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Theme section

"I want you to be a Muslim"

Religious subjectivity, proselytization,
and discursive conversion in an
ethnography of Islam[1]

Abstract   "I cannot pressure you. I want you to be a Muslim. You could die to-night!" In this article, I examine some recurrent ethical and methodological ambi-guities in my anthropological fieldwork among Danish Muslims, involving repeat-ed confrontation with Muslim proselytization and daʿwā (invitation). I argue that the ethnographer's religious subjectivity, as well as the manner in which the eth-nographic self is constructed, negotiated, and positioned in the field, directly re-lates to the possibility of an intimate engagement with the Muslim narrative, af-fecting the reliability of the analysis and success of the ethnographic study. I also introduce the notion of "discursive conversion" to describe the stage in which the internalization of the language of faith and voluntary acceptance of local catego-ries allows for a direct invitation to Islam.

Ousman is an imam from Aarhus who, according to one of his colleagues from the Copenhagen, is well-known for being outspoken. During our first meeting he – perhaps uncertain about my motives – seems eager to set the record straight about hot topics such as the implementation of sharia law, terrorist groups, burka-bans, and so forth. After hearing him out, then steering the interview towards theological issues, the conversation turns more affable and informal.

"In Islam, everybody has the freedom to decide. YOU have a free will.[2] I cannot pressure you. Psychological brainwashing and convincing people by taking advantage of their problems is strictly forbidden: Allah will not accept a brainwashed convert."

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"That's what I hear. *Ikhlāṣ* (sincerity) is important, is it not?" I comment. Ousman then relates some stories about "ethnic Danish" people coming to him on a regular basis to say the *šahādah* (testimony). He was particularly moved by one woman's motivations.

"After the ritual I asked her: 'Why did you become a Muslim?' She said: 'Because of the moon.' *Al-ḥamdulillāh*! If you look carefully, there is a kind of line in the moon, as if it cracked. This is narrated in the Holy Qur'an, where Allah, the All-Powerful, split the moon in two parts as a miracle and then put it back together. He left the crack as a sign for future generations." When I keep quiet, Ousman continues, first looking to his side and then straight into my eyes. "I do what I can to show you right and wrong, you know, then you decide... I feel that Allah wants me to call you to Islam, so I do it right now. I am now inviting you to Islam." He falls silent.

I am taken aback by the sudden shift from an amiable abstract conversation to a direct act of reaching out, the almost dramatic crystallization of words into a deed requiring my response. After a moment's hesitation, and what I perceive to be an awkward silence, I prepare to leave, hastily putting my Qur'an and notebook in my backpack.

"We'll see what happens!" I respond. But Ousman insists:

"You know, nothing will change when you say the *šahādah*, same life, same friends …"

"Well, you don't really believe that, do you?" Standing up, I express my predicament of wanting to get intensively involved with Islam while trying to keep some kind of professional academic distance. I try to communicate my discomfort with these situations. The imam says he understands, but then persists:

"Remember, we never know when we die."

"That's true, I guess."

"So don't wait. You could die tonight!"

"Alright … Thank you for your time, perhaps we'll meet again ..."

"I hope it will be as a Muslim. *Inshallah.*"

"We'll see what's in store for me … Goodbye!" I leave the mosque's property with big steps, electrified by the intensity of the exchange.

The chief concern prompting this analysis was my somewhat distressing confrontation with Muslim missionary zeal and repeated invitations to Islam (*daʿwā*) while performing participant observation and interviews in diverse Danish Muslim communities. Ranging from aggressive and insistent to considerate and mild, including insistently mild and aggressively considerate, these behaviors played an important role in many of my ethnographic encounters and exchanges. Reconstructing the conditions that allowed for this tenably uncommon number of missionizing experiences led me to consider how my religious subjectivity and ethnographic positioning affected the study, and which position ended up providing the best insight into my research topic. I came to understand the forgoing of strategic positioning and negotiation of local categories as essential to the apprehension and sometimes access to the religious discourse. Moreover, I came to see my confrontations and emotional response to *daʿwā* as indicative of a gradual and somewhat unintentional internalization of the Muslim religious logic.

I argue that the strategical deployment of the ethnographer's religiosity negates the ethical-methodological demand for emotional involvement and transformation because its delimitation counteracts the transformative power of the ethnographic encounter with the religious other, thereby hindering the creative process of collaborative knowledge production. While clear positioning and communication does mitigate anxiety-producing field experiences, refraining from clasping professional categories and accepting local ones leads to an intimate albeit emotionally demanding engagement with the research population. This calls for navigating rather than negotiating the categories one is assigned in the field; presuming the respondent has misconstrued academic motives is rather symptomatic of the academic's misconstruction of religious ones.

Observing that, for many of my interlocutors, religious commitment precedes understanding, I address the tension between attempting to reap the transformative dimension of ethnographic research and gain insight into religious phenomena, all without going through actual religious conversion and social commitment to the studied community. I hold that such transformation and insight happen through the adoption of lo-

cal categories and internalization of the language of faith, leading to a deepening of the conversation and what I will term a discursive conversion. This preliminary and occasionally unconscious conversion is what leads the ethnographer to be considered "in the knowing," ready to be extended direct and regular invitations to join the Islamic *ummah* (community). In other words, being confronted with *daʿwā* in this manner indicates that (intentionally or not) the recipient's religious subjectivity has been reconfigured into one of spiritual availability, and the adoption of the religious discourse has already taken place.

The invitation to Islam

The Muslim practice of *daʿwā* (literally "invitation") is considered a meritorious activity by the Danish Muslim community as well as the global *ummah*, based on a great number of straightforward passages in the Qur'an (cf. 3:104, 16:125, 41:33, 42:15).[3] The general view is that the Prophet's mission of spreading Islamic monotheism today is a so-called sufficiency duty (*farḍ al-kifāya*): if a certain number of Muslims in the community fulfill the obligation, it suffices. This happens by example and explanation. Force is illicit, and wisdom is key; as the famous Quranic verse (16:125) maintains, "Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance."[4]

For Susanne Olsson (2014, 192), *daʿwā* usually unfolds as "an individual practice aimed at improving the morality of the wider community where one lives," and such reform is "connected to public activism." For Charles Hirschkind (2005, 32) too, the practice has increasingly become "a space for the articulation of contestatory Islamic discourse on state and society." For the purposes of this paper, I want to focus on the proselytizing aspect, and the tension in wanting to receive *ḥasanāt* (credit for good deeds), the zealous impetus of helping the non-believer understand, and the awareness that there should be "no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256).

In my fieldwork, the emphasis on *ḥasanāt* was more

3. The most authoritative classical *mufassirūn* (writers of a commentary on the Qur'an), such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Baghawi, and Ibn Kathir (all living between the 9th and the 14th century), do not engage with the practicalities and ideological connotations of *daʿwā*, perhaps because the term *daʿwā* did not have the missionary connotations it currently has. Contemporary *mufassirūn*, on the other hand, discuss the notion somewhat at length. For instance, Sayyid Qutb, in commenting on some *āyāt* involving the call to Islam (3:104 and 12:108), argues for the reformation of the global *ummah* through political means.

4. Yusuf Ali interpretation.

marked in some communities than others, and there is general agreement that humans cannot know or calculate Judgment Day's "final balance." Moreover, communities and individuals I engaged with significantly differed in their interpretation of reward and duty. For some (Sunni with Salafi sympathies in particular), directly inviting non-Muslims to Islam appears to be both an individual duty and a reward. Yet *daʿwā* is subtler than merely asking the non-Muslim to acknowledge the Oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) and the prophethood of Muhammad. As several of my interlocutors in different environments point out, with a smile: "*daʿwā* can mean just smiling to your neighbor," i.e. showing good character. Individuals and even communities differ greatly in their understanding of what the "best and most gracious" way to argue might be; from literally extending an invitation to join the faith to anyone who shows a modicum of interest, to simply being a good exemplar and member of the community. Moreover, fieldwork on this topic, among the same communities I engaged, has shown some of the most active *daʿwā* groups emphasizing the distinction between proselytizing and informing, the latter being the main aim (Donslund 2017). While the format has changed over time (cf. Simonsen 1990), in recent years Muslim groups in Northern Europe have often explained *daʿwā* activities as informative in nature, and in many cases directed to the Muslim in-group. The location of the activities and choice of material, however, more often than not reveal a missionizing intent (Olsson 2014).

The rules seem clearer on the Danish Shi'a community, because the practice is related to two Ancillaries of the Faith: commanding what is just and forbidding what is evil (*al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-n-nahy ʿani-l-munkar*). Most importantly, one has to be certain that intervening in someone's life will produce a positive effect. If the recipient of *daʿwā* is not ready to listen, a confrontation amounts to pressuring and social control, which puts Islam in a bad light, worsening the situation. Most of my Shi'a and Sunni interlocutors thus agree that *daʿwā* requires a certain wisdom, experience, and ability to probe the recipient's capacity to understand the significance of the invitation.

The notion of *daʿwā* makes Islam a special case when it comes to the impact of proselytization on ethnographic studies. Unlike Hillary Crane (2013), whom Taiwanese Buddhists assured that karma is produced through action itself and that her

personal beliefs were almost irrelevant, for most of my inter-locutors action without intent is instructive but not "reward-ing." Therefore, extending an invitation to "say the šahādah" (the Islamic profession of faith) is a necessary first step for the non-Muslim's redemption and gaining of *ḥasanāt* from ritual activities. Moreover, the sensitivity required by the practice creates a situation of constant assessment of the ethnographer's status.

Vulnerable observers

In Weibel and Crane's edited volume *Missionary Imposi-tions* (2013), one of the main messages is that anthropologists engaging with religion must, as a kind of occupational hazard, endure intense bouts of proselytization, especially when zealous interlocutors repeatedly misconstrue anthropological curiosity as a kind of spiritual hunger. It would seem that there is some sort of miscommunication at work. The beginners-mind cultivated by ethnographers, as receptive as possible to the interlocutor's story, is seen as a cry for help and spiritual availability; any pious believer must after all attempt to save a seemingly wavering soul. In my case, I do not mean to suggest that the kind of proselytizing behavior I witnessed is the norm, nor that it is (necessarily) typical of certain Muslim environments, but that it relates to my own positioning in the field and the nature of *da ʿwā*. Rather than a miscommunication, there was an imbroglio of the various personas involved in an ethnographic study of religion. There is the ethnographic self, constructed within the university's walls and deployed in the field, stripped for efficiency, strategically positioned. There is the negotiated self, re-shaped and re-positioned by one's interlocutors, visibly engaged, looking for answers. Then there is the un-constructed, emotional, informal self. The first attempts to control the ethnographic encounter, the second is the recipient of *da ʿwā*, and the third experiences the distress associated with the invitation. The ethnographer's various personas can become entangled and confused, affecting the nature of the conversation. This generates a kind of anxiety, stemming from an effort to keep the ethnographic, negotiated, and informal selves separate, counteracted by one's interlocutor.

An episode with Kareem, one of my most helpful Muslim acquaintances, is illustrative of such a fieldwork situation. Meeting again after several months, Kareem immediately inquires about my progress. I reply that everything is going well, but not wanting to talk about me, I ask about his studies. Kareem answers dismissively, not willing to let me off the hook. "But listen. About your research, have *you* changed? I mean, do you know something you didn't know before, or have you just confirmed what you already thought?" I say something about exploring new themes, but the answer does not seem to satisfy him, and he half-jokingly insists: "But have you crossed to the other side yet?" I laugh, realizing his intentions. As in other occasions, Kareem does not accept my detached attitude and demands a full-hearted involvement. So I share with him my frustrations about the missionary zeal I endured in the last weeks. I complain that I fail to see how someone can claim to respect freedom of choice and religion and then repeatedly put me under this pressure to choose religion. I tell him that I feel as if my own open religiosity is neither acknowledged nor respected. Kareem is silent, and I realize that he too, albeit in a more discrete way, has been doing exactly that since the first day we met. "But you know, it's their duty, they have to do it ..." he says. "I mean, we know that there is a hell, and you know Islam by now, so you can't ignore it. [...] Those imams, they mean well." I reply that I understand, and in a way appreciate the intention.

With the ethical and reflexive turn in anthropology came a shift in focus from ethnographic data/account to the process/procedures of ethnographic fieldwork, from ethnographic knowledge/insight to the mechanisms of knowledge-making set in the researcher's mind before the act of writing. The reflexive imperative and the blurring of epistemological divides all led to the emergence of an ethical-methodological demand for intimate involvement.[5] Today, the anthropologist is, according to a growing number of authors, expected to engage one's emotionality and embrace the potential for transformation in the field. Ruth Behar (1996) defended and spoke of the anthropologist as a "vulnerable *observer*," in contrast to classical anthropological narratives construing the observer as (instructed to remain) detached and objective in the study of vulnerable *subjects*.[6] Some have posited it as an

5. Kirin Narayan (1993, 682) argued that in rethinking the self-other, insider-outsider categories, we also blur other divides: "One wall stands between ourselves as interested readers of stories and as theory-driven professionals; another wall stands between narrative (associated with subjective knowledge) and analysis (associated with objective truths). By situating ourselves as subjects simultaneously touched by life-experience and swayed by professional concerns, we can acknowledge the hybrid and positioned nature of our identities."
6. Renato Rosaldo's famous work about the Ilongot headhunters in the Philippines was praised as pioneering this kind of vulnerable ethnographic writing. Rosaldo (1989) wrote about the headhunter's meaning of "rage in grief" *from* his own grief, induced by the sudden death of his wife in the field, and thereby attaining, a profound ethnographic empathy. It is also around this time that Katherine Ewing (1994, 571) spoke of "the anthropological taboo" against "belief" and "going native" when it comes to the study of religion.

imperative: "One must allow oneself to be bent out of shape" (Wiegele 2013, 84). Researchers should have a genuine rather than calculated or feigned respect for the practices we study and ought to be open to personal change through and by those practices (Liberman 1999, 53).[7] The call for an "anthropology that breaks your heart" (Behar 1996) challenges not only social constructions and academic theorizations, but first and foremost the professional and personal identities brought to the field. This can constitute a problem, because in a way, in the anthropology of religion, going native, embracing vulnerability, and welcoming transformation amounts to metanoia or spiritual conversion.

There is no obvious and clear way to confront the vulnerable observer, which is why we tend to develop a professional identity and methodological defenses to reduce field anxiety (Devereux 1967). Identifying ourselves as "ethnographers," and the locus of our research as a "field" where we are to take on the "engineering view" is thus sometimes conceived of as a shield against various kinds of anxiety-inducing experiences, ranging from helplessness to partaking in power dynamics to missionary impositions.[8] Towards the turn of the century, however, the conditions were there to break down the methodological safeguards developed in the first half century of fieldwork-driven anthropology.[9] In short, it would seem that the ethnographer of religion can neither justifiably keep his distance, nor always reach the required degree of intimacy with his object of study.

Strategic positioning

Among the old guard, there were those who saw going native or involving one's religious subjectivity as losing one's perspec-

7. Others have argued for "standing in the gap" between disbelief and belief, one half lost and one half saved (Harding 1987), and a "walking between worlds" (Nietz 2002). For some this amounts to a kind of Coleridgean "willing suspension of disbelief," meant to open one up to new experiences and "not to intellectualize," to give oneself to the encounter so that one can "experience it more fully" and only later analyze it critically (Bruner 1996, 307).

8. Theories have been constructed to account for the emotionally distressing experiences and threats to identity, for example, labelling the phenomenon as "culture shock" and analyzing its various recognizable stages, whereby the "observer" is separated, psychologized, and distanced from himself.

9. The ethical demand for openness, change, involvement, and vulnerability fits with the narrative of those promoting an "ontological turn" in anthropology, "a basic reversal from striving to grasp 'the native's point of view,' to finding ways to overcome what one already grasps in order to better grasped *by* it" (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 7).

10. Evans-Pritchard famously distinguished between culture (rules for thinking and acting) and society (collectivity assigning membership) and urged anthropologists in the field to fully endorse the cultural, walking the walk and speaking the speak of the research population, but to avoid the societal part. The proper position of a researcher in the field is that of a "marginal native," long from being even a potential member.

tive as a social scientist and abandoning the goals that led one to the field (Freilich 1970, Peshkin 1984, Needham 1972).[10] While later developments have set the discipline on a quite different path, recent discussions are reminiscent of that attitude, requiring an account of subjectivity for the sake of objectivity.

Matthew Engelke (2002) argues for the necessity of finding a balance between the belief of the researcher and the researched, showing how icons such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner actually used their own conversion experiences to understand their particular study cases. For them, a developed religiosity opens doors not accessible to scholars unacquainted with belief. Religious conviction is then employed as a way to bridge the distance with the other, establishing rapport. In other words, the researcher's religious subjectivity and believing participation is useful and appropriate to the extent that it is conductive to anthropological knowledge. This raises several issues. Principally, the kind of "insider" understanding of the believer's "inner life" is rather, perhaps, a Christian or Buddhist understanding, which jeopardizes the value of an "outsider" understanding. It is unclear how the ethnographer is supposed to disentangle his religiosity from the production of knowledge. The problem is that, when one enters the field with a clearly defined religious identity, it appears arduous to see it as an object separate from the self and use it strategically, all while taking the other's religiosity seriously and maintaining its integrity. On the other hand, it would be hard to argue that, when the ethnographer's religious subjectivity is undefined, it is because it is lacking *in toto*, and one can just ignore the issue.

The tendency is to construct a stable ethnographic self, consistently positioning the researcher in the field in relation to the research population and resolving some of the dilemmas in the ethnography of religion. The reasoning goes that the professional anthropologist trains to be a *participant* observer rather than a *believing* participant. The construction of this position assumes a kind of distinction between "belief" and "anthropological knowledge," and the possibility of actively and strategically positioning oneself in such a way as to account for the first without impinging on the second. Yet strategic positioning in the ethnography of religion involves and indeed requires a quite complex defining of one's own religious subjectivity: a recognition, a disclosure, an analysis

of effects. Occasionally, this does not pose a problem; faith-based ethnographies are not hard to find, especially in the anthropology of Islam.[11] When there is no defined faith to speak from, the easiest way out might seem to keep the "question of belief" open and unanswered, flirting with the idea of going native to find oneself "walking between worlds." In line with this view, many seem to opt for a stoical methodological agnosticism.[12] Declaring oneself agnostic in the field might be methodologically sound but is emotionally uncanny; it hinders a whole-hearted and sincere interaction with one's interlocutors, creating a whole set of ethical ambiguities and perplexing situations.

Even more problematic is the communication of one's motives, goals, and religious status in the field. Presumed to be in the best interests of both the ethnographer and respondent, this tactic to mitigate anxiety-producing field experiences in practice involves a continuous decision-making process, especially when it comes to participation in religious practices. Crane (2013, 13), in her work among a Buddhist community, promptly found that she had to make regular decisions about which ritual actions she would and would not participate in as she tried to communicate her "carefully considered fieldwork position." Even then, her interlocutors took most conversations as challenges to their missionizing abilities, and she eventually chose to "bend the truth" with regard to her religious identity, which was "the only way I could get relief from the attempts to get me to become a nun" (Crane 2013, 16). Analyzing her personal ambivalence in the field, "flirting with conversion" only to reject it, she asserts that her attempt to position herself as both objective researcher and open-minded potential believer

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11. In the 1980s, Akbar Ahmed (1986, 1988), Ilyas Ba-Yunus and Farid Ahmad (1985), and Merryl Wyn Davies (1985, 1988) each in a different way called for an Islamic anthropology. It could be argued that establishing an ideological foundation at the beginning of the ethnographic enterprise makes the subsequent discussion an internal one, accessible only by like-minded individuals working the same common ground. This is problematic

insofar as the discussion does not open up new directions and pose new questions to which the broader academic community can respond, it merely works to produce answers and refine a self which becomes more and more distant from divergent ideologies.

12. In sociology, Peter Berger's (1979) methodological atheism (the practice of bracketing or refusing to consider the ultimate reality of religious objects, such as God and

angels for the purpose of sociological study), was later criticized as untenable and injurious to sociology's aims, in favor of a methodological agnosticism involving a "sufficient suspension of belief in any putative supernatural object of religious experience as to allow consideration of alternative, naturalistic explanations of the experience" (Porpora 2006, 58).

resulted in "an awkward dance in which I both welcomed and rejected their religious overtures and they both revealed and hid themselves from my researcher's gaze" (2013, 13). In her study among Charismatic Catholics, Mary Jo Neitz (2002, 39) decided to draw the line with the communion ritual, which to her signified "belonging and believing." Her choice was not neutral, but dictated by her personal religious history. Ronald Lukens-Bull (2007, 179) went from describing himself as "not a Muslim" but "safe to talk to," to asserting that anthropology was his religion, to simply giving up disabusing those he met of their assumption that because he prayed he was Muslim. In short, when it comes to religious identity, establishing and communicating one's position in the field is problematic, and sending mixed signals might be inevitable.

Navigating local categories

The shaping and positioning of the ethnographic self involves much more than a one-sided construction. From the first encounter, the ethnographer's identity and motives are rendered meaningful in local terms, they are assigned a place in the local discursive field. Unsurprisingly, the ethnographer's show of interest in his interlocutors' religiosity is reciprocated with a similar attention. The relationship is unbalanced: the interlocutor has been selected for his membership to community and commitment to a particular religious narrative, while the researcher might not have any such interest. Yet the peculiarity with engaging religious and missionizing communities is that the researcher can actually become a member. Efforts towards intimacy and crossing boundaries as well as mimicking insider behavior are quite naturally interpreted as signals of an interest to acquire this membership. The intimate engagement with a community's religious discourse presents members with the opportunity to assign categories charged with religious significance. All efforts to learn the religious language and show interest on the part of the ethnographer will appear to confirm these categories and interpretation of motives.

In the volume mentioned earlier, Daniel Washburn is understood as a "seeker of truth," whose spiritual journey has led to a Mormon church, while Lisa DiCarlo is broadly

labeled as "believer," and Jennifer Selby "oppressed Muslim Maghrebian" (Crane and Weibel 2013). There are countless examples of how such local categories shape the particular fieldwork, and there is always one, since there would be no rapport without the other's ability to "make sense" of the ethnographer's role and motives, which requires reference to known modes of existence within one's own discourse. When there is little discursive common ground, this translates to an approximate categorization and possible misconstruction of position and motives. For instance, Katharine Wiegele (2013), who identifies and presented herself to Catholic charismatics in Manila as "raised Catholic," was labeled as "just Catholic." Her interlocutors did not consider her fully "walking in the Spirit," as so many of their fellow Filipino Catholics. This seemingly trivial nuance is an important indicator of the discursive criteria of a specific epistemic community: it contains a great deal of inferred knowledge, revealing the shape of that particular religious discourse. During my own fieldwork, the way I engage Islam and ambiguous religious status made me someone who has difficulty acknowledging or admitting his knowledge of the divine: a "blind man" trying to open his eyes.

The tendency in the ethnography of religion has been to *negotiate* local categories through strategic construction and positioning of the ethnographic self, as discussed earlier, but also through an ongoing balancing act in the field. This is evident from the focus, among other things, on the aforementioned problematization of participation. Some authors suggest to negotiate local categories through a selective participation in ritual behavior: Jill Dubish (1995) lights the candles of a Greek shrine and donates money but does not kiss the icons, Simone Schweber (2007) considered partaking in only some ritual actions in a Jewish school, and Crane (2013) refrained from overdoing the prostrations in a Buddhist monastery.[13] Lukens-Bull (2007), for his part, characterizes anthropologists and ethnographers in general as "professional border crossers," whose professionalism is determined by their ability to balance their different roles, most notoriously that of the observer and the participant. At the same time, however, he recognizes the role of misperception, which became a major theme in his own fieldwork. In fact, his own position in the field was not so much a negotiation as a result of circumstances. The part

13. Other authors, while suggesting similar things, describe a lack of control on the issue of participation. Peshkin (1984) argues that it is nearly impossible to refrain from participating in the swirl of activity in the field, but most importantly that respondents expect their visitors to partake in an exchange of services.

in which he played an active role was the delimitation of his religious subjectivity: "openly and decidedly non-Christian." This amounted to a forceful rejection of the most likely local category, with the effect of creating even more confusion among his research population with regard to his status.

For the purposes of this paper, what is most interesting is the degree to which various scholars think, want, or presume to have control over participation and the negotiation of local categories. The direction academic and ethnographic enterprises take as well as the decisions taken in the field is arguably determined by the researcher's pre-existing religious history (Spring 1998).[14] Paul Clough (2006), reflecting on his own fieldwork, finds that his perception of his Muslim interlocutors was profoundly influenced by his Catholic background. Even when not dealing with Islam directly, but with the community's economic practices, his interpretations were guided by his (Catholic) understanding of his respondents' religiosity. These works reveal that both participation and negotiation are framed from the start: the ethnographer is primed for specific experiences and understandings. Clarity in the negotiation of one's position and role in the field does not necessarily make the situation less confused. Rather than a form of research that relies on the researcher's ability to negotiate an identity that is "betwixt and between," the (successful) ethnographic study then perhaps relies on the researcher's ability to *navigate* perceptions, allowing those assumptions that open doors and refraining from controlling the process of identification.

Early on in my fieldwork, when Kareem and his friend Mubin refer to me as a "non-believer," I try to question the label, eliciting a surprisingly loud protest. Mubin exclaims frustrated that one cannot "MAKE a blind man see the color purple. […] You're blind. You have never ever seen purple before." This leads Mubin to extend a subtle invitation to embrace Islam, not as a means of redemption but as a path to knowledge: "If you want to understand this, perhaps you should start on an earlier level. […] Start believing." Such decision, according to Mubin, will open my eyes and enable me to "see things in another dimension," from another perspective. "And then you can see purple when we talk about purple." Kareem then suggests that I am afraid to commit myself to saying I believe and complains that I am trying to "stay in the middle of nowhere." Ironically,

14. Lukens-Bull (2007, 179), after declaring himself a secular humanist with a deeply religious Christian past, observes that "the fact that at one point in my life religious moods and motivations had been central, made outright lies uncomfortable." He also suggests his youth experience with Christian ritual made him comfortable with participation in prayer and ritual, while "making public declarations of faith where there was none was uncomfortable given the place of testimonials in some of the churches I had attended as a youth."

this observation is in line with the idea of anthropologists as "betwixt and between" border crossers, but it did not make me feel more professional. In short, any attempt to negotiate categories such as "blind man" or "non-believer" frustrated my interlocutors' efforts to convey their story. These categories are a reference point not just for the discussion on belief, but also for their formulations concerning my actual research subject, human freedom. Mubin and Kareem identify my commitment to an ambiguous religiosity and professional detachment as what keeps me from truly "understanding Islam." Realizing how "believing" and "understanding" function in their narrative, I dropped the case, which allowed them to make their point and move on.

In accepting to be a "blind man" with the potential for conversion, something is lost, and something is gained. In my case, I lost my ability to convey and establish my own ambiguous religiosity, maintaining my own familiar categories, and justify a professional detachment in the field. I gained the ability to participate in the religious discourse of my interlocutors, undergoing a kind of reconfiguration of my religious subjectivity, affecting the quality of the ethnographic investigation and escalating the emotional intensity of the exchanges. For many of my interlocutors, the acceptance of a certain discourse on belief, including my own status, was necessary in order to even attempt to convey their perspective on human freedom, which is in many ways relative to the Islamic notion of the Divine.

Studying American Christian schools, Alan Peshkin (1984) chose to pay special attention to his community's sensitivity to his religious identity and complied with all the leadership's categories and behavioral demands. He was then confronted with an insistent pressure to convert "to the point of annoyance." In a similar fashion, it was after the first fieldwork period, and after having given up the negotiation of local categories by explaining my attachment to a kind of open-ended religiosity, that I was confronted with persistent Muslim proselytization. Unable to navigate out of the local category of "potential convert" without resorting to "bending the truth," as in Crane, I was "bent by it." And the "truth" was that, as someone assenting to be spiritually "blind," without insisting on some academic vantage point, I was now to heed the call to Islam and open my eyes.

Discursive conversion

The successful assignment of local categories is merely the first step towards a direct invitation. It is only after a long and intense conversation that Fadil, a part-time imam in his early thirties, seems to think the time is ripe to ask if I have "thought about becoming Muslim." When I hesitate, Fadil proceeds to identify the issue. I voice out my innermost doubts about my understanding of the Divine. This is familiar ground for the imam, who breaks out in a long passionate monologue: "To all those that come to me that can agree with the *šahādah*, I advise them to take it NOW, because the KNOWING of God, it takes time!" Fadil advises not to worry about knowledge because "knowledge will come AFTER the decision to become a Muslim." According to Fadil, you have to study Islam "WHILE you are LIVING IT." He ends with saying that those who doubt want to wait until they understand it fully, but that "you would need three or four lifetimes to understand it fully!"

Fadil's stance brings to mind Richard Price's (1983) description of the Saramaka "First-Time knowledge," according to which one cannot be told and taught everything at once. The student should be met where he stands, and gradually the process of learning will reveal all the things he does not know. Still, for many of my interlocutors "understanding Islam" involves a sincere, heartfelt commitment and decision that all those interested, ethnographers included, are required to make. Similarly, Mikkel Rytter (2015, 140) was told by a Sufi grand Sheikh that trying to explain the experience of *nūr Muhammadī* (Muhammadan light) to a non-Muslim like him was "just as absurd as asking me to explain the scent of a rose to a person who has never smelled this wonder of God." Mubin expresses a similar notion when he advises me to start believing in order to "open your eyes" and "see purple when we talk about purple."

When confronted with the common Muslim insistence that understanding requires religious commitment, most reiterate the methodological difference between researching people engaged in religious behavior and researching the religion itself, where only the latter may require some kind of conversion (Lukens-Bull 2007). This analytical distinction amounts to failing to consider the interlocutor's point seriously because it eschews as a misconception of what is in fact a crucial point: the

understanding of Islam is predicated upon the acknowledgment of and submission to Allah. The risk is that non-confessional academic knowledge of Islam becomes void in the eyes of the research population, making the ethnographic study anything but collaborative, transformational, and involved. Taking this (unsurmountable) demand for religious commitment seriously, however, requires an understanding of its function in the Muslim religious discourse, which stems from a previous decision to engage and commit to it, and amounts to a sort of preliminary conversion.

The notion of "discourse" has the merit of negating the facile distinction between ideas and practices, text and world, that "culture" maintained (Abu-Lughod 1991). It allows for recognizing and accounting the negotiation of diverse shifting and competing statements within the same social group, simultaneously getting at the sometimes deeply incoherent nature of the social world and the practical effects of its expressions. An ethnographic analysis of discourse then studies how statements within a particular speech community gain their meaning, accounting for the underlying conditions of possibility and articulatory practices involved. This however involves a long-term intimate involvement, through which the ethnographer inevitably becomes enmeshed with the discourse he seeks to study, along with his religious subjectivity and positioning. I suggest that this long-term exposure to a religious discourse and eventual ability to "make sense" of its statements leads to a "discursive conversion." This conversion does not involve the Muslim "reversion" to the "straight path," but rather the idea that one starts to think in the "language of faith," to gain the ability to anticipate relations between statements and practices. This allows for the apprehension of how something like *da'wā* functions in the Muslim discursive network, together with its gravity. Most importantly, compared to spiritual conversion, it is not an active decision, but rather the effect of an intensive engagement with a religious discourse.

From understanding to experience

In her decade-long study of Christian fundamentalism, Susan Harding (2000) analyzes how preacher Jerry Falwell and his

followers became an important force in the United States through a powerful use of language and storytelling. Harding describes how, by participating intensively in their world, she interiorized the religious discourse she was researching, leading to a kind of linguistic conversion enabling her to grasp the "truth" that Falwell conveyed. Balancing her role as analytic scholar and increasingly "religious fundamentalist mindset," she brings out the complexity (and inconsistencies) of the Christian fundamentalist discourse. In a way, Harding moves back and forth from a phenomenological involvement (her description of the experience of being "witnessed to" by a minister) to a more detached discourse analytical approach to the rhetorical strategies employed by religious authorities.

Jeanne Favret-Saada, writing about witchcraft in the Bocage region of France, states that there are only two subject positions when it comes to statements about witchcraft: the bewitched and the unwitcher; those who are neither will not even encounter and gain awareness of the discourse. "For anyone who wants to understand the meaning of [witchcraft] discourse, there is no other solution but to practice it oneself, to become one's informant" (Favret-Saada 1980, 22). Harding (1987) compares this to the rhetoric of her own research population, according to whom unbelievers have no chance to understand their faith, with the difference that the Gospel is public and actively targets nonbelievers. With regard to the ethnographer, the point is that there is no neutral position from which to observe the discourse and gather information: one is either lost or saved and will be addressed accordingly. Harding (1987, 171) writes that she was "naive enough" to think she could be detached, participate in the culture for months, engage with the community without partaking in it. She presumed to be able to ask questions based on respect and knowledge "and still remain outside, separate, obscure about what I believed and disbelieved." As she discovered, there was no such ground, at least not for her interlocutors. For them, she was "searching." They tell her that "God works in mysterious ways," and in her case, God seemed to let her find her way to Him through the book she was writing about them. Harding observes that "My story about what I was doing there, instead of protecting me from going native, […] located me in their world: I was a lost soul on the brink of salvation."

Discursive conversion thus involves acquiring the particular religious language of the speech community, involving both the passive skill of listening and the active effort to speak in those terms. Internalizing the "language of faith," along with its logic, affects not only the quality of the conversation but eventually also the ethnographer's conception and experience of the world.[15] An example could be Mikkel Rytter's previously mentioned work with the Danish-Pakistani Sufi community. In one article, after outlining the Naqshbandi *tariqa*'s discourse on affect, Rytter (2015) adds a reflection on the extent to which he could get a taste of the ecstatic experience of *nūr*, "reach *wajd*" (ecstasy), during his long-term engagement with the community. Similarly to the local categories I was assigned, Rytter was said to be "a hopeless case with a dead heart," because his primary intention was to "learn about the Naqshbandiyya and their ritual practices and cosmology, not to embrace Islam" (Rytter 2015, 154). Rytter then relates a strange and unexpected dream in which he was visited by a Sheikh whose touch made him "go in *wajd*," giving him his long-awaited taste of *nur*. Sharing this dream/vision with the local Naqshbandi Sheikh, its veracity is confirmed, and explained as a possible response to his prolonged fieldwork and sincere interest in the *tariqa*. Rytter resists the tendency to explain what he felt with reference to some kind of rational knowledge and embraces his Sheikh's suggestion of an actual visitation.

Rytter is confident in his success. In the anthropologist's words, the visitation meant that his efforts and aspiration to "understand" the Naqshbandiyya *tariqa* had been noticed and recognized. "It would mean that I have somehow been accepted as a Saifi novice" (Rytter 2015, 156).[16] He also states: "My participation and involvement in the *zikr* gatherings has provided me with an embodied knowledge and insight into Sufi experiences," and "this involvement has […] enabled me to participate in the ongoing conversations among the Saifi *murid*s when they discuss the […] experience of *wajd*" (Rytter 2015, 156). Without some kind of conversion to the studied religious discourse, such confidence in "embodied knowledge and insight" and participation in the Saifi conversation would not be imaginable, for the simple reason that the conditions would not be in place for that knowledge and conversation to make sense.

15. To some extent, it also involves a participation in Islam as a discursive tradition (Asad 1986, 17).

16. Katherine Ewing (1994) relates a very similar visitation of a saint in a dream during her work with Pakistani Sufi. Interestingly, this dream comes only after a period of struggle with the "temptation to believe," when she decides to "approach the whole encounter as a personal experience rather than as anthropological research" (Ewing 1994, 575).

This is an example of how engaging, partaking, and internalizing a religious discourse is more impactful than a mere intellectual understanding: it has the potential to re-shape one's reality. While Harding's discursive conversion manifests in her ability to take on the Christian fundamental mindset and the religious argumentation of her interlocutors, including emotional reactions in appropriate situations, in Rytter's case the discourse on *nur* crystallizes in an actual religious experience, which he takes seriously in the same way he would with that of his interlocutors. Both cases include a certain phenomenological involvement, the embracing of a religious explanation of the experience, and the recognition of the ethnographer's body as an informant itself.

Conclusion

Kareem is driving me back home. After a discussion about *ḥasanāt*, prompted by the Muslim funeral we just witnessed together, he takes his chance to give me some heartfelt advice.

"*Habibi*, when you become Muslim, THEN you will learn things!" He laughs. "No, honestly … for those who never heard about Islam, okay, we believe that God's mercy will … you know, get them to paradise, because they didn't know any of it. But you, you KNOW, my friend, you KNOW!" He emphasizes. "So if you don't obey, you're going to be fucked!" At this point we are both laughing. "Because YOU KNOW. Yeah, yeah! I'm serious!"

"I'm serious!" I echo, giggling.

"No, it's like ... when you KNOW, you have responsibility. When you don't know, *yani* …"

"And you could die any minute. Okay." I open the door.

"Yeah. Have a nice time," says Kareem grinning. We shake hands.

"You too. Thank you for this huh!" I add, turning off my recording app.

Ethnographic insight into religious matters is achieved in the ambiguous liminal space where one's own religiosity fades and that of the other begins. Inhabiting this space comes with a degree of distress, which is directly related to the way the

ethnographic self is fashioned, negotiated, and clasped in the field. As I hope to have conveyed in this paper, this process of construction and negotiation also affects the ethnographic knowledge we produce. It influences the way the ethnographer and his motives are construed by his interlocutors, and consequently what is shared and held back. Furthermore, the strategical deployment of one's religious subjectivity in a way negates the ethical demand for involvement and transformation because its delineation counteracts the transformative power of the ethnographic encounter and the creative process of knowledge production.

Discursive conversion happens in a similar liminal space of conceptual and linguistic ambiguity, cleared by the ethnographer. This requires a certain willingness and perhaps naiveté: the willingness to accept the local category of "potential convert," and to refrain from sticking to those originating in a removed academic discourse, combined with the naive receptivity to religious narrative. I do not mean to suggest that such receptivity is essential to conduct an ethnography of religion, but its presence (or lack thereof) does shape the nature of a specific kind of ethnographic encounter and insight. Maintaining my everyday ambiguous religiosity in the field disrupted the ethnographic conversation because it did not allow my interlocutors to fall back on the standardized narrative they propose to their usual atheist, agnostic, or Christian guests. Moreover, my ambivalence was soon eschewed by my interlocutors as an invalid stance and perceived as refusing to take sides, a kind of insincerity or confusion to be dispelled.

The reconfiguration of religious subjectivity in the field, together with the internalization of the religious discourse, created the possibility for more intimate exchanges and convinced my interlocutors that "I know," what they were talking about, which warranted the extension of direct invitations to Islam, requiring my response and commitment. It seems that the intentional decision to become a Muslim is preceded by a voluntary acceptance of local categories as well as the acknowledgment and internalization of the Muslim discourse. An understanding of the gravity and emotional reaction to *daʿwā* can be seen as symptomatic of this internalization. Intentional religious conversion is thus predicated upon an earlier, possibly unintentional, discursive conversion.

I am hoisting myself out of the car when Kareem calls me back, suddenly turning very serious.

"Wait, listen, listen man ... I think it takes a lot of courage. To change religion, or one's way of life, or one's way of understanding life. So I hope one day you will get that courage. I have been praying … and you know, my wife, she was not Muslim, she became Muslim while we were vacationing in Jordan."

"Oh! Really?"

"Yeah. I've been praying to God for 10 years, that she might become Muslim. It took her 10 years to make the decision. She has been BELIEVING for a long time, but you know, it takes courage. So I hope, one day, if you believe, you will find courage too."

I shrug my shoulders. "*Inshallah*," I say in a whisper, after a short silence. I step out and close the door behind me. "Yes! *Inshallah*!!" shouts Kareem from inside the car.

Abstract på dansk

"Jeg kan ikke presse dig. Jeg vil have, at du bliver muslim. Du kunne dø i aften!" I denne artikel undersøges nogle tilbagevendende etiske og metodologiske tvetydigheder i antropologisk feltarbejde blandt danske muslimer, der involverer gentagende konfrontationer med muslimsk rekruttering og *da'wā* (invitation). Jeg argumenterer for, at etnografens religiøse subjektivitet samt den måde et etnografisk selv konstrueres, forhandles og placeres i felten på, direkte vedrører muligheden for et intimt engagement med den muslimske fortælling, hvilket påvirker analysens pålidelighed og etnografiens succes. Jeg introducerer også begrebet "diskursiv konvertering" for at beskrive det stadium, hvor internaliseringen af troens sprog og frivillig accept af lokale kategorier giver mulighed for direkte invitation til islam.

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