compiled by the Prison Policy Initiative with data from Wolff, Jing, and Siegel (2009) found that 35% of men are exposed to direct violence in prison.

> When we tell you there's a war going on inside the penitentiary, it's going on, or as they say, it's going down. And you have two courses. You can either be a non-participant and lock yourself up, which later on you're going to get the consequences and brunt of that, or you can be a participant and get your just due or give your just due and come out either scarred, or unscarred on the end. The brutality that comes from the uniform side, shit it's unfathomable. It's something that you don't really want to experience. I mean, really. I don't think you can [imagine], to be honest. You have never, from a woman's perspective or a man's perspective experienced the type of abuse, verbal and physical, that goes on behind those walls. And then you can't do nothing about it. You can't call nobody on the outside and they can actually lobby for you and make your situation better. No, it works totally in the opposite—you call for help and the only thing you going to get is more abuse. This ain't no joking matter, man. You fighting for your life on a daily basis. People talking about you, talking behind your back, they're taking things from you and making you one of two ways—you can stand up for your right or you can fall by the wayside and become somebody's well, putting it bluntly, you could become somebody's bitch up in these places.

Although violence is inescapable, incarcerated individuals often feel safer in their private spaces, such as cells, or in supervised and structured public spaces, such as a prayer room, rather than in public spaces like showers. Still, even inside their cells, individuals remain vulnerable to witnessing violence or being victimized themselves (Widra 2020). Safeer's emotionally filled account of his introduction to incarceration depicted prison as both physically and psychologically violent.

> It got to a point where I didn't care who believed what I did. I didn't care because I'm in prison. And I gotta survive 53 years. I gotta survive. I gotta figure out how to survive for 53 years. I don't know if you ever seen a picture of Hollander State Prison or not, but if you see it, it would have a psychological effect on the individual that's about to go in there. And as a prisoner on that bus, shackled, like I'm shackled, slavery. I mean, it all came to my mind, and I knew that I was never coming out of that place because you are about to put me in there with real criminals, real rapists, real killers, real everything. And that's not me. When [I] got to prison, Hollander, this old peckerwood, he said, 'The only way you're gonna leave here is in a pine box,' because most people in Hollander had serious time to do. So, my whole thing entering Hollander was do or die. I have to set it straight as to who I am. I'm a man and I'll fight, and you have to kill me. 'Cause you know, a lot of stuff on in prison. Of course, you know that. So, when I went inside, I had to get adjusted. It was not easy. Trust me. It was not easy to see folks. And I was all messed up, but I couldn't show any fear. That's the whole point. Do not show or sense any fear, just be calm and let them know you for no nonsense. And that's what it was all about when I went inside Hollander. I had 53 years to do. I'm bitter, angry, distressed, deranged, you name it.

The dynamics of navigating such an environment are often referred to as "politicking." Once you enter prison, there is no escaping prison politics. As Jayce describes: "In prison, [you

must] do certain things, go certain places due to the politics [of prison].” Individuals must abide by the unwritten rules that vary by race and ethnicity, geography, etc., which create and maintain prison social structure. Cornell describes the prison environment by equating it to the jungle:

> It's a violent environment. And volatile. It could explode at any minute. When you’re in the jungle, you live by the rules of the jungle mentality. So [prison] has its own faulty rules and regulations that they go by.

The culture of prisons fosters an environment that leads to various kinds of conflict. For instance, the prison social structure generates competition for scarce resources (Edgar and Martin 2002). Yet, most conflicts are not about material goods, such as tobacco or drugs. Rather, non-material interests, such as respect, fairness, loyalty, or honor influence many situations that lead to violence.

To safeguard oneself against prison violence, incarcerated individuals often align with a group, as Safeer articulates: [When] you’re in the joint, you gotta be into something. You gotta find your place, your niche.” Race and ethnicity, religious identity, and gang membership are key factors that sort incarcerated individuals into social groups (Haynie et al. 2018). For instance, racial conflict is a significant factor where a dipropionate number of incidents involve individuals for different racial or ethnic groups (Edgar and Martin 2002). Tahir described the racial confines of prison.

> There’s all types of people in prison. A makeup of all types. There’s a few Latinos, but their politics are so deep. You have the northern Mexicans, the southern Mexicans, the Mexican nationals. There’s Whites, too. You got to deal with the Skinheads, the Aryan Brotherhood. It’s some serious stuff in there. And it’s concentrated. All the lines of demarcation are drawn. Real talk. You can’t miss them. You gotta always be ever so vigilant.

Walter described an incident where a racial riot broke out and he did what was necessary to survive.

> You have your racial riot. I’ve been through the racial riot issues where one faction is upset [at] another faction because of an issue that you’re only hearing about a couple of days before and you have no involvement in, but you have to [participate] in order to survive. I had to carry a knife to make sure that my wellbeing was safe and protected. But it is a norm that some of these things occur that you can only, at the point of impact, justify why you did what you did.

Deion describes the dangerous chaos of one racial riot during “war time”:

> Blacks and the Mexican mafia were at war with each other, and it was a real tense situation. It was like war time from the time you step out your cell in the morning, you don't know if you're gonna make it back to your cell or not because Mexicans were stabbing brothers and we're stabbing Mexicans and people were dying every day. Police were shooting people. A melee would break out and the man on the gun tier would shoot and end up killing somebody.

Similarly, Deron shared a story where a racial riot broke out, killing three prison guards. "I'm looking around like, 'What the hell happened here?' And all them guys that was in the jail with me that had done wrong thought this was an opportunity for those [incarcerated individuals] to get them." These examples depict the volatile nature of environments where violence is a common occurrence, making protection a valuable commodity. In this context, the position of Muslims within the prison social structure, who are known for their "militancy," offer their members protection from violence, a utility of the network.

FUNCTIONAL PATHWAYS OF THE UTILITARIAN FUNCTION DURING INCARCERATION

The utilitarian function of the Muslim network in prison is the interpersonal component of the network. This second primary network function is used by all the functional pathways, except for the *isolators*. During incarceration, the *isolators* enter and remain at the redemptive function. However, the remaining four functional pathways do not all use the utilitarian function in the same manner. Rather, these four functional pathways are divided into two groups. The first group is the *newly religious* and *prislamists* who use the utilitarian function as the network's entry point. The second is the *beneficiaries* and the *maximizers* who eventually transition to the utilitarian and continue to use both the redemptive and utilitarian functions simultaneously.

Due to Islam's positionality within the prison social structure, the Muslim network primarily provides protection from violence although other utilities include religious specific accommodations. Like with the redemptive function, brotherhood operates as an amplifier, allowing for the reclamation of power against other groups and racialized discriminators. Moving and associating as a group projects a particular image of self-discipline, elevating the

Blackamerican Muslim image within the prison social structure. This then allows the brotherhood amplifier to stand as a protective mechanism within the prison social structure and functions as a type of armor for prison violence. The following sections will demonstrate how the *newly religious* and *prislamists* along with the *beneficiaries* and *maximizers* navigate the Muslim network at the utilitarian function and what benefits it provides during incarceration.

MUSLIM NETWORK ENTRY POINT

While religious conversion is primarily associated with changes in personal and social identity, it does not always lead to a change in the self-concept. Rather, some religious conversion is based on a change in identification but not identity. As discussed in the Introduction, identification is an external process of adopting specific attributes of a particular identity. In the context of religious conversion, identification involves aligning oneself with a specific religious group, which can provide opportunities for communal engagement and interaction. Because identity and identification are not aligned in these cases, the motivations to convert, entry point into the new religious network, and subsequent uses of the network differ from the redemptive function.

In contrast to the redemptive function, the utilitarian function is the interpersonal component of the network at the collective level. This primary network function is the entry point for two functional pathways—*newly religious* and *prislamists*—and indicates the motivation to convert. Because the utilitarian function is primarily interested in the utility of the network, during incarceration, when individuals convert to Islam at the utilitarian function, they do so by only changing their identification but not identity. In other words, these individuals begin identifying as Muslim to gain access to the network's benefits at this function (i.e., protection from prison

violence) but do not engage in any transformative experiences during incarceration as seen with the redemptive function.

Adopting an Islamic identity in prison provides an alternative to involvement in prison gangs (Maruna et al. 2006; Spalek and El-Hassan 2007; Thomas and Zaitzow 2006). Some incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts enter the Muslim network through religious conversion solely for the benefits the Muslim network can provide, such as protection from prison violence. For example, Nadeem*(newly religious)* was a former gang leader in and out of prison who created many enemies due to his "strict" policies. After his third stint in prison, he realized he needed to "change affiliations" due to the unceasing conflict he continued to face from a rival gang. To escape the dangers that became increasingly violent, Nadeem decided to convert to Islam. He later became a sergeant for the Muslims' security and then a captain. Relatedly, Assad*(prislamist)* described the intense fear he experienced because of the relentless prison violence:

> You [are] taunted and disrespected by the different staff members [and] other inmates for anything. You [see] a lot of violence, people being robbed. I was afraid of being sexually assaulted because a lot of people were.

He described the respect Muslims receive in prison because of their "militant" nature. Similarly, Payne*(prislamist)* described seeing more death in prison than he did during his "life in the streets" and Curtis'*(prislamist)* assessment of the racial violence in prison led him to develop an "alliance" with the Muslims through converting to protect himself against these threats. In prison, when the *newly religious* and *prislamists* convert to Islam for its utilitarian benefits, their entry into the network is amplified by the Blackamerican Muslim brotherhood, which also includes the *beneficiaries* and *maximizers*.

BROTHERHOOD AS A FUNCTIONAL AMPLIFIER

Unlike Islam's marginalized status in the greater U.S. social fabric (Ali 2018; Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009; Jamal and Naber 2008; Maghbouleh 2017; Peek 2010; Selod 2018), Islam is

not necessarily a marginalized identity in prison. Blackamerican Muslims in prison are portrayed as a formidable force with a strong sense of unity and unwavering commitment to one another. Levell*(maximizer)* touched on this brotherhood as he explained: "In prison, when you get to the prison yard, the Muslim give you a care package. You got everything in there. Your soups, your cosmetics, your toothpaste, stamps with some envelopes." Deron*(newly religious)* explained that the solidarity of the Blackamerican Muslim network in prison is not happenstance, but rather a calculated effort: "Prior to my coming to [prison], there may have been some brothers scattered around. But when I came there, I brought the brothers in a more cohesive group." Emphasizing the solidarity Muslims provide for their community, Antwone*(maximizer)* explained that the community has a reputation where touching one Muslim is seen as a threat to all. "Muslims are now usually the strongest on any yard. We are up there, the strongest force on any yard and our unity is uncompromisable. You touch one Muslim; you touch us all." He continued to describe the "unity" of Blackamerican Muslims in prison:

> A lot of my friends were Muslims, and they were going to war, and I watched the unity. You could see the unity amongst them and how they wouldn't let their brother go ahead and be punished no matter what.

Jayce*(maximizer)* reiterated this point as he described the extent that Blackamerican Muslims in prison will band together as a unified group for their collective benefit: "All these guys stood in front of me and was ready and willing to sacrifice their lives or fight for me because they knew those people were wrong." These examples highlight the loyalty and commitment the incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim network has for one another.

Because of the protection it can afford, a Muslim identification can serve to reduce an incarcerated individual's risk from victimization. In fact, Marcel*(isolator)* explains that some men convert to Islam because they "used it as a protection thing," but were not "really into it. They treated it like a gang." Levell*(maximizer)* supported this claim: "Some guys come in here for

protection. Some guys get in the community for protection." For example, since race is a major organizing unit in prison, Curtis decided to convert to Islam because he realized he needed to develop an alliance with other incarcerated Blackamerican men: "When you're in prison, you gotta roll with your race, and a lot of Blacks in [prison] were Muslim." Curtis'*(prislamist)* need for protection from prison violence based on racial groupings led him toward Islam due to its racial makeup. Thus, his conversion (i.e., his Muslim identification) was rooted in the network's utility—protection.

Other incarcerated individuals may use their Muslim identification as a way of managing how others perceive them due to the status and privileges it provides. Kareem*(beneficiary)* describes a benefit of being Muslim in prison: "Muslims have the most respect on the yard, period. Guards respect us, wardens respect us. They might not like us, but they respect us. And you get some of the most hardcore gangster prisoners that become Muslims." Nadeem*(newly religious)* offered further evidence of the respect Muslims garner among prison authority: "Muslims are looked at different because they can't come and grab a Muslim and throw him in solitary confinement because of his association with Muslims." Safeer*(isolator)* shared how he was dealt with respect by the correctional officers because he was Muslim:

> My honor, you couldn't touch it. My trust, my loyalty, you couldn't touch it. COs respected me, counselors respected me, knew who I as. They didn't always search my cell because I would always tell a lot of them, 'The only thing you're gonna find in there, search something to save your soul.' They honored that, respected that. I remember one time an officer came by and said, 'Never mind that cell. Just pass it up.' That's my cell though. See, because I was well respected and honored in there.

In prison, a Muslim identification garners not only protection from violence but also respect, both from other incarcerated individuals as well as those with power and authority over their lives. Although protection from prison violence is the primary actor that strengthens the Blackamerican Muslim position within the prison social structure, the fundamental discipline of Islam leads to

greater access to rare or restricted opportunities as a function of protected religious accommodations.

DISCIPLINE AS A FUNCTIONAL AMPLIFIER

The intrinsic discipline of Islamic practice amplifies another utility the network can provide—access to opportunities, via religious accommodations, that would be otherwise unavailable. Islam was not accepted as a legitimate religion in prison until the landmark cases *Cooper v. Pate* in 1964, *Cruz v. Beto* in 1972, and *O'Lone v. Estate of Shabazz* in 1987 when incarcerated Muslims won the right to practice their religion freely (Ammar et al. 2004). This led to the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) of 1993 that protects "religious exercise" (U.S. Department of Justice 2018). The success of the RFRA elevated Islam's position within the prison social structure since it provided certain freedoms that other prison group memberships, like gangs, could not. The history of Muslim litigation that aimed to establish Islam and expand the law's presence in prison regarding religious practice, elevated their social position within the prison social structure.

Muslims contributed to developments within the civil rights movement in the mid-twentieth century, resulting in profound improvements in prison conditions. In the early 1960s, few prisons recognized Muslims as followers of a legitimate religion (SpearIt 2022). Courts began to hear claims by state prisoner-petitioners to establish Islam in prison, which began an on-going campaign for civil rights—a significant feat considering their small percentage in the U.S. population. SpearIt (2022) contends that the Muslim impact on prison law and culture is an underappreciated phenomenon that involves Blackamerican Muslims. These efforts helped create new rules and policies that expanded the law's presence in prison, where Muslims emerged as devoted upholders of the rule of law. Tahir explains that Muslims in prison are known to be "legal

beagles," and when anyone wants to know the answer to "the hard questions, they come to the Muslims." In fact, three participants were pro per[1] in cases on religious practice and expression in prison. Darnell*(isolator)* spoke of a pro per case that was "populated with 20 or 30 Muslims." These lawsuits also unveiled a role-reversal between the guards and the incarcerated since prison staff and administration must now be accountable for violating institutional rules. SpearIt (2022) writes:

> Some of the cases surrounding Muslim litigation go as far as to demonstrate a role reversal between the guards and the guarded. There, the criminal emerges not simply to expand prison rights, but also to compel prison staff to follow the law. In this role, the individual sheds the criminal designation and becomes a variety of legal proponents: sometimes jailhouse lawyer, sometimes a petitioner in a case or class action, or sometimes as a voice to ensure others in prison are treated justly. One the opposite side of this role, prison staff indulge the role of lawbreaker, knowingly violating rules and trampling on the rights of others. Muslims perform the regulatory function of watching the watcher and going to great lengths to hold prisons accountable.

The outcomes of this litigation did not merely provide access to religious accommodations for Muslims, which often forced changes in the normative prison operations, but also helped elevate the power status of Muslims in relation to prison authority. Dix-Richardson and Close (2002) have credited these legal battles as the catalyst for creating recognized diversity among the incarcerated, changing the structure of the prison system.

With the passage of the RFRA of 1993, the federal government is prohibited from "substantially burdening any aspect of religious observance or practice," including incarcerated people (U.S. Department of Justice 2018). This development granted incarcerated Muslims more freedom to engage in their disciplined practice and adherence to a set of principles and practices. Over the next decades, these freedoms often included access to *halal* food, special feeding schedules during *Ramadan* to suit the fasting hours, access to community rooms for *Eid* celebrations, as well as access to a Muslim chaplain. I argue that some of these newfound freedoms

[1] An abbreviation of the Latin phrase, "in propria persona," meaning "in their own person." It refers to a situation where a litigant represents themselves without a lawyer.

offered benefits for a Muslim identification, such as mobility and resources. For example, incarcerated individuals who declare their adherence to the Ramadan fast (whether they actually fast or not) are considered to be Muslim, according to the official definition used by the prison system (Ammar et al. 2004). Thus, some incarcerated individuals convert with the sole purpose of using a Muslim identification to their advantage. Asaad*(prislamist)* shared some ways he benefited from a Muslim identification:

> The brothers could go out and mix a lot if they needed to make a prayer. [They] allow you to go to the library or allow you to have materials sent in. I found many numerous ways to use the spirituality or religion in prison.

Darnell shared this sentiment as he described individuals who would use "Muslim services" as an opportunity to get out of their cells. "[They] just go because [they] were locked up, 23 hours a day." Even Deion*(maximizer)* admitted that he was first introduced to Islam because he began to attend Islamic services to get out of his cell:

> Initially, I started going to Islamic services. It was just a way to get out of the cell. When I first went to prison, we would spend pretty much—put it like this. At three o'clock in the afternoon, the day was over. We were locked in our cells. We had dinner at 2:30 and we were locked in our cell by three o'clock. There was no more movement from three o'clock until the next morning at breakfast time at five o'clock. So, between five o'clock AM and three o'clock PM that's when any movement was done. And I wasn't working in prison at the time. Prison was so overcrowded. There weren't any jobs. So, in order to get out of the cell, I would go to the Seventh Day Adventist services. I'd go to Christian services. I'd go to Jehovah Witness services, and I'd go to Muslim services—to *Jumu'ah* prayer. And so, at that time, I was just listening.

Deion's statement reveals that, through the RFRA, religious practice is protected in prison. As such, he used several religious services to escape his cell. Additionally, he shared how he used a similar tactic to take advantage of working in the *halal* kitchen in prison:

> Each part of the kitchen is a different department. I had access because I worked alone in the halal [department]. I didn't have nobody working with me. I could go to any area of the kitchen and say, 'Man, I gotta taste the oatmeal cookies.' They open up the cage and give [me] a bag of oatmeal cookies. Or I could say, 'I wanna make some tuna melts today.' They give me the tuna, the cheese, the onions, whatever I need so I can eat while I'm at work. When I get off work and I go back to the building, I take my shower, I go in my cell. I'm done for the day.

Access to food, and a particular type of food like kosher or *halal* meat, was seen as a difficult luxury to acquire. Lamonte*(maximizer)* explained that Muslims were given an "RMA"[2] diet, although he questioned the authenticity of the alleged *halal* meats. "The best diet you can get is the kosher meal and the kosher meal means they serve you *halal* meat, but they make it extremely difficult for anybody that is not Jewish to get on the kosher meal." Lamonte's example describes the maneuvers incarcerated individuals will make to access religious protected accommodations. Roscoe*(maximizer)* provides another example of how the Muslims are granted specific accommodations in accordance with Islamic tenets, such as fasting.

> Okay, all right. I'ma be honest. When in prison, the Muslims, during the month of *Ramadan* in most prisons, Muslims, they get the chow hall to their selves. They kinda sometime get different foods to eat. When people donate it to 'em [as opposed] to everyone else, they get like—depending on what prison it is, they let 'em get dates and stuff like that. And so, I knew that during the month of *Ramadan*, the Muslims were gonna be treated differently than everybody else for eating food and stuff like that. Or just not having to rush in the chow hall to eat their food. They give 'em time, longer time than the natural man. So, it was just like little amenities like that that I'm like, 'Oh, yeah, I wanna do it.' [Laughs]

These examples are significant because individuals who assume a Muslim identification can access these protected Muslim accommodations, making Islam more appealing and conversion more prevalent.

While both the brotherhood and discipline amplifiers work to strengthen and elevate the Blackamerican Muslim position within the prison social structure, the stresses involved limit all five functional pathways' capacity to tap into redemptive themes. The following chapter discusses the significant role of religion and redemption narratives during reentry. The embrace of narratives emphasizing redemption often corresponds with societal tales of change and recovery, simplifying the reintegration process by satisfying societal hopes for reform and rehabilitation. The adoption of these redemptive stories may act as an indicator of an individual's spiritual metamorphosis.

[2] Religious Meat Alternative (RMA) programs provide a vegetarian meal at breakfast and lunch and a certified *halal* meat at dinner.

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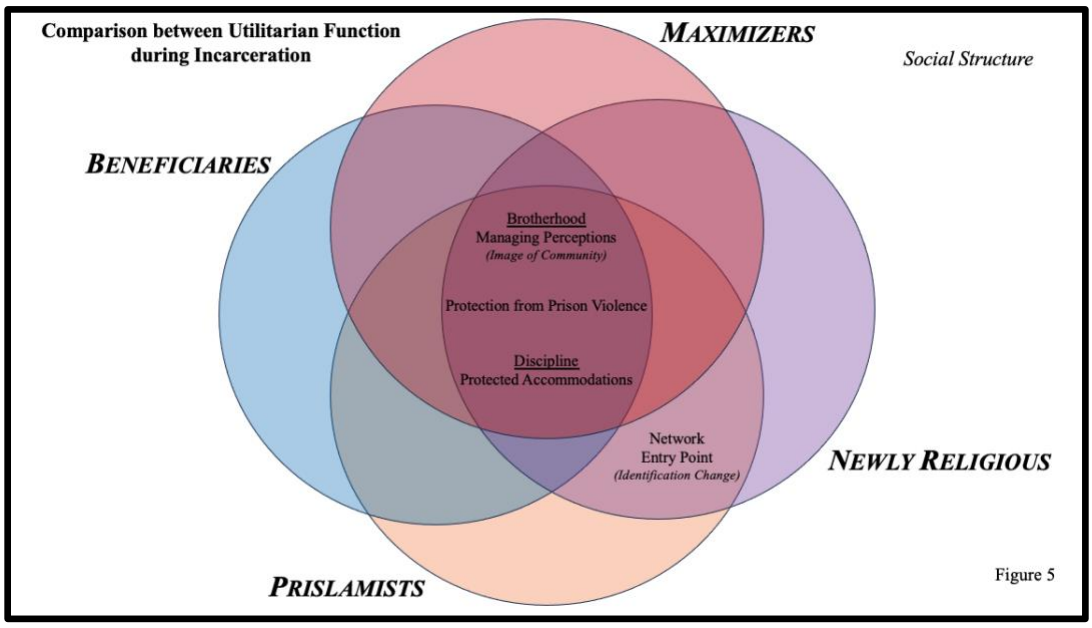
SUMMARY

The utilitarian function of the Muslim network, which does not require a full religious conversion (i.e., an identity change) but merely an identification as Muslim, provides protection from violence and access to opportunities within the prison structure. Violence is pervasive within U.S. prisons and operates as an informal organizing structure. Unwritten rules based on factors such as race, ethnicity, and geographic origin shape the social structure. Conflict can arise due to the scarcity of resources and values like respect, fairness, and honor. To safeguard themselves from violence, individuals often align with a group, with race, ethnicity, religious identity, and gang memberships being key factors. In this context, identifying as a Muslim can offer protection from violence and access to opportunities, making the Muslim network a valuable resource in the volatile prison environment.

The Muslim network in prisons serves a utilitarian function, providing interpersonal support and protection for its members. This function is critical to all but one of the functional pathways: the *isolators* who focus solely on the redemptive function of the network. In fact, some incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim converts—like the *newly religious* and *prislamists* who enter the network at the utilitarian function—convert to Islam solely for its utility. That is, these men undergo an *identification* change without an *identity* change. However, the *beneficiaries* and *maximizers* use both the redemptive and utilitarian function concurrently. Figure 5 provides a comparison of these four functional pathways.



In prison, Blackamerican Muslims hold a strong, united, and influential status rather than the marginalized one they experience in broader U.S. society. Muslim identity in prison carries benefits like protection and mutual aid, with instances of other incarcerated individuals converting for these advantages. Incarcerated Blackamerican Muslims emphasize the solidarity and protection they offer to their members. Some incarcerated Blackamerican individuals convert to Islam to reduce their risk of victimization, treating the community as a form of protection akin to a gang. Since racial groupings are significant in prison settings, some Blackamerican men convert to Islam to form an alliance with other incarcerated Blackamerican Muslims, largely for protection from racially motivated violence. Being a Muslim in prison also affects how others perceive them, bestowing a level of respect from both fellow incarcerated individuals and prison authorities.

Adherence to the strict discipline of Islam can grant greater access to scarce or restricted opportunities due to religious accommodations. The disciplined practice of Islam within prisons offers access to opportunities through religious accommodations otherwise unavailable to incarcerated individuals. The recognition of Islam as a legitimate religion in prison due to several

landmark cases and the passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 provides certain freedoms that other prison group memberships cannot. Muslim contributions within the civil rights movement, resulting in improved prison conditions, helped create new policies that expanded the law's presence in prison, elevating the social positions of Muslims within the prison structure. These legal rights and accommodations not only protect the religious practices of incarcerated Muslims but also contribute to the elevated power status of Muslims in relation to prison authority, affording them mobility and resources. Thus, the brotherhood and discipline amplifiers strengthen and elevate the Blackamerican Muslim position within the prison social structure.

PART 3

REENTRY

CHAPTER 4

THE REDEMPTIVE FUNCTION DURING REENTRY

> "The majority of my life—I just got to doing 23 years—has been associated with incarceration and affiliation with law enforcement agencies until I changed my way of thinking, by the grace of God."
>
> — Justin *[68 y/o, revert, unspecified Islamic sect]*

Roscoe's interview was among the most impactful. When he was 18, Roscoe began to get into serious trouble. He had a gambling problem that set him into a cycle of crime and debt. He was eventually arrested for selling drugs but let go after a short stint in jail. At 23, however, he was arrested for a crime he spent 29 years in prison for. A crime he did not commit.

"Because I was innocent, I always thought the prison gates one day would just open for me and they would let me go." After being interrogated by the police, Roscoe, now 61, remembers the last time he could still sense his freedom before the Level 4 prison deadbolts reminded him that he was now the property of the state of California: "This is the last time you gonna see the streets in a long time. They'll be flyin' spaceships by the time you get outta prison."

Roscoe and his younger brother were both tried for first degree murder. "They ended up finding us guilty and giving me 25 to life and giving him 25 to life." Roscoe was incarcerated at a notoriously dangerous California maximum security prison. He recalls spending many days on the yard lifting weights with "a bad attitude" waiting for justice to reveal itself. "Each time I would go to the board, I'd tell them, 'I didn't do this crime.' I didn't want to go in there saying I did it when I didn't." Roscoe's lawyers encouraged him to plead guilty to lessen his sentence: "Look, if you say you didn't do it, they're going to max you out." It had been a decade since he was first incarcerated. Still, Roscoe was poised in his innocence. "It finally dawned on me that these people

are serious and they're trying to take my whole life away from me. That's when I met this Muslim brother."

Roscoe is a beautiful orator. His descriptions effortlessly transport you into his world. It's like waking up from a dream that felt so real it takes you a moment to snap back into reality. "He started to teach me about Islam, and instantly I just gravitated to it. It was like Allah had already set my path in motion because everything just came so easy. And I really started to love Islam and to love Allah. I wanted more."

24 years into his incarceration, he received a letter from the District Attorney. "They had exculpable evidence that me and my brother were innocent. I just said, '*Alhamdulillah*[1].' I always knew it." The Innocence Project began working to get Roscoe out of prison. "They started writing letters to the board until the board finally gave in. They said, 'We know that you're innocent, but were going to release you on parole.' I told them, 'You could release me to the moon. Just release me.'" It took five entire years for the criminal legal system to let Roscoe free.

29 years after being wrongfully convicted of first-degree murder, Roscoe was finally released from prison. "The Innocence Project picked me up, took me to dinner and asked, 'What kind of food do you want? Anything in the world.' 'I love seafood.' 'Well, let's go get some fish.'

After taking in this first meal as a free man, The Innocence Project took Roscoe to Target for some clothes. "I think I had six lawyers pick me up. I had been gone so long. It was so strange because I was used to—anytime I was outside the prison, I was handcuffed and shackled down. This was the first time in 29 years that I was walking freely. I was seeing kids running around and everything. I was following [the lawyers] in the store because they were shopping for me. One of them turned around and said, "Roscoe, you can go your own way now. You're free."

[1] The Arabic, Islamic phrase meaning, "praise be to God."

"I think it's the most beautiful thing in the world. I wish everybody can have this feeling. I wake up and I'm not angry. And no matter what, I trust in Allah. I did have my struggles. Everything hasn't been rosy since I came home because people still have their biases and stuff, even though I was innocent. But Allah is the best planner."

Roscoe's deep conviction in his faith was potent. I wanted to know more about this "Muslim brother" who introduced him to Islam: "He started talking to me about Islam. So, I listened to him. He asked me to fast during the month of *Ramadan*. This was before I took my *shahada* and became Muslim. 'Okay, I'll do it,' I told him, 'But, I'm not gonna stop drinking my pruno at night.'" Pruno had become Roscoe's escape in prison. "I was trying to cope just like everybody else. But the Muslim brother said, 'Ah, don't worry about it. Allah will remove that from you.'"

Roscoe was determined to have a drink of pruno after breaking his fast. "But Allah had other plans." Throughout the entire month of *Ramadan,* Roscoe had no desire no drink. "I didn't even desire to have no pruno. I didn't even want it. I didn't even want it. I ended up making it through the whole month without drinking at all. That shocked me. Then it kinda woke me up. And it's like, 'Something is going on.' I couldn't believe it. That right there was really a changing point in my life. I told him, 'I didn't wanna drink no pruno during the month of *Ramadan*.' I asked him, 'What you doing to me? It's a spell or something, right?'"

This was the first time in a long time that Roscoe had stayed sober for 30 days straight. "I started to really pay attention. When I came out of the month of *Ramadan,* I was ready. I was ready. Wasn't no doubt in my mind after that. I never looked back." Roscoe has committed to learning about Islam ever since his conversion in 1992. "The Muslim brother really gave me all the information I needed to have at that time. He was real influential to me accepting Islam."

I bombarded Roscoe with questions because I was adamant in my desire to understand more about this man who had such a profound impact on a remarkable man: "Can you talk a little more about this Muslim brother that started talking to you about Islam. Who was he? How did you meet him? What are some of the things you talked about?"

"Matter of fact, I think he's out now. He was in [prison] for like 32 years or something. He just got out. His name was Tahir."

*****

REDEMPTION AFTER INCARCERATION: A NEW LIFE PERSPECTIVE

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, an estimated 600,000 people are released from state and federal prisons each year (The Sentencing Project 2023). Of these, 160,000 are Black men, making up about 26% of all prison releases in the U.S. The initial stages of reentry are critical for establishing support networks, both formal (e.g., parole officers) and informal (e.g., family, friends, or faith communities). These networks are key to providing emotional support and practical help, such as finding housing and employment—the subject of Chapter 5. Upon release, formerly incarcerated individuals often face immediate challenges, where the risk of recidivism is the highest (The Marshall Project 2016). The beginning of the reentry process can set the tone for the overall experience of reintegration. Positive early experiences, like feeling welcomed in a community, can boost self-esteem and motivation, fostering resilience in the face of ongoing challenges (Hunter 2005). With the proper guidance and resources, individuals can map out a plan for their life post-incarceration. One of these resources is the intrapersonal component of the Muslim network—the redemptive function during reentry. Studying reentry from a religious lens can provide unique insights and implications for rehabilitation and community reintegration.

The role of religion and redemptive narratives extends beyond the prison walls and impacts the lives of formerly incarcerated individuals. More than 75% of prison chaplains say that support from religious groups after release is critical for successful rehabilitation and more faith-based formal programs are needed to help incarcerated individuals transition back into community living (Lugo et al. 2012). Personal interactions with religious volunteers and fellow attendees provide emotional support and legitimate coping mechanisms (Lim and Putnam 2010). Reentry programming practitioners recognize the significance of accommodating diverse religious and spiritual perspectives in shaping individuals' meaning making processes (Worthington et al. 2011). With religious leaders and volunteers playing influential roles as role models and conveyors of positive life lessons, the faith community is uniquely equipped to affect offenders' cognitive processes and facilitate their reconnection with their communities (Braman 2007; Drake, Aos, and Miller 2009; Ericson 2001; Levitt and Loper 2009; Sundt, Dammer, and Cullen 2002).

In recent decades, many faith-based organizations have been established across the country to help formerly incarcerated individuals with spiritual rejuvenation toward identity transformation. After spending 39 years in prison, Kabir explains his transformation: "I am the antithesis of who I used to be. That negative energy has been transformed into good energy. Positive energy." One method to achieve such identity transformations is through redemptive narratives, which are frequently utilized by formerly incarcerated individuals during the reentry process (Maruna 2001; Mowen, Stansfield, and Boman 2018; Stansfield and Mowen 2019; Stone 2016), underscoring its potential to induce behavioral and cognitive change through a new life perspective—the *intra*personal component of the Muslim network—as suggested by a broad collection of empirical and anecdotal evidence (Clear et al. 2000; Giordano et al. 2008; Lugo et al.

2012; Maruna et al. 2006). Walter reflected on how his faith has helped him reorient himself after spending 30-years incarcerated for a life sentence:

> My life was in shambles at one point. I had a lot of things going on, on the outside, and family members and others who knew me back then will tell you. However, where was I going? That was the point. And at what point did I let what happen to me be a roadblock and a hindrance of my continuance in life because I was lost. That's why those things happen. And I vow not to—when I pray every day, not to do the things that will cause harm and not to be [of] harm. I pray for those things. Whereas before, there was no praying for those things.

While this example highlights Walter's cognitive change due to his faith, the next demonstrates how this change can also be accompanied by behavioral changes:

> And when we pray, do we actually mean what we say? Do we actually carry those actions out, not just giving lip services because the Lord knows and you know. So, He knows what you're going to do, what you're not going to do.

A function of his faith, Walter's cognitive and behavioral changes led him to situate his incarceration within a religious framework where God provides strength for struggle and patience for evolution:

> He's not gonna place a burden upon you that you cannot handle. And these are tests of time when we go through certain things to see how we handle them for the next state or stage of development.

Yet, the primary function of religion within reentry contexts is perceived not as behavioral modification or recidivism prevention but as a protective shield, bolstering human dignity against the inherently dehumanizing conditions of incarceration (Clear et al. 2000), demonstrated by Marvin, a 36-year-old Sunni revert:

> [After reverting to Islam], I began to find some peace in my life. It was like I stopped looking over my shoulder at that moment. Islam helped me to be a human being and to see people and treat people kindly and not be suspicious of people.

This new life perspective is aligned with the propagation of faith development, cognitive coping, and meaning making in the lives of incarcerated individuals (Dammer 2002).

> I had a pretty good idea of how to actually cope with [incarceration and reentry]. I would say one of the things that was really helpful was my belief in Allah. It's something that you tie yourself to. It's like Allah says, 'Hold on to the rope.' So that's what I was doing. I was tethering myself to that rope and then this was able to give me some semblance of hope.

> Then the other thing that gradually came to myself was the fact that I had to forgive myself. I had to make peace with myself and the carnage that I created, the people I hurt, not just the family but in the community as well. And then also, I had to forgive myself for hurting myself.

Bryson's rope metaphor encompasses both hope for a better future and forgiveness for past mistakes. Through his faith development, Bryson makes meaning of his incarceration while learning to cope with its ramifications.

Faith-based new life perspectives are rooted in social control theories (Hirschi 1969; Sampson and Laub 1993), which posit that propensities toward criminal behavior are inversely related to the strength of attachments and conformity to conventional societal structures, like religion, considered a community institution deeply embedded within neighborhood social life . Marvin speaks to this inverse relationship:

> [Islam] was the biggest relief for me in the true sense—I had become so immersed into the *dunya*[2], the world, that I was [doing] drugs, and alcohol, and gang banging and doing all them things. It became my way of life at the time. And it was so much my way of life that I was blind. I was really thinking that I was enjoying life, but the moment that I embraced this Islam and I put all those things behind me, it really was like the biggest burden was released from me.

His testimony speaks to both his behavioral and cognitive change—a result of this redemption narrative. For Pierce, a 44-year-old convert, he described this process as a needed change where he developed into a "well-polished Black man." Character development with a religious or spiritual dimension is theorized to catalyze an identity transformation along existential and cognitive dimensions (Jang and Johnson 2017; McRoberts 2005). When asked about his reversion in the context of his reentry, Deion explained:

> And Allah says in the Qur'an that when we take our *shahada*, that He wipes the slate clean [and] we're forgiven for all that we did in our *jahiliyyah*[3] [state]. So, when I read that in the Qur'an, I'm like 'Man, I got a whole new life.'

[2] The Arabic word for world.

[3] The Arabic word for ignorance. In Islam, it refers to the period preceding the revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad.

Redemptive narratives often intertwine with religious or spiritual beliefs, offering an important source of hope, motivation, and community support during the reentry process (Giordano et al. 2008). Kabir alluded to this when he said, "I consider my faith to be the best thing that has ever happened to me. It's instrumental in who I am today." These narratives, beyond merely personal, are profoundly social, shaped by societal beliefs and expectations about redemption and change (Paternoster and Bushway 2009). Consequently, the adoption of redemptive narratives often aligns with societal narratives of transformation and recovery, easing the reentry process by meeting societal expectations for reform and rehabilitation. The adoption of such redemptive narratives can signal an individual's spiritual transformation and offer support for formerly incarcerated individuals—the focus of this chapter—further augmenting the available support and resources during reentry—the focus of Chapter 5.

FUNCTIONAL PATHWAYS OF THE REDEMPTIVE FUNCTION DURING REENTRY

While the redemptive function during reentry continues to rely on an identity transformation via a new life perspective, it differs from the incarceration phase in two ways. During reentry, the *newly religious* begin to use the redemptive function of the Muslim network, while the *beneficiaries* no longer interact with this primary network function. Like in the incarceration phase, the *isolators* and *maximizers* continue to use the redemptive function uninterrupted.

As previously discussed, the name, *newly religious,* is based on the timing of their use of the redemptive function. Chapter 3 explained the utilitarian function as the entry point into the Muslim network during incarceration, where they remained throughout. However, during reentry, these men begin to use their access to the redemptive function since the need for protection from prison violence dissipates. In this state, the identity and identification of the *newly religious* are

aligned as they undergo an identity transformation and begin taking accountability for past crimes. After spending 23 years in prison for the crime he adamantly denies, Deron*(newly religious)* eventually came to understand Islam as the vehicle from which to receive redemption for the crimes he did commit: "Sure, I went to prison for something that I didn't do, but I did a whole bunch of stuff before I went to prison that I had to pay for." The *beneficiaries,* on the other hand, do not use the redemptive function during reentry. Both *beneficiaries* became disillusioned by the state of the Muslim community upon reentry. Kareem describes feeling alienated and discriminated against by the larger American Muslim community, who they believe have a responsibility to Muslims newly released from prison:

> It wouldn't be a difficult to have a thing so when the brothers come home from prison, we got $50,000 waiting for him so that brother doesn't have to go look for a job, we already have something set up for him. 'You're gonna go and you're gonna be the manager, or assistant manager. You're gonna start from the bottom. But in one year, you'll be the manager. Or we'll open up another [dry cleaning business] for you over in another city. And we'll run it, and we'll finance it, and after you do a two-year internship, it's yours, because it's paid for by the community.' Now, this person can get married. Now, he can give back to the community. Muslims are so stingy. They don't understand when you help a fellow brother or a sister, you're elevating the community, but they're so stingy.

Their dissatisfaction with the lack of community support distracts the *beneficiaries* from the redemptive function during reentry; they end up using the Muslim network primarily for access to housing and employment resources.

Like with incarceration, these redemptive narratives are amplified by brotherhood, which provides support to maintain identity transformations. While the *maximizers* and *newly religious* rely heavily on their access to a Muslim brotherhood, with a few exceptions, the *isolators*, on the other hand, continue to primarily separate themselves from others and engage in the redemptive function independently.

BROTHERHOOD AS A FUNCTIONAL AMPLIFIER

The concept of brotherhood can be a powerful element in the experience of formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts during the reentry process. Social support is one of the primary benefits of the brotherhood amplifier. Brotherhood engenders a support network among individuals who share the same religious beliefs and life experiences. This network can alleviate feelings of isolation and offer mutual encouragement during reentry, a process that can often be challenging and alienating (Travis 2005; Western and Pettit 2010). For example, Kabir*(maximizer)* and Da'vion*(maximizer)* cope with the challenges of reentry by leaning on and maintaining close ties with their Muslim brothers. Nadeem*(newly religious)* described his Muslim support network, noting that two of them are among his most trusted friends:

> I was with [one of them] in prison, who was one of my lieutenants. He's out now and we have a really good relationship, strong relationship and I can count on him for anything, and he can count on me for anything. These are the people I can turn to if I have any problems, which I haven't, by the will of [God], but if I need something or if I need to talk about something, no matter what it's related to, I can go to them.

Like the *maximizers* and *newly religious*, Dorian*(isolator)* and Jelani*(isolator)* both make an effort to keep in contact with many of their currently incarcerated Muslim brothers where Jelani continues to build a Muslim network during his reentry: "I got social media, I'm in Zoom calls with my brothers or Zoom calls with the [Nation of Islam] temple, friends coming over here—it's just much more access than being incarcerated." Brotherhood in Islam emphasizes collective responsibility, which encourages individuals to adhere to Islamic teachings and maintain reformed behavior. This community accountability can act as a strong deterrent against recidivism (Hirschi 1969). Deron*(newly religious)* explains:

> One of the things that I've learned about being incarcerated is that we need to be connected with [the] world so that when [we] come out, [we] have a better way of thinking, [we] have a better way of acting. But, if you don't have anything or anybody to connect with on the outside, then when you come outside, you still have the same mentality that you had when you were [incarcerated].

Brotherhood also aids in strengthening their new religious identity. By interacting with fellow Muslims, especially those from similar racial and experiential backgrounds, these individuals can further distance themselves from their past criminal identities (Maruna 2001). Furthermore, it encourages spiritual growth and steadfastness in religious practices. In fact, after his incarceration, Jayce's*(maximizer)* Muslim network raised funds that allowed him to make *Hajj*. Such spiritual development can offer a source of hope, purpose, and resilience during the reentry process.

As during their incarceration, the *isolators* tend to continue their redemptive process alone. When asked how he navigates his faith during reentry, Jordan*(isolator)* described a largely lone routine: "You just read the Qur'an, you pray five times a day. One day when you want to get out and try to make it to Mecca, you stay prayed up." Another *isolator,* Irvin shares:

> I've made a couple of good close coworker friends, but like I said, I'm kind of an introvert. So outside of work, I normally will just go home and try to find side work or just go home [to] sleep.

In a few instances, the *isolators* interact with the brotherhood amplifier during communal religious services, like *Jumu'ah*. Jordan describes the extent of his interaction with other Muslims during reentry: "You go in [the mosque] and do your *salah*[4] and you come back out." However, the lack of community can further distance the *isolators*. Jerome*(isolator)* alluded to his desire to have a community of Muslims around him: "Where I live, there's not really no Muslim community up here," whereas Demarcus*(isolator)* explained that he does not feel a sense of community at his mosque because "there's more Middle Easterners than Blacks. And the Middle Easterners tend to look at me odd. Like, 'Why am I here?' Like, I'm imposing or something." Since the extent of the *isolators*' engagement is limited to communal religious activities, both Jerome and Demarcus struggle to find a Muslim community, or in Demarcus' case, a community where he feels accepted:

[4] The Arabic word for prayer. Muslims are required to pray five daily prayers, one of the five pillars of Islam.

"I was isolated. I was an outsider." As a result, both men continue to isolate themselves during reentry. Brotherhood provides a support system, fostering a sense of belonging and inspiration through shared experience, while discipline, on the other hand, enables formerly incarcerated individuals to overcome challenges, establish positive habits, and make responsible choices. Together, these elements contribute to personal growth, transformation, and successful reintegration into society.

DISCIPLINE AS A FUNCTIONAL AMPLIFIER

The transformative potential of religion, and its function as a source of discipline and structure, play a critical role in the successful transition of formerly incarcerated individuals back into the community. This discipline is not only a behavioral regulation, but also forms an integral part of an individual's identity transformation and cognitive restructuring post-incarceration. Several participant testimonials underscore the challenges these individuals face when trying to maintain such practices outside the prison environment, emphasizing the need for supportive structures to aid this process.

Because the *newly religious* do not interact with the redemptive function until reentry, both Nadeem*(newly religious)* and Deron*(newly religious)* discovered an entirely new side of Islam outside of prison. For example, both men regard fasting as a major factor in the discipline of Islam and its positive impact on the mind. Deron shared his disciplined practice of weekly fasting from "Thursday night until Sunday evening…all 52 weeks of the year." He emphasizes how this disciplined routine, which may not be understood or appreciated by others, has been a cornerstone of his transformation. "Fasting causes a sense of discipline [because] the mind has to develop a discipline and fasting causes us to discipline ourselves." Similarly, Nadeem remembers his first Ramadan outside of prison. Although it was the summer and exceptionally hot, he recalls: "It was

a powerful thing. It showed the discipline of the [Muslims]. I loved it, I really did. The discipline, the *Jumu'ahs*, the family—it was a whole new family on a whole different level." This demonstrates that while the discipline attracted Nadeem to Islam, it was both the discipline and brotherhood aspects that amplified the redemptive function.

Jayce*(maximizer)* speaks to the stringent regulations imposed by his adopted religious lifestyle. His commitment to Islamic practices, such as praying five times a day, abstaining from pork and alcohol, and fulfilling the pillars of Islam, have shaped his post-incarceration life. Despite the difficulties, he emphasizes the importance of these practices to his reform and rehabilitation process.

> See? I have to do that now. And is it difficult? Man, sometimes I'll be so tired, I have to pray sitting down, but I get it done. I have to pray. I can't make up no excuses. 'Why you didn't pray?' Allah is all foreseeing and all forgiving.

Ruben*(isolator)* addresses the challenge of maintaining religious practices during reentry. He notes that while religious practice is simpler in an incarcerated environment, on the streets it is often harder due to various temptations. However, he argues that if an individual manages to instill discipline and commitment while in prison, it will be easier to sustain religious practices during reentry.

> If you really strong enough to do it, it's easier, but on the streets, it's a lot of people that get out and when they get out on the streets and get around their homies or temptation, they go right back to the same thing. So, that alone should be able to say like, that's proof that, yeah, it's easier to practice being incarcerated than it is to practicing on the streets. But if you dedicate yourself and be committed while you in jail, I don't think that it's gonna be harder on the streets if you already got that discipline and that dedication in you.

Ruben's statement also demonstrates how the redemptive function can serve as behavioral regulation. Since Islam prescribes specific codes of conduct or practices that can regulate behavior, abiding by these rules can foster discipline, structure, and self-control—traits that can be beneficial in preventing reoffending. Lastly, Eddison*(isolator)* gives a succinct definition of what

being religious means to him, focusing on adherence to religious practices like prayer and reading the Qur'an: "Religious, I believe, is to abide and walk in faith and actually act out religious acts, act the duties of the Islamic culture, reading the Qur'an and praying five times a day."

These examples shed light on the discipline amplifier of the redemptive function during reentry and stress the importance of discipline through religious observance. For many, redemptive narratives offer a sense of purpose and meaning in life that serves as a powerful motivator for personal growth and change while providing a coping mechanism and offering comfort, guidance, and hope in the times of adversity. This can be especially beneficial for individuals dealing with the challenges of reentry, reducing feelings of isolation or despair.

Often, the adoption of a redemptive narrative is linked to participation in supportive communities, like religious networks, which are optimal channels for nurturing social bonds and can extend beyond the act of communal worship. These networks can provide resources to help with housing applications and job searches—the subject of the next chapter. Since redemptive narratives involve a sense of personal transformation, this change in self-identity can be crucial in motivating formerly incarcerated individuals to seek stable housing and meaningful employment as part of their new life. These narratives can also instigate behavioral changes that are attractive to potential landlords and employers. Redemptive narratives can also provide a framework for formerly incarcerated individuals to discuss their past and present in a way that emphasizes growth and change. This can be beneficial in applications and interviews, where they may need to explain past convictions in a manner that highlights their dedication to rehabilitation. A compelling redemptive narrative can help counteract societal stigma associated with incarceration, allowing individuals to present themselves as changed people, committed to a lawful, responsible, and

productive life. This can alleviate concerns that potential landlords or employers may have and open doors to opportunities that might otherwise be closed. The demonstration of discipline, responsibility, and a commitment to a new path can help break down barriers and biases that often hinder access to these resources.

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SUMMARY

The redemptive function of the Muslim network emerges as a significant tool during reentry. It serves as a protective shield that upholds human dignity against the dehumanizing aspects of the carceral system. This function varies between different pathways. As protection from prison violence becomes less important post-incarceration, the *newly religious* begin using the redemptive function to transform their identities (i.e., undergo an *identity* change) during reentry and take responsibility for their past actions. While the *beneficiaries* discontinue use of the redemptive function, the *isolators* and *maximizers* persist in their engagement with it. Figure 6 provides a comparison between these four functional pathways' use of the redemptive function during reentry.

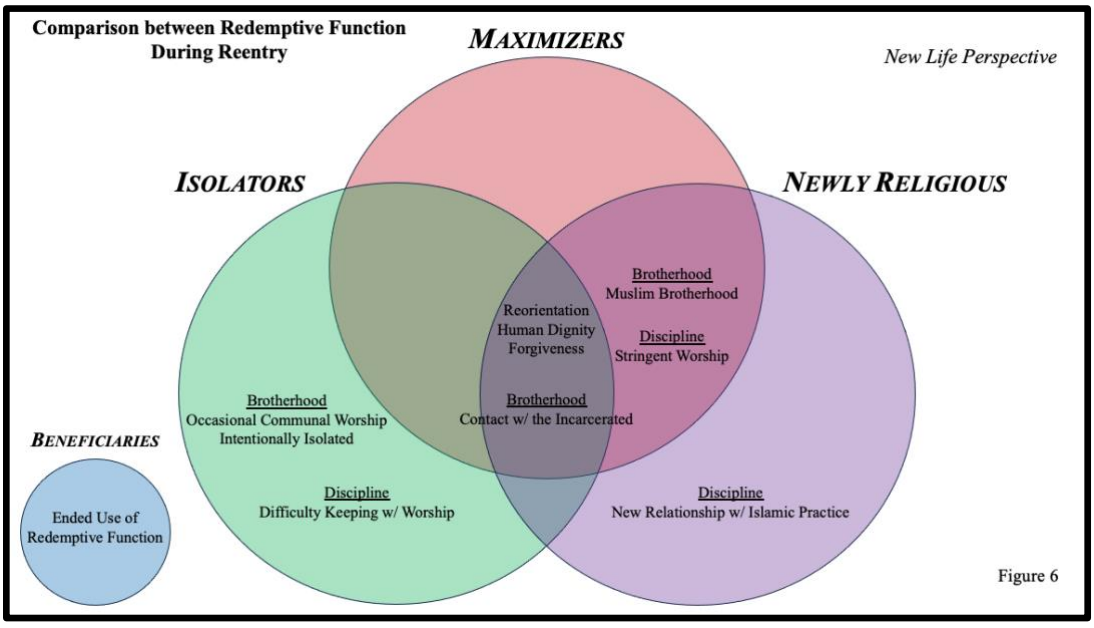

Figure 6

The concept of brotherhood offers a powerful social support network for formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts during reentry. This network mitigates feelings of isolation and offers encouragement during a potentially challenging reentry process. The sense of brotherhood in Islam instills collective responsibility, aiding in adherence to Islamic teachings and maintaining reformed behavior. This community accountability can act as a powerful deterrent against returning to criminal activity. The individuals also derive strength in their new religious identity from their interactions with fellow Muslims who have similar experiences. This distances them from their past criminal identities and promotes spiritual growth. The sense of brotherhood offers a crucial support system during the reentry process. It encourages a sense of belonging, shared experience, and discipline, facilitating successful reintegration into society. However, the experiences of the *isolators* highlight that the process is not uniform and can be influenced by factors such as acceptance within the community.

The transformative capacity of religion, particularly as a source of discipline and structure, is crucial for the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals into society. This discipline extends beyond behavioral regulation and is a core component of identity transformation and cognitive restructuring post-incarceration. Testimonials from participants illustrate the importance of maintaining these practices after leaving prison and the necessity of supportive structures for this process. The *newly religious* gain a fresh perspective on Islam outside prison, viewing practices like fasting as major contributors to discipline and mental growth. Similarly, the *maximizers* speak to the strict rules of Islam, including praying five times a day and abstaining from pork and alcohol. They emphasize these practices' significance to their reform and rehabilitation process since the discipline and commitment instilled in prison can aid in sustaining

religious practices after release. Religion can function as a behavioral regulation, with adherence to Islamic conduct fostering discipline, structure, and self-control, traits beneficial in preventing reoffending. The adoption of redemptive narratives provides a sense of purpose and can be a powerful motivator for personal growth and change, instigating behavioral changes that help formerly incarcerated individuals counteract societal stigma and present themselves as committed to a lawful, responsible, and productive life.

CHAPTER 5

THE UTILITARIAN FUNCTION DURING REENTRY

> "I didn't go through no resume process. Most of us that come out the system—the criminal justice system—know that we are going to be discriminated against. It's legal to discriminate against us in society. So, I won't waste my time and energy submitting a resume to a particular company. I go through people, friends and family."
>
> — Kabir *[59 y/o, revert, Shia]*

"He was 22 years old. This man also grew up in a tumultuous household. He didn't have any proper guidance. His mother was young. She was a teenager when she had him. And so, this man's culpability was diminished."

Tahir repeats the judge's statement from memory as if he is reading off a script. "The judge ended up granting the habeas corpus." Once again, I found myself rushing to my keyboard. I hurriedly swipe the mouse from left to right and left again to wake up the Arabic dictionary screen saver that now fills my computer screen. "I should go to law school," I think as too many thoughts rush through my mind.

"HABEAS CORPUS (*NOUN):* A WRIT REQUIRING A PERSON UNDER ARREST TO BE BROUGHT BEFORE A JUDGE OR INTO COURT, ESPECIALLY TO SECURE THE PERSON'S RELEASE UNLESS LAWFUL GROUNDS ARE SHOWN FOR THEIR DETENTION."

Tahir deepens his voice again as he continues to quote the judge who granted him his freedom after 36 years in prison. "I'm impressed with where this man is at right now. This man is a certified drug and alcohol counselor. He has his doctorate degree. Now, who does that?" Tahir shifts back to his warm and welcoming voice as my heart begins to race. '36 years?' I think to

myself, trying my very best to wrap my head around the idea. I can't fathom it. That's longer than I've been alive.

"My earliest release date was supposed to be 1992 and my latest release date was supposed to be no later than 2005. But instead, I got out in 2021." I listen intently, attempting to determine what Tahir is feeling right now as he revisits this day in court. "I thank Allah for Him preserving me in a way, because I've always kept myself fit in my mind, body, and soul. So, Allah persevered me in that way." I hear Tahir break into a laugh, a contagious one as I find myself laughing with him, although I have no idea why. "People always think I'm younger than them. It makes me laugh, so I laugh. They think I'm young because Allah preserved me for a reason. It's to try to fulfill my work out here." I hear something different in Tahir's voice. It's subtle but makes its presence known. "I work for this organization that was started by prisoners, former prisoners."

Pride. What I hear in Tahir's voice is pride. Not the kind of pride that prevents someone from asking for help when they need it. No. It's the pride of a man who knows what it takes to heal society because he understands what it means to harm it. It's the pride of a man who knows how to withstand trauma and chaos because he has endured it himself. "We do safety and service. We work in the community. We go in and push the dope dealers out. We help the homeless. We do prosocial work. A lot of prosocial work." There's a pause. "Are you still there, sister?" I realize I've been silent on the other end, trying to absorb the wisdom of what feels like an old friend. "Yes. I'm here. I'm listening. Please, please continue." Tahir clears his throat as I try to ground myself back in reality. "Character, courage, and emotional intelligence. Most people confuse feeling uncomfortable with feeling unsafe." I close my eyes and nod my head slowly, repeating his last statement in my head: Character, courage, and emotional intelligence. Most people confuse feeling uncomfortable with feeling unsafe. "There is a difference between danger and distress."

Tahir continues to speak as I scurry to gather every last bit before our time together is up. “It makes me feel good because I have a good job. A good job. A meaningful job. Now, I have a little money in my bank account, and I was able to do some things for my mother, my daughter, my granddaughter, my grandson, my sister—and other people that were helpful to me in my life while I was in prison.”

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RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: SECURING HOUSING AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The redemptive function of the Muslim network during reentry demonstrates how a religious or spiritual dimension catalyzes an identity transformation along existential and cognitive dimensions, easing the reentry process by meeting societal expectations for reform and rehabilitation. This transformation is likely further bolstered by the individual’s expanding social network and faith community that fosters a socialized mindset and facilitates the integration of individuals, especially the most isolated, into broader social contexts. Religion does more than merely offer a framework of traditional beliefs and relationships that promote social behavior. It also serves as a structural support network, assisting recently released individuals in tackling issues such as obtaining social backing. This, in turn, facilitates the process of acquiring housing and seeking employment., a daunting challenge for many formerly incarcerated individuals (Stansfield et al. 2017). Stigma, discrimination, and systemic barriers often further complicate these obstacles, while the intersectionality of being Blackamerican, Muslim, and formerly incarcerated presents unique challenges in the reintegration process. However, through social capital—relationships and connections that can be leveraged for support and opportunity—religious networks can provide essential support and resources to help formerly incarcerated individuals overcome these challenges. This sense of brotherhood and community often fostered within religious networks can

lead to informal support systems that provide formerly incarcerated individuals with social capital—connections that lead to housing and employment opportunities (Western and Pettit 2010). Using these religious networks to navigate and manage resources to secure permanent housing and legal, stable employment is the utilitarian function of the Muslim network during reentry.

HOUSING AND EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

HOUSING

Religious networks can provide crucial housing assistance. Housing is often a critical issue for formerly incarcerated individuals, with many facing homelessness or unstable living conditions upon release. Mosques, Islamic non-profits, and faith-based organizations often have housing programs that provide temporary shelter, help locate affordable housing, or assist with rental and utility payments for those in need (Couloute and Kopf 2018; Lugo et al. 2012). These faith-based programs often offer temporary housing solutions while helping to facilitate more permanent living arrangements (Travis, Western, and Redburn 2014). A central tenet of Islam—one of the five pillars—is the act of *zakat*[1]. Many individuals may offer informal support to their brothers in faith, ranging from opening their homes by offering a room to rent, providing financial assistance for housing, or assistance in navigating housing systems in the search for suitable accommodations. This sense of community can be incredibly valuable, offering both practical support and a sense of belonging.

Many religious organizations also play an advocacy role, helping formerly incarcerated individuals navigate bureaucratic housing processes. This may involve assisting with the completion of forms, mediating with potential landlords, or offering references to vouch for the

[1] A form of almsgiving considered in Islam as a religious obligation and is next after prayer in importance.

individual's character and reliability (Duwe 2017; Travis et al. 2014). The support of a respected religious organization can be particularly beneficial in overcoming potential discrimination or stigma related to an individual's incarceration history. Often, religious networks also provide mentoring or guidance services. This can involve pairing a formerly incarcerated individual with a more established member of the community who can offer advice, share their experiences, and assist in finding stable housing . These various forms of support can make a substantial difference in helping secure stable housing. However, it's crucial to recognize the individual and systemic challenges that these individuals face, and the need for more extensive and comprehensive support to fully address these challenges.

EMPLOYMENT

Similarly, religious support has strong and robust prosocial effects on post-release employment. Religious networks are instrumental in helping formerly incarcerated individuals reestablish relationships and make connections to community-based employment and training networks (O'Connor and Bogue 2010; O'Connor, Cayton, and Duncan 2007; O'Connor and Duncan 2011). Religious communities often provide essential job training and placement programs that can help formerly incarcerated individuals find employment. Many mosques and Islamic organizations have job training placement programs that specifically target individuals who are returning from prison (Hallett et al. 2017). These programs provide vocational training, job readiness skills, and connections to potential employers. Such opportunities are important given the substantial barriers formerly incarcerated individuals face in obtaining conventional employment.

Many mosques and Islamic organizations provide vocational training and job placement services tailored to individuals reentering society from prison (Maruna 2001). These programs can

be of great significance, offering essential job skills training and support from community that shares their faith and understands their unique challenges. Additionally, the Muslim community often supports entrepreneurial opportunities as an alternative route to employment. Halal businesses, for example, are encouraged within these communities, and some mosques or Islamic organizations might provide training or even microfinance programs to help start these businesses (Mohamed 2011). For Black Muslim men who may face discrimination in the traditional job market, these entrepreneurial opportunities can be a valuable alternative.

Faith communities often serve as rich sources of social capital, providing networking opportunities that may lead to employment (Putnam 2001). The *Ummah*, or global community of Muslims, may offer connections and resources that would not be accessible otherwise. This can be crucial for Blackamerican Muslim men reentering society after incarceration, as these connections can provide access to job opportunities. Mosques and Islamic organizations often provide resources and guidance to community members seeking employment. This support can be particularly beneficial for those who have been incarcerated, as they may face additional challenges and stigma in their job search. Like other faith communities, Muslim communities can provide mentorship and guidance. More established members of the community may assist formerly incarcerated individuals in navigating the job market, providing valuable advice, and potentially, job opportunities (Travis et al. 2014). These points illustrate some of the ways that religious networks can provide critical support in helping formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim male converts secure employment. However, individual experiences can vary greatly depending on numerous factors, including the specific resources available within their local Muslim community and the unique challenges they face because of their intersectional identity. Further, these resources, while crucial, may not be enough to overcome the systemic barriers faced

by this population, underscoring the need for broader societal and policy changes. However, the support and resources available within religious networks offer promising avenues for overcoming these obstacles. It's important to note that even when these resources are available, success in leveraging them can vary greatly based on individual circumstances, and the presence and strength of local religious networks and supportive organizations.

FUNCTIONAL PATHWAYS OF THE UTILITARIAN FUNCTION DURING REENTRY

HOUSING

During reentry, the functional pathways vary greatly in terms of how they use their access to the resource management that the utilitarian function of the Muslim network provides. Like with incarceration, the *isolators* do not interact with the utilitarian function during reentry, often depending on traditional routes for housing and employment or using their primary networks (e.g., family and friends) as opposed to their religious networks. On the other hand, both the *maximizers* and *newly religious* operate in a similar fashion, relying on institutional support networks to access and secure housing and employment opportunities. Although the *beneficiaries* desire for such support, structural challenges and grievances along the way have led to a distinct cynicism that derails positive momentum in these areas. Finally, upon reentry, the *prislamists* become disillusioned with their adopted faith, leading them to return to their original faiths or seek spiritual fulfillment elsewhere. Thus, the *prislamists* exit the Muslim network altogether.

The recurring theme of community support in resource management, particularly in securing housing and employment, is notable. These narratives highlight the importance of interpersonal connections within an individual's religious communities in facilitating their reentry into society post-incarceration. Jabreel*(maximizer)*, for instance, emphasizes the role of religious communities in providing ongoing spiritual support and practical assistance, including housing

resources for newly released individuals. He mentions that there are transitional homes and employment opportunities available for those in need, further enhancing the sense of belonging and support within the Muslim community.

> [The Nation of Islam] stays in contact with our family on the inside. We stay in contact and make sure we feed them the necessary spiritual information they need to grow if they have a desire, and when they come out, we're able to accommodate them in regards to helping them find employment and being involved in the mosque, housing—we have [Muslim] brothers throughout [the state] that have transitional homes. So, we're giving them a reason to want to be a part of this community because we are identifying with whatever it is they're going through.

Jermaine's*(newly religious)* narrative provides insight into the collective responsibility and support that often characterize these religious networks. His example emphasizes the influence of religious community leaders in steering him away from potentially harmful environments upon his release, underscoring the protective nature of these networks. Similarly, a religious leader in Jermaine's community ensured he had somewhere to live after he was paroled, encouraging Jermaine's cousin to oversee his relocation.

> He said, 'Brother, make sure [Jermaine] has somewhere to go when he paroled.' And he was on him for two years straight, like straight. He was like, 'We can't let [Jermaine] go back to the hood. We can't let [him] go back to the hood.'

Through his religious network, Jermaine was able to find and secure housing upon the conclusion of parole.

EMPLOYMENT

Regarding employment, incarceration and structural factors are overbearing, limiting employment opportunities as well as categories for employment. What is notable is, despite this limiter, particular pathways, such as the *maximizers* and *newly religious* use their Muslim network and connections to find employment and economic opportunities regardless. For instance, Kabir*(maximizer)* eschews the traditional job application route, preferring to leverage connections within his religious network of friends and family: "So I won't waste my time and energy

submitting a resume to a particular company, I go through people like friends and family." A similar sentiment is expressed by Abdul-Malik*(maximizer)*, who found his job through a fellow Islamic brother: "[I heard about the job] through another Islamic brother of mine. He told me about it, and he said, 'You know, they're hiring.' So, I went down there, and it happened. I received my training—paid training—and I've been working a week now there." Furthermore, religious communities provide not only job referrals but also direct employment. Both Embry*(maximizer)* and Jayce*(maximizer)* report that upon their release, their respective Muslim communities helped them find employment. Embry was hired by members of the Nation of Islam, while Jayce credits the introduction to his mosque community, initiated by a fellow formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim, as pivotal in this process.

> I just walked into the *masjid*[2] and introduced myself. Matter of fact, I did not. It was [another formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim] that came. He was teaching and he took a liking to [me]. He wrote a letter to this board, and he explained to me where to go. He introduced me to the [other formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim] brothers and the rest is history. I stayed in the *masjid* until [the job] started. They helped me get jobs.

Adam's*(maximizer)*[3] narrative provides another example of this, detailing how his affiliation with a Muslim non-profit foundation led to employment within the Muslim non-profit space upon his release.

> I was actually blessed. I was a student of a foundation—basically a distance learning foundation. I'm still affiliated with them and actually got out and started working with them. So, I was given a job working for them. I was a course facilitator basically. And basically, that got me into the Muslim non-profit space, which is where I've been the whole time since I've been out. I started working for another organization where I work now, and I'm the executive director here at this mosque, and I've been here for seven and a half years. So that's been a real blessing in terms of support. My support has been [the Muslim non-profit] and my family.

Religious affiliations and networks can play a significant role, leveraging skills learned during incarceration and applying them in the reentry context. Since the *newly religious* enter the Muslim

[2] The Arabic word for mosque.

[3] As a *maximizer*, Adam also used the utility of the Muslim network to for marriage. After giving a lecture at his mosque, Adam was introduced to the woman who he would end up marrying.

network at the utilitarian function during incarceration primarily for protection against prison violence, Nadeem*(newly religious)* honed his security skills under the guidance of the Nation of Islam, and, upon reentry, found employment utilizing these very skills: "In prison, I trained with the Nation in security. I've been working in security almost since I've been out." Following his release, he translated these skills into gainful employment in the security sector. Additionally, showing the potential for entrepreneurial initiative within this community, Nadeem even helped establish a non-profit organization while still in prison, an organization he continues to work with during reentry: "I work for a non-profit organization, one of the non-profit organizations that I helped to start while in prison. I am a part of [it] and still working with them." Deron's*(newly religious)* experience adds another dimension to this discussion. He created a position for himself with the Nation of Islam's Prison Ministry, demonstrating the initiative and agency often required by formerly incarcerated individuals navigating a challenging job market. Finally, both the *maximizers* and *newly religious* seem to enter industries that require socialization and cooperation, a positive form of which they seem to discover through Islam while incarcerated.

In addition to housing and employment, these religious networks also offer essential assistance in securing other resources. Hatem's*(maximizer)* experience encapsulates this aspect, recounting how a fellow Muslim brother, who owns a car dealership, offered him a much-needed vehicle at an affordable price.

> Allah has made it very good for me. I'm gonna end up getting a car. And a brother—Muslim brother, he owns a car dealership. We talked yesterday. He only wants $4,000 for it. Well, I haven't gotten my stimulus money yet, and the brother will take $3,000—he has already told me. So, it's been a good situation.

BROTHERHOOD AS A FUNCTIONAL AMPLIFIER

Kareem's*(beneficiary)* experience during reentry demonstrates the importance of religious networks in prison. Since Kareem was not incarcerated for long—a year-and-a-half—he did not

have the opportunity to develop a spiritual community. Upon reentry, he realizes the does not have the support he needs. His narrative underscores the pressing need for resource management, structural support, and economic empowerment among Blackamerican Muslim individuals, particularly for those who are formerly incarcerated. A theme that repeatedly surfaces in Kareem's testimony is the shortcoming of the Muslim community's organizational structures, especially regarding brotherhood. He emphasizes the community's pivotal role in the transition from prison, arguing for a comprehensive, solution-oriented approach toward societal reentry. This includes providing the necessary resources to support entrepreneurship among the formerly incarcerated, fostering their reintegration into society, and changing societal perceptions. Kareem takes an active stance on these issues, planning a series of initiatives like meeting with a prison chaplain and organizing fundraising events. He expresses a clear vision for the potential of these initiatives in aiding the transition process for Muslim individuals exiting prison.

An insight from Kareem's personal experience reveals an unfortunate racial bias within his Muslim community. Despite the region boasting a large Muslim population, Kareem laments that they have been slow to offer support, attributing this partly to their inability to see beyond his color. He argues that his racial bias continues to hinder progress within the Muslim community, echoing broader discourses about systemic racial biases.

> I live in a community where we have 50,000 Muslims in our community. Our *masjid* is big. We have two *Jumu'ahs*. And there's like over 1,000 people at each *Jumu'ah*. And then we have another *masjid* in the same city a mile away that has two *Jumu'ahs*. So, it's a big community. And so, they're in the process now of looking at how they can help me. And the sad thing about it, it's been 32 years. And if they would listen to me as you're listening to me, and they would take notes and say, 'Wow, this brother really has something,' but they can't see beyond my color. So, we wonder why we're not getting anywhere because we're still caught up in that color thing. We don't know how to play the game. We go to prison and do all those years, and we don't have nothing when we come home. Nothing.

A crucial point raised by Kareem is the absence of robust structural support for individuals after their release from prison.

> The wider Muslim community hasn't agreed to help the Black inner-city Muslims so that we can build, so that we can be a force that when people come out of prison, we have a way to help them, to get them on their feet, so that they don't return back to crime. 'Cause people, if they can't feed their self, they're gonna return back to crime.

As an example, he refers to a Blackamerican Muslim convert who he feels could have had a positive influence on the community with the proper support.

> He became Muslim, but there was no structure in place so that when he came home—with a person like that, the *masjid*, is supposed to grab him and say—he had written books, very handsome, very articulate. The *masjid* was supposed to grab him and have him lecture in colleges and high schools all across the country. But they're not ready for us when we come home. When we talk about structural organization, they're not ready for us when we come home.

In the absence of a supportive structure, however, he defaulted back into a life of crime.

> And so, a person like him, he fumbles right back into the gang life. And there's millions of Muslims that he could have helped from a structural point of view, had there been a post for him, a position for him. Maybe he's not an *imam*, maybe that's not his expertise, but as an organizer, as somebody that the young gang bangers are gonna—they look up to [him] and he comes outta prison, we got $100,000 for him. And we saying, 'This is what we need you to do. We need you to go to these colleges, these high schools, we need you to speak. We already got a house for you. We got a car for you, but you're gonna go to work. You did crime all your life. Now it's time for you to work for Allah.' But there's no structure in place.

Kareem argues that had the community been prepared to support this man's reentry and effectively utilize his potential, this outcome could have been avoided. The lack of support structures for societal reintegration, he argues, drives them back into criminal activity for survival.

Kareem's narrative highlights the crucial role of community support, resource management, and organized structures in supporting formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly Blackamerican Muslims. His experiences and perspectives serve as a call for concerted efforts toward societal reentry support mechanisms, tackling racial biases within communities, and leveraging the potential of these individuals for community development.

In assessing the post-incarceration experiences of several individuals, an intriguing pattern of religious disenchantment emerges, notably regarding their identification with the Islamic faith adopted during incarceration. In the context of reentry, when the threat of prison violence is

mitigated, some individuals—*prislamists*—appear to decouple from the Muslim network, highlighting a disjunction between identity and identification that leads to exiting the Muslim network entirely. For the *prislamists*, a common theme observed is the perceived hypocrisy of religious practice and ideas of brotherhood among formerly incarcerated Muslims. The nuances in their experiences, however, are striking and merit individual exploration. Consider Amani*(prislamist)* whose disenchantment primarily originated from the observed discordance between religious preaching and practice. His cynicism led him back to Christianity, citing the need for "Christ in his heart." He cites that his early teachings of Christianity had a more substantial spiritual allure for him, exacerbated by grievances regarding religious hypocrisy among some Muslims. Jirani's*(prislamist)* and Curtis'*(prislamist)* experiences resonate similarly. Their disenchantment was fueled by witnessing what they regarded as hypocrisy among practitioners of organized religions, which led them to disconnect from their spiritual affiliation with Islam. Jirani explains: "[The Muslims] wanted me to go and do all these hours and volunteer all this to make the mosque look good, to make the Muslims look good and then you turn around and judge somebody." This sentiment echoes the underlying disillusionment these individuals experienced. Additionally, Curtis' return to Christianity was incited by fear, particularly the anxiety that abandoning Christianity would prevent him from reuniting with his deceased loved ones—a palpable fear as he had recently experienced the loss of a sibling. Upon reentry, he conveys a sense of religious syncretism, integrating elements from multiple faiths, including Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, in his spiritual journey:

> I'm just kind of like searching for my own truth. Like I feel there's truth in everything, but I feel like the ultimate truth is just loving the next person and just spreading positivity and spreading kindness and stuff like that. Like I said, I still practice some Muslim beliefs and I still practice some Christian beliefs. I practice a lot of Hindu beliefs as well. 'Cause I'm a firm believer of karma, which is a Hindu term. I read up on a lot of well-known Muslims, like Elijah Muhammad, and it was said that he was a hypocrite and this and that. So, that kind of like steered me off. At the end of the day, you're worshiping somebody who didn't even follow a lot of the stuff that he was preaching.

Interestingly, Asaad*(prislamist)* departed from Islam following his disillusionment with organized religion but opted to remain "spiritual." In essence, these narratives underline the critical role of perceived religious authenticity and the need for institutionalized religion to foster genuine, non-judgmental support systems, particularly in the context of formerly incarcerated individuals' reintegration into society. They also highlight the complex dynamics between religious identification and personal spirituality, contributing to an expanding discourse on the sociological study of religion in post-incarceration contexts.

DISCIPLINE AS A FUNCTIONAL AMPLIFIER

Curtis*(prislamist)* expressed profound admiration for those individuals who are capable of fully embracing a new religious identity, notably that of a Muslim. This transformative process, according to his understanding, necessitates a significant amount of discipline. He underscores the fact that this transition is far from being an effortless endeavor; rather, it is a commitment that imposes a set of constraints on one's lifestyle which stands in stark contrast to the freedom that was previously enjoyed.

> I feel like people that are able to come and convert, it takes discipline. So, I commend them for being able to make the full switch. 'Cause it's not easy being a Muslim and stuff. Like I said, it takes a lot of discipline. You can't just live freely like how you used to.

His emphasis on the required discipline for conversion is indicative of the significant behavioral modifications associated with a shift in religious affiliation. From an academic perspective, this observation aligns with the theories that characterize religious conversion not merely as a cognitive shift, but also as a process that permeates and transforms the individual's daily life. In this sense, the implications of conversion extend beyond the realm of belief, influencing the behavioral and social aspects of an individual's existence. It is also noteworthy that Curtis, in describing the rigors associated with being a Muslim, underscores a nuanced understanding of the demands of the religious tradition. His observation points toward the interplay between religious conviction and

lifestyle, a dynamic that often shapes religious experience in profound ways. By highlighting the shift from a "free" lifestyle to one defined by religious discipline, Curtis elucidates the costs and challenges associated with religious transitions, offering an insight into why some, like him, may be deterred from such paths. However, it is essential to recognize that Curtis' perspective is inherently subjective, rooted in his individual experiences and perceptions. As such, it may not necessarily reflect the experiences of other individuals undergoing religious conversion, demonstrating the diversity and complexity inherent in the human religious experience.

Roger's*(isolator)* statement effectively captures the distinction between two forms of discipline. After converting in prison and eventually being released, he returned to prison once again. "I didn't have society discipline. I only had incarceration discipline." For some participants, Islam can provide a throughline between "incarceration" and "society" discipline: the good habits built by Islam during incarceration (e.g., prayer, health, reflection, ethical and considerate treatment of others and the self) are useful not merely while incarcerated but contribute to success and wellbeing during and past reentry. This does not hold as strongly for other forms of discipline ("incarceration discipline"), like forming protective networks, working out regularly to attenuate physical threats, and remaining vigilant in the case of violence, all of which have little to no utility on the outside as they are rooted in institutionalizing circumstances. Roger's example underscores the challenges faced by formerly incarcerated individuals when transitioning back to society. It suggests that certain religious frameworks can assist in this transition by promoting practices that are beneficial both within and beyond the prison context. However, it also acknowledges that not all skills and behaviors cultivated during incarceration are transferable or useful in the free world, creating a disconnect that needs to be navigated carefully.

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SUMMARY

The utilitarian function of the Muslim network during reentry plays a significant role in the functional pathways of securing housing and employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim converts. Religion acts as an institutional support network, offering a system of beliefs, social connections, and practical assistance that eases the challenges faced during the reentry process. The narratives of formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim converts highlight the importance of interpersonal connections within their religious communities, emphasizing the collective responsibility and support that characterize these networks. These connections not only provide practical resources but also foster a sense of belonging. The utilization of religious networks for resource management varies among the functional pathways, with *isolators* relying more on traditional routes and primary networks, while the *maximizers* and *newly religious* embrace the support and assistance provided by their religious communities. Figure 7 depicts this variation.

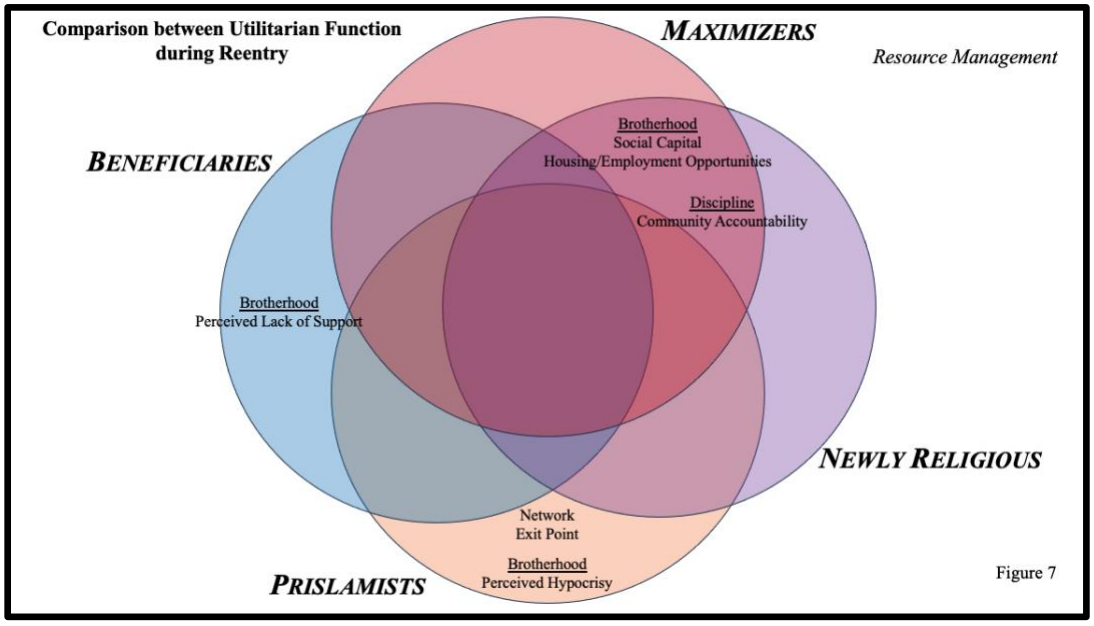

Figure 7

Brotherhood within the Muslim network during reentry is a critical aspect for formerly incarcerated Blackamerican Muslim individuals. Religious communities act as sources of social capital by providing vital assistance in locating affordable housing, offering temporary shelter, and facilitating more permanent living arrangements as well as by offering networking opportunities and connections that can lead to employment. The *ummah*, the global community of Muslims, provides access to resources and job opportunities that may otherwise be unavailable. The concept of *zakat* within Islam fosters a sense of community, leading individuals to open their homes, provide financial aid, and navigate housing systems for those in need. Additionally, religious networks advocate for formerly incarcerated individuals, mediate with landlords, and offer references to combat potential discrimination or stigma. Mentoring and guidance services further contribute to securing stable housing by providing advice, sharing experiences, and fostering a sense of belonging within the community. Similarly, religious support plays a significant role in post-release employment. Faith communities offer job training, placement programs, and connections to community-based employment networks, enabling individuals to acquire essential skills and find employment opportunities. Vocational training programs within mosques and Islamic organizations target individuals reentering society from prison, providing valuable job readiness skills and support. Entrepreneurial opportunities, such as halal businesses, are also encouraged within these communities, providing alternative employment avenues for those who may face discrimination in the traditional job market.

Discipline within the Muslim network during reentry highlights the transformative process associated with religious conversion and the demands it places on individuals. Religious conversion extends beyond beliefs. Significant behavioral modifications and lifestyle constraints come with embracing a new religious identity, shaping daily life and social interactions.

Furthermore, Islam can provide a bridge between "incarceration discipline" and "society discipline," where the habits and practices developed during incarceration continue to contribute to success and well-being during and after reentry. While some aspects of discipline rooted in institutionalized circumstances may have limited utility in the outside world, the discipline fostered by Islam, such as prayer and the ethical treatment of others, can be beneficial beyond the prison environment. However, the narratives of *prislamists* shed light on their disillusionment and disenchantment with the Muslim network and organized religion after incarceration. They point to perceived hypocrisy within religious practices and behaviors—highlighting the disconnection between identity and identification—leading some individuals to exit the Muslim network entirely. Overall, discipline within the Muslim network underscores the transformative power of religious conversion and the demands it places on individuals. It highlights the need for discipline to navigate the challenges of reentry and the potential for Islamic practices to support success and well-being in both prison and post-release settings.

CONCLUSION

> "My greatest fear [in prison] was losing my pictures of my family. I lost my mother while I was in prison. I lost my grandmother while I was in prison. I lost my stepfather while I was in prison. It was just so many people close to me that I lost while I was in prison [for 33 years]. All I had was their pictures to remind me of the good times that we shared. But Allah blessed me to make it up outta here without losing any of my photos."
>
> — Deion *[66 y/o, revert, unspecified Islamic sect]*

I tap the black screen of my iPhone. The time illuminates and startles me at the same time. It's 6:53 p.m. and there is still so much more I want to ask him. I finally concede to time's unrelenting forward march and begin asking my final interview questions: "What would you like to see happen with this research?" I catch Tahir off guard, it seems. "Hmm," he responds with a pause. I can hear him thinking. "That's a—that's a really good question," he finally answers. "Hmm."

"I want people to know something. These men, those who embraced Islam—even the ones who just got the trappings of Islam, the bare minimum—I want people to know what we got in return. We now have peace. It's shaped our lives. It changed us. It gave us *islah*."

ISLAH: THE ARABIC WORD, USUALLY TRANSLATED AS "REFORM," MEANING TO IMPROVE, TO BETTER. THE ISLAMIC CONCEPT ADVOCATES FOR MORAL ADVANCEMENT THROUGH A REFORMATION BASED ON THE RUDIMENTAL STANDARDS OF THE QUR'AN AND *SUNNA*[1].

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RELIGION IN THE CARCERAL CONTEXT

The dominant narrative related to incarceration often reinforces retributive constructs, highlighting presumed deficiencies in those incarcerated while minimizing the systemic disparities

[1] The Islamic traditions and practices of the Prophet Muhammad that constitute a model for Muslims to follow.

embedded within the criminal legal system. Such discourse often employs stereotype-driven narratives rooted in race, class, and gender to regulate the bodies, actions, and identities of the incarcerated. Interestingly, religion surfaces as a less recognized, yet potent, institutional element related to carceral control. Given its profound influence within American society, notably in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, religion is equipped to challenge punitive narratives by introducing pathways toward hope and redemption.

Religion intertwines with the carceral experience in several ways, one of the most significant being through conversion narratives that function as identity-building apparatuses. Conversion narratives afford a means to understand and express personal experiences while encouraging involvement with religious communities and practices. This viewpoint resonates with broader currents within the social sciences, especially in the realm of identity theory, where narratives serve as a fundamental component of identity construction. Conversion narratives facilitate individuals' ability to derive meaning from their experiences, associate significance with life events, and assimilate these personal experiences within overarching religious narratives. Sharing conversion experiences facilitates the recasting of personal histories in the light of religious conversion models. For individuals returning to society during reentry, these redemption narratives serve multi-functional purposes, stimulating personal transformation, aiding coping mechanisms, strategizing for social acceptance, reflecting societal narratives, and accessing spiritual communities.

Religious conversion narratives induce profound changes in the identities of those incarcerated and previously incarcerated. By recounting their experiences within the parameters of their religious identity, individuals can recontextualize their past and chart a transformative personal path from perceived immorality to redemption and spiritual advancement. The symbolic

potency of these narratives is immense. They offer a framework through which formerly incarcerated individuals can interpret their past indiscretions and transgressions while finding forgiveness and acceptance within their religious communities. These narratives promote catharsis and, more importantly, a restructuring of personal identity, which is critical for successful societal reintegration. Religious communities provide supportive environments for such transformations and consequent reintegration, offering community acceptance and reinforcement of the new identity, complemented by practical aids like housing, vocational training, and counseling. The result is a nurturing milieu that significantly smooths the journey from confinement to liberty, reducing recidivism chances. The connection between religion and the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals is complex, enveloping spiritual, emotional, and practical facets. Religion, through the medium of conversion and redemption narratives, offers essential tools for personal transformation and societal reintegration during reentry. The intersection of religious networks and reentry underscores the adaptive, dynamic nature of religious communities in addressing societal challenges, highlighting the potential for religious resources in mitigating societal problems beyond their direct spiritual realm. Therefore, an intricate understanding of these dynamics is critical for developing effective reentry programs that capitalize on these inherent strengths of religious communities.

A pragmatic assessment of the reentry process underscores the crucial role that religious networks can assume in surmounting key challenges, notably the issue of securing appropriate housing. These are several methods to utilize these religious networks. The first involves establishing relationships with members of the same religious community who may offer housing assistance. Furthermore, religious organizations often operate housing programs explicitly created for formerly incarcerated individuals while offering emotional support and guidance throughout

the reentry process. The pragmatic function of religious networks in the reentry process of formerly incarcerated individuals is substantial. By fostering relationships within their religious communities and with leaders, they can enhance their prospects for successful societal reintegration, underscoring the transformative potential of religion in the context of reentry experiences.

NARRATIVE PROCESS AND THE PRODUCTION OF IDENTITY

This dissertation finds narratives as a primary tool for understanding how individuals interpret their incarceration, reentry, and religious conversion. The conscious crafting of identity through narrative is identified as a significant process, contributing to the sociology of religion by elucidating the dynamics of conversion as a narrative process. This approach to conversion and narrative is unique and offers fresh insight into the field. The relationship between narrative formation and identity forms a key component of the dissertation. The case presents a clear and valuable empirical case of individuals consciously engaging in identity construction through narrative. This consciousness is particularly evident in incarcerated individuals, who are exposed to religious conversion narratives and are aware of the narrative crafting process. Hence, their identity work through narrative is not only exhibited during the interviews but also pervades their everyday experiences in prison and out. This ongoing narrative work within their lives underscores the intricate interplay between narrative, identity, and religious conversion within a carceral context.

I propose a nuanced exploration of religious conversion among formerly incarcerated Blackamerican male converts, delineating the complexities of identity versus identification change in this context. Findings indicate that all individuals in the convert subsample experience an identification change, defined here as the explicit acknowledgement of oneself as a Muslim.

Identity change, conversely, is only experienced by those who incorporate a spiritual dimension to their conversion. This delineation shows that those who engage with the religion for *only* its utility undergo an *intentional* identification change. Crucially, this dissertation is not merely an application of identity and network theory, but rather it contributes to the development of both. The access and use of the Muslim network is a significant point of exploration, with the emphasis not on reentry outcomes, but rather on the process of access. The divergence between gaining access to a network and actual usage is linked to identity and identification.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE PATHS

This dissertation underscores substantial contributions to identity literature by critiquing the oversimplified conceptualization of collective identity and recommending the inclusion of *intra*personal reflections in identity control theory. I argue that identity change is triggered when situational changes, such as incarceration, create an incongruity between situational meaning and the identity standard. Furthermore, findings demonstrate that a religious conversion based on an identification change as opposed to an identity change differs not only as a matter of self-conceptualization but also carries implications for behavior, particularly regarding how individuals use their new religious networks.

These insights have significant implications for the broader discourse on prison rehabilitation. Despite the harsh, dehumanizing conditions of incarceration, many incarcerated individuals accomplish remarkable feats of personal growth and transformation. This suggests the potential for fostering a prison environment that encourages this personal evolution for reintegration, prompting a reevaluation of rehabilitation paradigms. By comprehending the diverse experiences of Blackamerican Muslims within the prison industrial complex, we can inform more

efficacious rehabilitation and reentry strategies. Several avenues for future research can be identified based on these findings:

Development of targeted support programs. Comparative analysis of various pathways taken by different religious groups can illuminate the factors contributing to successful reentry, as well as the unique challenges faced by different communities.

Faith Community. Investigation into the role faith communities play in supporting formerly incarcerated individuals can reveal invaluable resources. Identification of best practices and protentional areas for enhancement can augment the effectiveness of faith-based organizations.

Intersectional analysis. Exploring the interplay between race, religion, and the criminal legal system can yield critical insights. Comprehension of the dynamics Blackamerican Muslims face in navigating their racial and religious identities within a system that often marginalizes both, can inform the development of more inclusive and equitable policies.

Effectiveness of rehabilitation programs. Rigorous evaluation of existing initiatives can highlight successful strategies and identify shortcomings, providing a basis for evidence backed enhancements.

Alternative approaches to the prison industrial complex. As we rethink rehabilitation, it is crucial to consider alternatives to incarceration that prioritize personal development and community reintegration.

Incarceration, inherently traumatic, can have enduring repercussions for individuals, irrespective of their racial or religious identity. For many, it also sparks a need for spiritual introspection and guidance. A nuanced understanding of this spiritual need is essential for the development of effective rehabilitation programs that facilitate healing, growth, and positive social reintegration. While religious networks provide significant support, these resources alone may not

be sufficient to overcome systemic barriers, emphasizing the need for broader societal and policy changes to facilitate successful reintegration.

EPILOGUE

Sunday — November 21, 2021

> *Morning!!! (Deep Breath) I was told on 11-10-21 that I'm endorsed to go to MCRP*[1]*, and as you can see, it's been 11 days since then, and I'm still here awaiting the opportunity to get my life back in order. Hopefully, this week will be the week that my journey to financial and physical independence will begin! I'm actually looking forward to getting a job (possibly two) along with learning the new social norms, while applying the skills and techniques that I've learned to use as a means to overcome life struggles and methods to achieve my own personal goals. Life is change; growth is truly optional!!*

This was the last journal entry for one participant who asked to remain anonymous. The next day, he was released from prison after 16 years incarcerated.

The 59 men in this dissertation served over a combined 1,157 years in prison. On average, that is a 20-year prison sentence, per person.

*****

> "Call ME a Nigga: I utter these words as a political battle cry for the Black, damned, and forsaken—that is, the staggeringly high percentage of poor Black boys and men languishing in jail cells, for those selling drugs, gangbanging, or otherwise scrambling for survival and self-respect. I say it because we have a fundamental divide that needs bridging. This divide is a cultural fact as well as a social fact. It is an economic divide crossed by moral judgement. It is the divide between the haves and the have-nots, but it is also, for many, seen as a divide between the morally upstanding and the morally corrupt."
>
> — Jody David Armour (2020)
> *N*gga Theory: Race, Language, Unequal Justice, and the Law*

[1] MCRP is an abbreviation for Male Community Reentry Program, a California voluntary program for eligible males who have two years or less of their prison sentence left to serve.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

TABLE A: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF "CONVERTS"

Pseudonym	Functional Pathway	Age	Conversion Identifier	Islamic Sect	Total Years Incarcerated	Years since Release
Aadil	Isolator	52	Convert	(None)	28 years	4 years
Abdul-Malik	Maximizer	47	Convert	(None)	23 years	1 year
Adam	Maximizer	50	Both	Sunni	22 years	9 years
Alonzo	Isolator	66	Neither	Nation of Islam	5 years	13 years
Amani	Prislamist	50	N/A	N/A	17 years	1 year
Antwone	Maximizer	57	Revert	Nation of Islam	30 years	2 years
Anwar	Maximizer	57	Revert	Sunni	19 years	< 1 year
Asaad	Prislamist	56	N/A	N/A	30 years	< 1 year
Booker	Isolator	37	Convert	(None)	5 years	1 year
Bryson	Maximizer	67	Convert	(None)	26 years	2 years
Clyde	Isolator	24	Revert	(None)	6 years	1 year
Cornell	Isolator	57	Revert	(None)	28 years	2 years
Curtis	Prislamist	28	N/A	N/A	3 years	1 year
Da'vion	Maximizer	41	Convert	Sunni	8 years	< 1 year
Damien	Isolator	32	Convert	Sunni	5 years	1 year
Darnell	Isolator	52	Revert	Sunni	30 years	1 year
Deion	Maximizer	66	Revert	(None)	33 years	7 years
Demarcus	Isolator	52	Convert	(None)	22 years	1 year
Demetrius	Isolator	53	Convert	(None)	25 years	3 years
Deron	Newly Religious	64	Revert	Nation of Islam	23 years	21 years
Dontrell	Isolator	37	Revert	(None)	11 years	1 year
Eddison	Isolator	28	Convert	(None)	8 years	1 year
Embry	Maximizer	56	Revert	Nation of Islam	25 years	10 years
Hatem	Maximizer	47	Revert	(None)	29 years	1 year
Irvin	Isolator	28	Convert	(None)	5 years	1 year
Jabreel	Maximizer	55	Revert	Nation of Islam	13 years	18 years
Jakobe	Maximizer	28	Convert	(None)	11 years	1 year
Jayce	Maximizer	66	Revert	(None)	30 years	3 years
Jelani	Isolator	49	Revert	Moor	7 years	3 years
Jermaine	Newly Religious	41	Neither	Nation of Islam	15 years	3 years
Jerome	Isolator	36	Convert	Moor	5 years	1 year
Jirani	Prislamist	36	N/A	N/A	6 months	17 years
Jordan	Isolator	70	Neither	(None)	25 years	2 years
Justin	Beneficiary	68	Revert	(None)	23 years	2 years
Kabir	Maximizer	59	Revert	Shia	39 years	1 year
Kalvin	Isolator	60	Revert	(None)	9.5 years	12 years
Kareem	Beneficiary	57	Revert	(None)	1.5 years	32 years
Khalid	Maximizer	28	Convert	(None)	6.5 years	1 year
Lamonte	Maximizer	50	Neither	Nation of Islam	13 years	1 year
Levell	Maximizer	63	Revert	Sunni	30 years	7 years
Liddell	Maximizer	71	Neither	(None)	47 years	1 year
Marcel	Isolator	61	Neither	(None)	8 years	2 years
Marvin	Maximizer	36	Revert	Sunni	18 years	1 year
Nadeem	Newly Religious	66	Convert	Shia	39 years	3 years
Najeem	Maximizer	57	Neither	(None)	24 years	8 years
Payne	Prislamist	63	N/A	(None)	41 years	9 years
Peirce	Isolator	44	Convert	(None)	22 years	3 years
Peter	Maximizer	48	Revert	Nation of Islam	20 years	7 years
Ramello	Isolator	42	Revert	(None)	4 years	4 years
Rashaad	Isolator	47	Neither	(None)	23 years	2 years
Rodney	Maximizer	55	Revert	(None)	32 years	1 year
Roger	Isolator	73	Neither	(None)	11 years	2 years
Roscoe	Maximizer	61	Convert	(None)	39 years	8 years
Ruben	Isolator	35	Revert	(None)	13 years	< 1 year
Safeer	Isolator	69	Neither	(None)	27 years	8 years
Tahir	Maximizer	59	Revert	Shia	36 years	1 year
Tatum	Maximizer	52	Revert	Sunni	24 years	6 year
Tavis	Maximizer	46	Convert	(None)	17 years	3 years
Walter	Isolator	63	Convert	(None)	30 years	1 year

APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY

Alhamdulillah | The Arabic, Islamic phrase meaning "praise be to God."

Allah | The Arabic word for God.

an-nafs al-ammarah | One of the three principal stages of self in Sufism, also mentioned in various verses in the Qur'an. In this stage, the self is primitive and incites people to commit evil.

an-nafs al-luwwamah | The second principal stage of self, also known as the self-accusing self. In this stage, the conscience is awakened and repents for listening to its ego.

an-nafs al-mutma'innah | The third principal stage of self where the self is at peace. This is the ideal stage of ego for Muslims. On this level, one relieves itself of all materialism and is firm in faith.

deen | The Arabic word for religion, although it often refers to worship in a comprehensive sense that includes all aspects of human life.

dunya | The Arabic word for world.

Eid | Two official holidays celebrated within Islam. One marks the end of Ramadan while the other honors the willingness of Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his son Ismail (Ishmael) as an act of obedience to God's command.

Hajj | The Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of the faith, that must be carried out at least once in an individual's lifetime by all adult Muslims who are physically and financially capable of undertaking the journey.

Halal | Food that is permissible to eat according to the teachings of Islam.

Imam | A Muslim religious leader who often leads others in prayer and worship.

Iman | The Arabic word for faith.

Islah | The Arabic word for reform, meaning to improve, to better.

Jahiliyyah | The Arabic word for ignorance. In Islam, it refers to the period preceding the revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad.

Jihad | A struggle within oneself against sin or one with a noble aim.

Jumu'ah | The Arabic for Friday, the day of congregational prayer.
Khutba | A sermon given by an imam on Fridays at noon prayer.

Kufr | The Arabic word that translates to "non-belief."

Masjid | The Arabic word for mosque.

Nia | The Arabic word for intention. Intention is highly valued in Islam as it is believed to be the foundation of every deed, upon which individuals will be judged by God.

rak'ah | A single iteration of prescribed movements and supplications performed by Muslims as part of the prescribed obligatory prayer.

Ramadan | The ninth month of the Islamic calendar. It is considered the holiest month and is marked by a period of fasting, one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

Salaam Alaikum | The Arabic, Islamic greeting that translates to “Peace be unto you.” This is used as the traditional greeting among Muslims.

Salah | The Arabic word for prayer. Muslims are required to pray five daily prayers, one of the five pillars of Islam.

sallallahu alayhi wa sallam | The Arabic, Islamic phrase that translates to “Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him.” The phrase is used when evoking the Prophet Muhammad.”

shahada | The Muslim declaration of belief in the oneness of Allah (God) and acceptance of Muhammad as his final messenger. Reciting the *shahada* is the only formal step in conversion (or reversion) to Islam: “There is no true God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of God.”

sheikh | An honorific title often reserved for senior Muslim leaders.

Shiism | The second-largest branch of Islam. Believers hold that Ali ibn Abi Talib was the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad.

Shiite | An adherent to the Shia branch (or sect) of Islam.

subhanAllah | The Arabic, Islamic phrase that translates to “Glory be to God.”

Sunna | The Islamic traditions and practices of the Prophet Muhammad that constitute a model for Muslims to follow.

Sunni | The larger of the two main branches, or sects, of Islam. It differs from the Shia branch in its understanding of the Sunna—the traditional portion of Islamic law based on the Prophet Muhammad’s words or acts—and its conception of religious leadership, and its acceptance of the first three caliphs.

Tawhid | Islam’s central and single most important concept, which declares the indivisible oneness of God.

Ummah | The whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion.

Zakat | A form of almsgiving considered in Islam as a religious obligation and is next after prayer in importance.

Zuhr | The second of the five daily, mandatory Islamic prayers that takes place around noon.

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