



## Un/Covering: Female Religious Converts Learning the Problems and Pragmatics of Physical Observance in the Secular World

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*This article presents the experiences of three women who have chosen to move from secular, assimilated lives to lives characterized by the distinctive dress and practice associated with observant Islam, Orthodox Judaism, and Orthodox Christianity, respectively. All three relied upon informal, peer, and distance learning strategies for their religious education. The article analyzes both experiences in informal adult religious education and contemporary U.S. experiences with identity and assimilation, or covering (Yoshino 2006). [women, religious identity, religious education, patriarchy]*

"In the American dream, assimilation helps us become not just Americans, but the kind of Americans we seek to be. Just conform, the dream whispers, and you will be respected, protected, accepted." Kenji Yoshino, *Covering* (2006:20).<sup>1</sup>

Religious conversion often involves instruction in the pragmatics and physicality of observance that can be as important and meaningful as the convert's spiritual awakening and profession of faith. The learning associated with conversion is often characterized by relearning to belong, to be in the world, to shed former selves, and, for many, to simultaneously coexist with and nonconform to secular society (Stromberg 1990). More than merely a spiritual shift, conversion can also be a complex physical and cultural process that requires intense instruction and mentoring in an observant community (Luria 1996; Taylor 1999).

In this article, I explore some of the religious conversion experiences of three women learning what it means to nonconform with secular culture, or to stop covering (Yoshino 2006). As Yoshino writes, we are currently in an era where many religious minorities in particular are "covering"; to that end I explore the multiple meanings of covering: from Yoshino's interpretation of "toning down unfavorable identities" (2006:4) to the fundamentalist Christian and Jewish shorthand for a woman's covering her hair or wearing modest dress, and the Muslim woman's hijab, also a form of covering one's hair and wearing modest dress (Abu-Lughod 2002; Bronner 1993; El-Guindi 1999; Krakowski 1991; Mahmood 2005). I suggest that for some religious women, then, the act of covering their hair or bodies in accordance with religious identity and observance is really, and paradoxically, an act of uncovering, in the sense that they are choosing to actively resist the pressure to cover in the sense of choosing to nonconform, even if there are consequences to that resistance, as has been the case in France since its 2004 ban on "conspicuous religious symbols" (Economist 2004:24).

These analyses use ethnographic case studies of three middle-class female religious converts, each of whom has been learning about and adopting a new religious identity using a variety of teaching and learning strategies as an adult. While independent learning using online, text, peer, didactic, and face-to-face instructional formats is commonly used by many adult learners, these women are further distinguished in that their learning is not solely about spiritual change but is also a pragmatic lesson in the physical changes of

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uncovering. As Stephanie, Amanda, and Rebecca<sup>2</sup> move from secular, “covered” lives to lives characterized by forms of “uncovered” religious orthodoxy and its often distinctive dress, they grapple with learning to “uncover” in different ways: Stephanie struggles with isolation and hostility and seeks solace in a robust online community of fundamentalist Christian women; Amanda turns to the Qur’an itself and to other progressive Muslims to reinterpret hijab from a feminist perspective; Rebecca puts her conversion and Orthodox observance on hold for several years as she struggles with her own complex and layered identity as a multiracial woman uncovering in a different way.

Fundamentally, these women’s experiences suggest that choosing to nonconform and “uncover” is more than a personal change. Instead it speaks to the larger complexities of self, learning, and agency in a cultural climate that Yoshino calls a “renaissance of assimilation” (2006:3). While the mechanisms by which we all learn to cover in the first place are part of the intricacies of symbolic interaction and socialization, culturally reproduced and reinforced over time (Blumer 1969; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), the mechanisms by which one might learn to “uncover” are less clear. Critical incidents such as spiritual shifts play a role in awakening critical consciousness (Zamudio et al. 2009) and providing the *why* of uncovering. However, I suggest that the religious education offered to/undertaken by the convert provides the *how*. While a great deal of attention has been paid to religious conversion in the psychological literature, somewhat less research has been done from an anthropological perspective, and an even smaller percentage of that work has focused on women’s personal enactment of practical religious education (Connelly 2009; Cucchiari 1988; Bryant and Lamb 1999; Buckser and Glasier 2003; Deeb 2009; Mahmood 2005).

Regardless of an individual’s religious affiliation and/or practice, the concept of uncovering in the context of the convert’s education raises questions: What does it mean to “un-cover”? How do individuals learn to, and think about, resisting the pressure to cover (i.e., assimilate into a dominant culture or norm)? The paper begins with a discussion of theories of assimilation and passing followed by a brief methodological overview. Participant vignettes, discussion of key themes, and final conclusions bring the paper to a close.

### Covering and Identities

Yoshino draws a distinction between “passing” and covering. The former is about *hiding* a stigmatized identity from others; for example, the main character in Nella Larsen’s 1932 novel, *Passing*, is a light-skinned African-American woman who passes for white, marries a white man, and is subsequently consumed with hiding her African American identity from a hostile, racist world that perceives her as white. Covering, meanwhile, is about *downplaying* a stigmatized identity. Borrowing from Goffman, Yoshino illustrates the difference between passing and covering:

Goffman [notes] that passing pertains to the visibility of a particular trait, while covering pertains to its obtrusiveness. He relates how Franklin Roosevelt always stationed himself behind a table before his advisers came in for meetings. Roosevelt was not passing, since everyone knew he used a wheelchair. He was covering, downplaying his disability so people would focus on his more conventionally presidential qualities. [Yoshino 2006:18]

Yoshino writes that women are encouraged to cover by being “told to ‘play like men’ at work and to make their child care responsibilities invisible” (2006:21), and to avoid feminist affiliations and, for academic women, feminist scholarship. Similarly, Fordham and Ogbu’s work documenting the world of “acting white” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986) has illustrated how black youth are encouraged to cover their blackness to assimilate to racist conceptualizations of the good student; such “acting White” is a burden “imposed on Black students within a white dominated institution in which Black culture is marginal-

ized and stigmatized and an alienating racialized performance is the price of academic success" (Fordham 2008:268). So also men who occupy subaltern masculinities may adopt stances associated with hegemonic masculinity in order to compete and succeed (Connell 2005; Griffiths 2006). Ethnographies of obese persons reveal that men and women alike cover their size by becoming less present in the public sphere; this can be through avoiding public situations, silencing themselves, or through distancing themselves from their own physicality (and from non-obese persons) by a skewed kind of "acting thin," namely adopting pejorative, often crude, self-deprecating language around fatness and size (Brown 1989; Monaghan and Hardey 2009). In exemplars from the ethnography of disability, disabled persons and their families go to great lengths to diminish the visibility of disability, employing a range of functional covers like prosthetic eyes and limbs, as well as the discourse of fitting in among the normal and "achieving" equality in the face of adversity (Bridgens 2009; Jenks 2005). Finally, Zine describes Canadian Muslim youth being openly exhorted by school administrators to "act like Christians" (2001:413).

Yoshino reminds us that when individuals uncover, identities become choices. For example, when a participant wears hijab to publicly identify herself and uncover as a Muslim, she is refusing to "tone down that unfavorable identity" (2006:4). This is also a choice not to "act Christian" or otherwise assimilate. So, refusal to cover (by refusing to "act Christian," or "act white," or "act straight" or similar) by uncovering as Muslim, as black, as gay, and so on, those identities become choices. Choices, unlike things one "cannot help," are not protected by civil rights legislation. For example, by this logic, one "cannot help" but be black, but one *can* choose to cover that blackness by acting as white as possible. The pressure to cover means that "individuals no longer needed to *be* white, male, straight, Protestant and able-bodied; they only needed to *act* white, male, straight, Protestant and able-bodied . . . [the message was clear:] don't uncover yourself" (2006:22). The subtext here borrows from neoliberal discourses of fault, consequence, and social amorality; a person is protected as long as they assimilate and don't "act like a minority." To wit: by choosing to uncover the marginalized self, the individual who is uncovering has somehow forfeited social protection against all kinds of micro- and macro-aggressions. They are, effectively, "asking for it." In this universe, the participant who uncovers as a Muslim has no recourse should negative outcomes result from her uncovering. When confronted with anti-Muslim aggression, threats, and scrutiny the prevailing discourse of choice demands that she has only herself to blame for not "blending in"; she uncovers at her own risk.

## Method

The three individual cases presented in this article are part of a larger study of Western women and religious/ethnic identity. Data were collected between January 2009 and December 2010. Three participants are presented here as individual cases for analysis.

Several study participants were geographically far flung, so being able to use telephone and Internet communication was essential. Artifact collection included both physical and digital materials, including archives, blogs, websites, and emails. Where possible, data collection also included nonparticipant observation of women in their places of worship and with their families, though these opportunities were rare given the geographic challenges of the participant pool. Participants were recruited via community connections and snowball sampling, and many of these were additionally part of online communities participating in the e-universe of the countless blogs, websites, and Facebook pages dedicated to women's religious meaning making, identities, and practice.

Participants were forthcoming in telephone and in-person interviews, emails, and in some cases directing me to websites, blogs, chat rooms, and other distance learning sites where they themselves had experienced adult religious education. The interview process

was guided largely by the work of Seidman (2006) and Spradley (1979), focusing on open-ended protocols asking questions about how individuals came to their new faith, their process of learning about conversion, and the learning communities of which they were a part both before and after their conversion and how they felt about physically standing out where they had not before. Finally, as several participants were professional academics or students and self-described feminists with progressive politics both before and after their religious conversion, I spent time exploring how their understanding of feminist identity both jibed and conflicted with their new religious identities. Participants were interviewed several times over the course of the data collection period. Throughout data analysis, I paid special attention to participants' interpretations of their experiences of relearning, through education, what we might call the "uncovering" of the self. The themes emerging from analyses were used to frame ongoing data collection, cross-analysis of themes, and triangulation of findings across and between the data sources. These findings were then used to craft participant vignettes and inform discussion about learning and community.

#### *Researcher Identity, Role, and Representational Concerns*

My interest in this topic is theoretical as well as personal: 1) my own professional interest in feminist perspectives on religion, identity, and education; and 2) my identity as a moderately observant feminist Jewish woman increasing her own level of uncovering, albeit in small ways, in everyday life. Amanda and I have common friends and several common interests, but I only learned of her conversion after the fact when I learned of her marriage. Her experience in particular intrigued me, and I was inspired to begin formal inquiry after learning more about how she made the transition to wearing hijab and what it meant to her. When I initially met Rebecca, she and I were both attending an autoethnography workshop at a national conference and paired together in a small discussion group where we connected as observant Jews, academics, and West-coast, warm-weather enthusiasts. While I often go out of my way to talk to women in my community and others, I'm not sure that Rebecca and I would have connected were it not for the unusual setting—a workshop where we were each to share specifics about community and religion. Sometime after this initial conversation, I contacted her to participate in my study of women and religious conversion, and she was very forthcoming in sharing her experiences. After I had begun collecting data for the project, I was able to connect with a range of online communities for religious women, and it was through one of these that I found Stephanie. She described herself in her online biography as a "newly saved<sup>3</sup> Canadian Christian" who was trying to begin covering her hair not just at church but in everyday life but was struggling with others' reactions to it and her own "burning desire" to increase observance. I was very interested in diversifying the participant pool to the greatest degree possible and contacted her via email, eventually having several phone conversations and email exchanges.

My role in the research settings was that of a nonparticipant observer and "professional stranger" (Agar 1996). That said, even with what I held in common with many of the participants, I was still wary of transposing upon it too much of my own experience, especially as a critical feminist, and allowing subjectivity too much of an unchecked foothold in the project. So, I used member checking of all interview transcripts and written vignettes by sending written products to participants for them to review for accuracy. In this way, I tried to maintain what Ashcraft (2006) calls a "dual perspective" that privileges participant voices and presents their narratives as they occurred, but despite an intentionally emic perspective, still does not seek to separate them from "the material conditions in which these voices emerge and the ways they may be complicit with oppressive practices"

(Ashcraft 2006:334). Finally, it is important to emphasize that the experiences of the participants are in no way representative of the experience of all female religious converts and are absolutely located in the relatively privileged, North American middle-class milieu. While the themes and questions arising from these analyses may be generally illuminative, the paper in no way seeks to speak beyond the context of these participants in these particular locations.

## Participants

My project began with looking at how North American religious converts learn 1) to be practicing members of their new faiths and faith communities and 2) to “uncover” (make themselves known) as members of those communities by adopting distinctive practice and dress. Because so many people learn to be practicing members of one faith or another as a result of childhood socialization, I realized that in order to make this learning visible I would need to look at adult converts. Some interpretations of Islam, Orthodox Judaism, and more orthodox forms of Evangelical or Fundamentalist Christianity were all associated with a specific, visible identity kit and behaviors, and these were even more visible and more concentrated among female adherents.<sup>4</sup>

Stephanie, Amanda, and Rebecca are three middle-class women just beginning to “uncover.” They are a new Fundamentalist Christian wearing the veil,<sup>5</sup> a convert to Islam getting used to wearing hijab, and a convert to Orthodox Judaism struggling with identity and practice—all of whom are experiencing becoming “uncovered” by leaving life defined by secularism and assimilation to one marked by the distinctive practices and identity kits of their chosen faith.

### *Stephanie: Empowerment and the Veil*

Stephanie is a white Canadian in her late thirties who has recently become a self-described Fundamentalist Christian. Previously a member of the moderate Church of England in Canada, she joined a Fundamentalist Christian<sup>6</sup> group after searching for more observant Christian practice and subsequently connecting with other Christian women online. “I was looking for physically present meaning,” she says, “and an intense, everyday, living relationship with Christ.” She began wearing a veil in early 2008 as a “properly plain” Fundamentalist. The theological roots of Stephanie’s veil are partially rooted in the doctrines of simplicity and modesty drawn from a single passage in the book of Corinthians that directs a woman to cover her hair for prayer. Stephanie and other members of her faith interpret this as meaning a woman should not cut or style her hair, and that a woman’s hair is implicitly sensual, corporeal, and private and should be reserved only for her husband and children in the home and covered with a veil in all public settings.

Stephanie described her veiling as varied over time in both degree of coverage and veil style. She explains, “I was drawn by conscience and conviction to reclaim covering and modesty [and tried] . . . several different scarves, hijabs, and buncovers until I found something that worked from a website.” While some Fundamentalist Baptist, Mennonite, and Orthodox Christian women wear veils similar to the hijab, covering the head, ears, and neck, Stephanie’s veils and those typically worn by Fundamentalist Christian women in the United States are much more like those worn by U.S. Mennonite, old Quaker (or “plain”), or Amish communities: small, light cotton bonnets covering the ears and back of the head, often tying under the chin, with some variations in length of covering in the back. While often small, simply sewn, and without adornment, these veils are highly conspicuous in public; unlike bandanas or scarves that may pass as a secular fashion statement for assimilated women, the veil is iconic, at least in the United States and Canada, as Christian



religious headgear. Stephanie has certainly felt conspicuous, noting that “fear of standing out (especially in context of modesty, etc.) is a hurdle many women struggle with . . . our own fear; that first day or two is often fraught with panic and terror as the [veil] can feel white-hot upon our head.”

Stephanie asserts that the act of veiling is “an incredibly liberating and empowering practice” in the midst of a Christian context that “seems all too hyperfocused upon the internal, often ignoring or veering away from the enriching aspect of the physical elements of faith, such as veiling, modesty, fasting, fixed hour prayer, etc.” Stephanie interprets faith as a whole body experience and insists the rules of faith should be followed with “clarity, beauty, and gentleness whilst not compromising.” Unlike Amanda and Rebecca, Stephanie never identified as a feminist, but much of her narrative emphasizes women’s empowerment through faith, even in the Christian fundamentalist community where empowerment may look to the outsider like submission. “[Outsiders] may think that I have lost my mind, that suddenly I’m no longer thinking for myself or cowed by religious order, but what I have is greater,” she says. One example she offered was that of the fashion industry, saying, “Why should I let the fashion industry tell me how to wear my hair and to dress?” She continues,

Modest attire and veiling removes the emphasis from the fetishised cult of the body redirecting us to consider the other as a whole person. Sexuality is denigrated when it is dragged into the public arena, as are both men and women denigrated by this propensity of our postmodern culture . . . to me, the covering is very much a symbol of power upon my head, a very special and intimate sacramental, that I, as a woman, am privileged to be able to wear. It is a quiet witness and a sign against all that is so destructive in our postmodern culture.

#### *Amanda: Solidarity and Hijab*

Amanda is a white, middle-class woman in her thirties living in a major U.S. urban center who was raised as a Protestant Christian in the Midwestern United States before converting to Islam in the last year. A daughter of politically progressive, spiritually moderate parents, her decision to convert was met with some surprise by her family and friends. Amanda herself was particularly surprised to find that she was comfortable wearing hijab. She has identified as a feminist throughout her adult life, and while she found the hijab itself problematic from a Qur’anic point of view as a religious requirement for women, wearing it became a potent symbol of shared identity with other Muslim women.

Amanda converted to Islam shortly before her marriage.<sup>7</sup> When her fiancé, a devout and observant Muslim himself, asked if she would consider converting, her initial response was to refuse. However, after some further thought and consideration, she began to consider the possibility and set to researching about Islam. As a feminist, she said that her “main concern was about the treatment of women,” so the first book she picked up was a Qur’an with an index in which she could specifically look up everything about women, including marriage, clothing, and other expectations. She also used the Internet and discovered many feminist critiques of Islam that were eye opening. She noted that these were particularly important “insofar as they made it clear to me that there is a space for feminists within Islam and that those aspects of mainstream/orthodox Islam which appear to be repressive of women can be, and have been, interpreted in other ways.”

It was only after her marriage that Amanda began wearing the hijab regularly. At first, she wore the hijab “just to try it out,”

and [in the end] I felt like I was just used to it. I felt really comfortable wearing it, but self-conscious of what my [non-Muslim] friends would say—I first wore it on New Year’s Eve, but then the second time I saw people, they asked, “So, are you wearing this all the time now?” . . . and the first week at work, I felt self-conscious, and I wondered if people would say anything.

Initially Amanda wore a headscarf only when attending Muslim events and not the rest of the time. "I started to get frustrated by living two different lives," she said, "feeling kind of hypocritical. The style of wearing it as I do now [that does not cover the ears and neck], though many Muslim women do not consider it [legitimate] hijab, is a middle ground for me where I can feel comfortable both in Muslim groups and non-Muslim groups, and yet is me, not changing to please others." She explains that it enables her to be visibly identified as Muslim; "I don't think people notice right away but [when] I see someone who is visibly Muslim, either wearing full hijab or I know from an event, if I greet them with Salaam Aleikum they look and try to sum me up as to whether I am Muslim or not. [The hijab] lets them know that I am."

Amanda's reasons for wearing hijab have less to do with religious obligation, observance, or the pressure some female converts feel to show their commitment to faith by wearing distinctive dress than about making a choice to be in solidarity with other Muslim women. This includes making the choice to wear hijab even when it is not comfortable or convenient, such as during recent travel and the tension of going through security for the first time as a visible Muslim.<sup>8</sup> For Amanda, wearing hijab in solidarity with other Muslim women hinges on her belief that it is a choice to wear hijab. "I feel really strongly that it is not required and that women do not need to be more covered up than men," she says, "Hijab literally means 'to cover' and I don't feel that I am covering anything. Intention is a major part of Islam and my intention in wearing a scarf is not to cover my hair, but simply to be visible. I don't believe that women need to cover up. I'm doing it because I want to be visibly identified as Muslim."

### *Rebecca: Identity and Orthodoxy*

Rebecca is a self-described multiracial woman in her early thirties who was raised in what she describes as a "nominally Catholic family—I had agnostic parents, basically, but it was Catholic in flavor." In the conservative, middle-class West Coast U.S. community where she grew up the most vocal group were "the Religious Right—Christians who lobbied against teaching evolution in our high school—that kind of thing," and while she didn't share their beliefs, she was also uncertain about her own. Her explorations, which began in high school and continued into college, led her to Judaism. When a classmate invited her to visit the campus Hillel, Rebecca said she remembers walking up the stairs and "grabbing every flier and for the next six months going to every single thing Hillel put on—every seminar, every dinner, every discussion." She remembers that "something clicked, and a friend of a friend who was Jewish, we started talking, and it turns out he would go to one family's house for *shabbes* [the Sabbath], and to the modern Orthodox *shul* [synagogue] in town, and he invited me to go with him." After several visits to the family's home with her friend, she began to feel a sense of belonging. After a while she met with the rabbi and told him she wanted to convert. "At that point I was still trying to get grounded, get observant, keeping kosher, becoming *shomer shabbes*,<sup>9</sup> not wearing pants as often—and certainly dressing the *frum* [observant, modest] part when I went to shul." Then Rebecca went to Israel. This was a life-changing experience that made her realize her positionality and question her identity.

I realized how American I was—I really began to question myself on so many levels. At this point I realized it wasn't just a religion, it was an incredible history, and so ancient and in my little West Coast mind we're all first generation and there it's mind blowing . . . so that was just heavy. I was young. I'm mixed race and have many different ethnicities and I didn't grow up in a heavily cultural household. We assimilated; I was still learning who I was. I was still involved, but I decided to table conversion. I felt like I couldn't go into it having these complicated feelings. And I needed to know who I was before I took on this new, huge identity.

Years passed, but Rebecca returned to observance, finishing her conversion during the data collection period. In some ways “uncovering” has spoken to her own complex identity.

I didn't finish my first Orthodox conversion because when I went to Israel, it shut me down, I thought Judaism is also a culture, it's a country, it's complex and somewhat painful politically that I do not agree with everything, I didn't know how to merge it—being mixed race, with a divorced family, coming from a community where my family didn't fit in politically, racially, culturally, and so on, I was young and figuring it out back then.

As time has passed Rebecca has become much more comfortable in addressing people's curiosity about how a person of color became a Jew.

But now it's like, discuss all you want, doubt all you want, but at the end of the day you ate kosher, said your b'racha before you ate, went through the motions of observance. Nobody can doubt you if you are observant and living a Jewish life. [Other people] can stare all they want, but I am singing all of the words [of the service]. I love Orthodoxy—the minutiae of observance—but I am also [becoming Orthodox] because I definitely want to do whatever I can to make sure my own kids are a little more secure in their Jewish identity. . . . Being mixed myself, any kid I have is going to be ethnically mixed, so I don't want them to have any doubt about where they belong, if they are really Jewish or not.

Like Amanda, Rebecca is interested in belonging and community; she is concerned about being visibly acknowledged as a member of the Jewish community and addresses this by pursuing the most stringent standard of conversion, the time-consuming, expensive, and intense Orthodox conversion process. Further, and as will be explored more deeply later in this discussion, as a person who identifies as multiracial, the need to address any ambiguity by acts of clear and obvious uncovering are important for Rebecca. Also like Amanda, Rebecca doesn't see a necessary conflict between religious observance and feminism. From the ritual separation of men and women in the synagogue to the requirements for family purity and modest dress for women, “I embrace it from a feminist perspective,” she says, “there isn't anything disempowering about embracing womanliness, being beautiful in a different way than the commercial ideal out there, and seeing differences in men and women.” She is comfortable wearing modest clothing that covers her arms, collarbones, and legs, foregoing pants and other masculine-associated clothing items and, when she marries, covering her hair. While she does stand out as religious, and this is undeniably gendered, she is more comfortable with this than with the liturgical aspects of gender in her religious practice, such as being required to stand behind the *mehitzah* (barrier separating men and women in the synagogue) during services at the synagogue. “That's the rub there—the men are having fun and the rabbi is talking to them and we're [the women] up in the rafters trying to follow along—but I'm still okay,” she says. She resolves to live with and accept what she perceives is a somewhat intractable imperfection, adding, “Just like with theory, or with a family, nothing is 100% to your liking. You take the good with the bad.”

### “Stand Next to Me”: Community Religious Education and Experience

All three women relied upon religious education to learn how to “uncover” in a culture that values—even mandates—covering or hiding that which does not fit the mainstream, norm, or “covered” ideal. Additionally, all three drew a distinction between learning about their newfound faith as a text-based theoretical exercise and learning how to be Muslim/Jewish/Fundamentalist women in practice. While both forms of learning were clearly important, the latter was greatly facilitated by learning in communities. All three relied upon their immersion in uncovered communities to help them learn how to “uncover,” and how to live as uncovered religious minorities. These communities



included in-person, face-to-face communities, online communities, and a mixture of the two. For both Stephanie and Amanda, their online communities became informal distance learning communities as well. While online learning is commonly used in formal seminary contexts, and many religious groups use social networking, chat room, and other sites for community building, limited research has been done on nonseminarian adult learners using online sources for religious education (Harlow 2007; Hines et al. 2009). Religious educators who work with specific cultural groups acknowledge the power of computer use in identity development and encourage religious educators to approach online teaching and learning with full understanding of its unique capacities as well as its shortcomings, especially with regard to online community (Arroyo 2010; Dinter 2006).

Stephanie, by far the most isolated of the three, relied entirely on the online community of Fundamentalist Christian veiled women. Despite living in a relatively populous suburban area, she felt very much alone in her fundamentalist practice of the Christian faith. Her decision to convert to a Fundamentalist form of practice was the product of "prayer and meditation, and the support and influence of other like-minded Christian women in the online community." In the chat rooms and websites she learned new ways to pray, where to purchase veils and how to wear them, and even strategies for dealing with others' response to her uncovering.

When uncovering in public resulted in open hostility more than once and resistance from her husband who "at first doubted the importance of veiling," she was able to use her knowledge of the online Christian fundamentalist community to connect with women who not only interpreted religious practice the same way she did but could also give her advice on how to address these practical concerns. Stephanie explains: "It was actually a friend from a Plain<sup>10</sup> website who told me that hostile responses from other women were common in her experience, and that I shouldn't respond to them with hatred, or fear, or feel pressure to take off my veil, but instead understand that the veil brings feelings up from within them that can be unpleasant." Stephanie affirms that her online community helped foster that understanding and provided a venue for her to assist other women struggling with the multifaceted challenges associated with veiling:

A woman once shouted at me [and I learned] that they may see that the veiled woman is judging non-veiled women, and the non-veiled woman's own self-consciousness about visibility and doubts about her level of observance could bubble up. [Similarly] I heard from so many women that their husbands didn't like the veil, and wanted them to take it off, to avoid the looks and stares and questions. I had been there too. I would love to become even more plain, but my husband would have a coronary I fear! Still, some of us [in the chat rooms] were only just beginning to wear a small bandana, having not yet begun to veil or even change from pants to skirts, they were worried that their husbands would be unhappy with their new appearance . . . some women suggested strategies for helping their husbands adjust to the change . . . Through the online groups I know scores of women whose husbands are dead against covering or conviction on modesty! It takes much prayer and patience to bring our husbands or male family members around to this as being a good thing, but we are not alone doing it.

This was a theme that came up multiple times in Stephanie's narrative: that in learning with her online community, she was not alone, nor were her compatriots. While prayer did provide a kind of solace and ameliorated feelings of isolation for Stephanie, it was prayer along with the companionship of her learning community that was most significant.

Amanda also benefited from an online community; She began with online and text self-teaching and remote learning before developing an online community, being matched with a formal mentor and finally reaching out to a face-to-face religious community of Progressive Muslim women wearing hijab. A private person, she was first reluctant to reach out to area Muslims so she relied primarily on texts, including those related to Progressive Islam and feminist interpretations of Islam. Prior to, and even after her

conversion, her primary modes of learning about and interacting with Islam were through books, the Internet, and online groups on her own. While learning in isolation was familiar and comfortable for Amanda, she was nervous about “coming out” as a new Muslim. Her independent learning did not teach her how to “be” a Muslim in daily life. She says:

I felt isolated [and] I didn't feel like I belonged. I didn't feel like I had a community. Then a colleague of mine who is involved in the Muslim student group invited me to go to an Iftar [breaking of the fast after Ramadan] and before they served the dinner they had the prayer. I had never prayed in a congregation before—I had just been trying to do it on my own based on what I had read. This was my first chance and I wasn't sure [what to do]. My colleague had introduced me to the woman student who was the head of the Muslim Women's Organization. She said I was a recent convert and would she teach me. She said, “stand next to me” and I felt like I was finally more public about things. I think I got on their mailing list and I learned that they have prayer group on campus—so sometime later I went to another dinner and a woman came up to me—who was another white American wearing hijab and she came over and introduced herself and asked if I was a new convert. She emailed me the next week. She was in charge of matching up new converts with a mentor—I remember she said “a mentor can help you learn how to pray” . . . we met and really hit it off. She helped me learn how to pray and how to do the ritualized ablutions before you pray [especially when] wearing hijab. This is all very complicated and basically I had to learn it in person instead of reading about it. It would be hard to have learned all of this online. Also she was able to answer questions that I could not have asked online, such as how to pray when you're out of the house, or how to do the ablutions in a public restroom—everyday life.

Amanda now authors her own blog about Islam and feminism, and continues to educate and be educated by other Muslims grappling with similar questions. This includes more conservative Muslims and others unsure about how progressive and feminist viewpoints jibe with contemporary Islamic practices and identities.

Unlike Stephanie, whose religious education was exclusively online, or Amanda, who learned in both online and face-to-face communities, Rebecca never engaged in online learning or isolated self-teaching. Historically, Jewish religious education, like Muslim and Christian practice, has been community based, focusing on face-to-face formal and informal religious and cultural instruction (Short 2005). So Rebecca sought out face-to-face community from the beginning of her conversion/learning experience, first by going to a family's home for Friday night Shabbat dinners and to the Orthodox synagogue for services with a Jewish friend. After several visits she began to feel a sense of belonging that she says was the cornerstone of her decision to convert. Another friend tutored her in Hebrew, and after a while she met with the rabbi and told him she wanted to convert. Her first Passover was at the rabbi's home. “He made space for me,” she said, to learn both the intricacies of Orthodox observance but also as a member of the community. All of her learning, she notes, was primarily in the communities and families, and while formal conversion required a “huge amount of reading,” Rebecca observed that the pragmatics of being a visible, practicing Orthodox Jew was through “a lot of people welcoming me and through personal home rituals”:

I went to shul and took the formal classes at school so I had a textual knowledge and learning but the thing that, looking back, Shabbat dinners, going through the whole Kiddush and talking through the traditions, and holidays seeing even, like, going to an Orthodox family's home on Shabbat and seeing the toilet paper pre-torn, that's what stands out in my mind. Judaism is all about community and looking back it's seeing other people model it that helped me connect to texts later on and understand. For me Judaism was a personal community first, and it felt like home before the learning happened—maybe that makes me more comfortable too. I can “do” it—a lot of the learning comes with the doing. Judaism is very action based—it's not about faith as much as there's space to doubt that—from day to day it's about doing what you have to do.

Rebecca's insistence that Orthodox Judaism is a religion of practice, of "doing what you have to do," as well as the intense face-to-face work involved in both living an Orthodox life and the formal conversion process itself, made online learning, or other purely doctrinal learning in isolation, not as useful. It is possible that for Rebecca, the vibrancy and availability of such community was one of the major attractors to the faith, and she conveys this when she talks about wanting her children to belong (in addition to her belief in her own *yiddishe neshama*—Jewish soul). Amanda came to Islam initially through travels and her partner, while Stephanie was a Christian who began exploring ways of deepening her Christianity online. So it is possible, then, that each woman's path to the faith, religious education, and physical process of uncovering is connected to her motivation for conversion and the meaning she makes of uncovering.

### **"Taking the Good with Bad": Gendered and Political Problems and Positionalities**

Uncovering by wearing distinctive dress or participating in distinctive practices often serves the internal devotional purposes as well as external purpose as a show of political and religious solidarity with others (Brenner 1996; Deeb 2009; Mahmood 2005). All three women learned to "uncover" in communities that emphasized the dual internal/external purpose of the practice. Rebecca described wearing modest dress as an inwardly directed symbolic enactment of her devotion but also a sign to others that she belonged and was an observant Orthodox Jew for whom wearing gender-specific modest dress highlighted her "womanliness." Amanda's hijab was a sign of solidarity with Muslim women and also a spiritual practice to "get in the zone" before prayer—though she was always careful to construct her choice to wear hijab as a choice from a feminist, progressive Muslim stance. Stephanie's veil was a physical embodiment of religious commitment but also communicated resistance to what Stephanie sees as distorted, hyper-sexualized western beauty standards. All three women engaged with uncovering by adopting an identity kit that resists both the pressure to cover and constructed their uncovering as resistance to elements of patriarchy as well. This is not uncommon among religious women; many see religious observance as a form of resistance to secular objectification and hegemonic masculinity (Greenberg 2003; McGinty 2006; Van Nieuwkerk 2008). The participants interpreted uncovering as a way to actively nonconform with contemporary racist, sexist, eurocentric beauty standards, most of which aggressively market conforming to certain standards of beauty—covering (Rooks 1996).

However, religious women's uncovering viewed from a critical vantage point can also render it less benign. As Neiterman and Rapoport write, "studies on women's participation in religious organizations, movements and communities show how they . . . empower women and strengthen their status on the one hand, yet on the other hand reinforce patriarchy by regulating and controlling women, thereby preserving women's traditional identity and positions" (2009:175). While many would disagree about the connection between tradition and control, it is difficult to dismiss the ways in which many forms of religious uncovering reinforce patriarchy while simultaneously limiting the means by which women might respond to it (Alumkal 1999; Hartman 2005). Certainly some doctrinal discourses in Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and beyond decenter modesty as the enactment of feminine agency by framing the purpose of modest, distinctive dress as solely a function of male desire (Hartman 2005; Mahmood 2005).

Having come across both thoughtful feminist critiques of hijab as well as facile Orientalist arguments about Islamic women and "oppression," Amanda struggled with her own interpretation of women's participation in Islam. She pored over Qur'anic requirements for modesty from a doctrinal perspective; in problematizing everything

from where women were allowed to pray in relation to men, to women's role in prayer, to the popular expectation that she would wear hijab solely because she was a woman, she utilized the tools of critical scholarship to directly question the theological underpinnings of practice. Rebecca pragmatically resolved to take the "good with the bad," acknowledging that no one thing can be perfect; she frequented Conservative synagogues where she could participate in the service while also attending Orthodox services where, even though she had to sit in the women's section behind the mehitzah and substitute words for prayers she found offensive,<sup>11</sup> she felt the comforting rhythms of her own Orthodox observance and the importance Orthodoxy places on women in the family context (Callister et al. 1999; Kaufman 1985).

Stephanie also massaged the rough edges of her faith into something that felt empowering and meaningful to her as a woman, and sought out other fundamentalist women who interpreted it the same way. She observed on more than one occasion that this may have been one reason for her heavy reliance on the Internet because so few Christian women were "coming around to [her] way of thinking . . . that the veil is about strength, and women should be strong." On first glance, it appears that something has happened to patriarchy here; Stephanie and other women in her community don the veil often in the midst of their husbands' initial objections, each providing strategies for the others to help bring the reluctant men around to the idea. It is important to note that these women did endeavor to convince their husbands, often increasing observance by small steps to help them adjust, rather than simply going ahead without consent, or flying in the face of family harmony. Similarly, the men's objections seemed to be about the public consequences of uncovering rather than about their wives' subscription to a gendered form of observance. They were not bothered by their wives' insistence that women must cover their heads but rather by the "looks and stares and questions." So, patriarchy remains relatively intact. Considering that many Fundamentalist Christian churches and movements emphasize women's subservience, obedience, and self-sacrifice while de-emphasizing empowerment, choice, and independence (Joyce 2006; Keysar and Kosmin 1995), Stephanie's perspective highlights how her interpretation of women's empowerment, and her learning from like-minded women in online communities, may be one example of contradictory practices thriving in the (online) margins.

However, even with such conflict, this would certainly not be the first time women in religious communities developed strategies to "subvert the patriarchal norms of their religious belief system . . . engage[ing] in dialectic of conformity and resistance to male domination" (Alumkal 1999:136). It is also possible that aspects of each woman's religious education included tools for not only uncovering but also strategies for the "dialectic" Alumkal describes. Such tools provide pragmatic ways of balancing the demands of complex layers of gendered identity and belonging (Brasher 1997; Pevey et al. 1996). While the purpose of formal religious education is typically centered on doctrine, the religious education of the women converts here was not only doctrinal but procedural: learning how to be uncovered in a secular culture was of equal import, if not greater personal significance. It is possible that adult converts' unique religious education creates a space for Alumkul's dialectic that may not be as readily accessible for those whose religious socialization takes place in childhood home and family life. Adult converts, meanwhile, learn by synthesizing an array of simultaneously discordant and confirming prior life experiences with new practices and belief.

Both formal and informal religious education have historically served multiple, simultaneous goals, often emphasizing not only doctrinal conformity and confirmation of faith but also other community and cultural goals (Baquedano-López 2004). For these three participants, self-teaching and learning in isolation could only take them so far.

### Notes on Choice and Privilege

Amanda and Stephanie, both white, educated, and middle class, occupied positions of relative race and class privilege both before and after their conversions. For them, uncovering meant, to some degree, truncating the experience of privilege associated with being mainstream white Christians in Western culture. Amanda described her first forays into being “uncovered” as a Muslim by describing her discomfort and insecurity in interactions with friends, colleagues, and finally, airport security, where a previously routine security pat down took on new, self-conscious meaning. She affirmed that uncovering by wearing the hijab and visibly identifying as a Muslim is a choice, one that she can make or unmake at any time, but a choice made in solidarity with others with full understanding of the positive and negative consequences. Stephanie was painfully aware of the costs of un-covering, and has met with hostility for wearing the veil, from intimates and strangers alike. However, even though she was a Fundamentalist Christian, and part of a small subset of Christian fundamentalist women who wear a veil and distinctive “plain” dress, she was still a Christian and as such occupied a position of relative privilege in Western cultures. Though it is unlikely, both Amanda and Stephanie could conceivably alter their identity kit and can return with some ease to the covered identity of the nondescript white person should they wish to do so.

Rebecca, the only person of color in the group, occupied a somewhat different position. She had, as she said, grappled her whole life with questions of identity and assimilation, occupying spaces that made it difficult for her to fit into any one group or setting. In choosing to live as an Orthodox Jew she was effectively choosing that identity and affirming it through observance and through her willingness to “uncover” as an Orthodox Jewish woman—despite having lived as a person of color throughout her life. She was choosing a new community—notably an insular one that has historically neither proselytized nor warmly welcomed conversion—and in doing so finding new layers of belonging (as a member of that community, distinguished by practice and modest dress) and difference (as a Jew of color in the Orthodox community, and as an Orthodox Jew in the secular world).

However, in the seemingly paradoxical endeavor of learning to resist sociocultural pressure to cover unassimilated religious and gendered identities by wearing distinctive, modest dress as a matter of religious observance, Rebecca’s religious education emphasized simultaneous resistance *and* belonging: resisting the pressure to cover by “uncovering” as an Orthodox Jew in secular contexts and “uncovering” as a sign of belonging in the Orthodox community context. In conversations she continually went back to concerns about her future children and her need for them to be in no doubt as to their identity as Jews and that this was her primary reason for uncovering. It is possible to argue that by becoming an Orthodox Jew, an “autonomous minority” (Ogbu 1985), she was augmenting an involuntary minority status by choosing a more voluntary one, even though being a person of color does create its own complexities for her belonging in Jewish communities. Her uncovering as a Jew does not diminish the daily experience of confronting racism as a person of color, a Jew of color, and a multiracial woman in contemporary culture. For Amanda and Stephanie, who have joined religious communities that both actively proselytize and are made up of many converts, religious education has emphasized uncovering perhaps more directly. Amanda noted that many new female Muslims feel pressured to wear hijab. While Stephanie’s community of veiling Christian women does self-select, there is a decided drive among online community members to become ever more “properly plain” over time. Addressing the complex issues of choice and privilege is challenging largely because of the difficulties inherent in disentangling covering and uncovering from the larger, systemic matrices of privilege and oppression.



### Conclusion: The Mainstream Is a Myth

In the perverse logic of covering there is an underlying assumption of the benignity and desirability of the mainstream. Like Zine's (2001) Muslim youth who are exhorted to solve everyone's problems by simply "act[ing] Christian," French Muslims are forbidden to wear headscarves in favor of adherence to the French national culture and identity (Keaton 2005). The latter assumes that being French is both mutually exclusive with and more desirable than being Muslim, and those who persist in being Muslim should be required at the very least to appear to be as French as possible—covering their Muslim identities by, paradoxically, uncovering their heads. In the U.S. context, social pressure to cover begins early and effectively: any casual glance through popular young adult literature in the United States reveals the dominance of "fitting in" and "belonging" as desired outcomes for every protagonist, and this is often more important than the other iconic American narrative theme of "finding oneself" (indeed, one should only "find" a "self" that aligns with mainstream identity norms and cover the rest). In sum, the mainstream is constructed as so universally accessible, and so commonsensical, that anyone who does not cover must be actively choosing not to "fit in."

However, what if the assumptions driving the concept of a "mainstream" were problematized? Urrieta challenges the assumptions of benignity, desirability, and neutrality from a critical race perspective, writing that the so-called "mainstream" is really a "whitestream" (2006:473): a system that actively promotes the idea of whiteness and white experience as the norm of human experience, when in fact society is far from being entirely white (or male, or Christian, or straight, or thin, or able, and so on). Yoshino goes on to suggest that the "mainstream is a myth" (2006:25) that ultimately hurts everyone, including straight, white men who he has observed to "[angrily deny] that covering is a civil rights issue . . . [asking] why shouldn't racial minorities or women or gays have to cover?"

But why should they receive protection for behaviors within their control—wearing cornrows, acting "feminine," or flaunting their sexuality? After all, the questioner says, I have to cover all the time. I have to mute my depression, or my obesity, or my alcoholism, or my schizophrenia, or my shyness, or my working-class background, or my nameless anomie. I, too am one of the mass of men leading a life of quiet desperation. Why should classic civil rights groups have a right to self-expression I do not? Why should my struggle for an authentic self matter less? I surprise these individuals when I agree. [2006:24–25]

So, if the norms or standards to which individuals are pressured to submit to covering are undesirable, unobtainable, and unreasonable for the majority of humanity, questions remain about what it means for individuals to "choose" to cover and "uncover" and what it means when identities become coded as "choices." Choice implies some degree of agency, just as the rhetoric of having "no choice" implies the absolute undesirability and piteousness lack of agency associated with identities one cannot cover.

The logic of covering suggests that because a person *can* assimilate (meaning, they can code switch, or dress the part, or associate in ways to act white/straight/male/middle-class, and so on) they *must*. Individuals who do not may be punished in a variety of ways. For Rebecca, Stephanie, and Amanda, the act of resisting the pressure to cover was also an act of resistance to the so-called mainstream and its underlying assumptions. The "punishments" they faced—the stigmatizing stares, the negative reactions from friends and strangers alike, the anxiety provoked by extra attention at airport security—pale in the face of the sweeping legal and educational penalties imposed on Muslim women and other outwardly religious students in France since 2004, but they smarted nonetheless. Further, it is against this backdrop that veiled women become the most frequent targets of anti-Muslim harassment and hate crimes as, "uncovered," they are the most visible (Cainkar 2011).

That said, why did Rebecca, Stephanie, and Amanda persist in presenting uncovered selves when these presentations, like those of the Muslim women and girls in France (and more recently other contexts), incited punishment? On a very concrete level, the three participants discussed here had their communities and identities at stake, and those are powerful motivators for nonconformity to secular norms, as well as conformity to the chosen group. On a larger level, perhaps their performances and those of others like them are small but effective reminders of the fallacy of the so-called mainstream.

Finally, these data suggest that the concept of “choice” is complex. When covering becomes the expectation and “unfavorable” (Yoshino 2006:4) identities become “choices,” it follows that desirable identities become “choices” as well—in other words, those who cover successfully are making “good choices” while others are making “bad choices.” Rebecca, Stephanie, and Amanda all effectively made “bad choices” (in this system, at least) by adopting so-called “unfavorable” identities and by resisting the pressure to mute said identities through learning to “uncover.” While some religious women from a variety of faith communities claim that “uncovering” by wearing distinctive dress is not a choice but rather an inflexible dictate of faith, all three participants here framed it as a choice, even as all three noted that as a choice it may not have made sense to their families and some friends. But as middle-class North American women, their “bad choices” must be contextualized somewhat differently from those of other women in other communities. For example, their realities cannot be generalized with those of immigrant African and French African women and girls who must “choose” observance, identity, and survival over schooling—or the other way around (Keaton 2005)—or Mayan women who persist in creating and wearing *ropa typica*—traditional dress—despite the risks of oppression and violence (Ludwig 2007). In both of these cases, as well as in others, uncovering is done against the backdrop of an escalated taxonomy of choice where the survival of self/identity is often pitted against literal physical survival. So, choice is contextual, as is the valuation and legitimation assigned to a given choice and the logic behind it. That said, the “good choices” are also context dependent. As Yoshino illustrates with his example of the “angry white man” (2006:25) who has made the “good choice” to cover all his life only to reap the bitter rewards of self-abnegation and inauthenticity, even the “good choices” have consequences, though all consequences are certainly not equal.

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## Notes

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1. Thanks to Kevin Kumashiro for introducing me to Kenji Yoshino’s work in Kumashiro’s keynote address at First Nordic Conference on Feminist Pedagogies, June 14-16, 2009 at the University of Uppsala in Uppsala, Sweden.

2. Pseudonyms,

3. Many Christians refer to themselves as “saved” once they are baptized or otherwise formally enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ. This implies that they will be “saved” from hell by being absolved of any sins and live life everlasting after death.

4. It was also more likely that some members of these faiths would be more comfortable talking to and spending time with a member of their own sex.

5. The insider terms used to describe modest, distinctive dress are many; Muslim women wear a wide variety of distinct coverings including but not limited to hijab, niqab, abayah, and chador, to

name a few. Christian women, including Amish and Mennonite as well as Fundamentalist women describe their head and hair coverings as bonnets, veils, or buncovers. For the purposes of clarity in this discussion I am choosing to use the words the participants themselves use: hijab and veil, respectively.

6. Christian Fundamentalism varies widely from one congregation to the next, however most could accurately be described as politically and socially conservative, antimodernist groups that believe in both the literal interpretation of the Christian Bible, including “biblical guidelines of male headship” (Joyce 2006:12) as well as women’s simultaneous subservience to men and elevation as bearers of children (Pevey et al. 1996).

7. “I wasn’t sure how to do it at first, how to actually convert. But it turned out to be a fairly straightforward process—I called my host family in [East Africa] to ask what I needed to do to convert before I married, and they said all I had to do was recite the Shahada [the Muslim declaration of faith]—right then, over the phone—with my host father. I did it in Arabic, and in Swahili, and in English and that was it. I was kind of shocked because I hadn’t planned to do it that day. Interestingly, later on I found out that, apparently, there is a 1–800 number people can use to convert.”

8. “I almost decided not to wear it, since I don’t feel any religious obligation to do so, but decided that was cowardly and plus I was really curious as to how I would be treated. So I wore it, but knowing that unlike women who wear it for religious reasons I would take it off if asked to do so.”

9. A person who is *shomer shabbes* is someone who is completely observant of the Jewish Sabbath, meaning that from sundown on Friday evening until sundown on Saturday they do no “work,” which includes everything from turning on and off light switches, cooking, writing, exchanging money, watching television (or operating any electric appliance) for some, and even tearing toilet paper for others. Instead, observance typically includes lighting the Sabbath candles, relaxing, attending religious services, and having the Sabbath meals with family and friends.

10. Women in Stephanie’s Christian fundamentalist community, and others among the Amish, Mennonite, and some Quaker denominations, refer to themselves as “Plain,” meaning that they wear distinctive “plain” dress usually consisting of monochromatic or simply patterned, unadorned blouses and long skirts with simple work shoes or boots, no makeup and typically unprocessed long hair covered in a buncover or veil. Historically among “Plain People” in the United States like the Anabaptists, Quakers, Brethren, Amish, Mennonites, and others, adherents believe that “excessive display in clothing manifests on the outside what is hidden in the heart” (Gingerich 1966:257).

11. The prayer Rebecca referenced is the “*she-lo assani isha*,” which gives thanks for not being born an idolater, a slave, or a woman—in that order. Many Jewish women and men alike substitute with the words “thank you for making me who I am.”

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