Chapter Three

The Conversion Narrative

Conversion is often viewed as a sudden and fundamental shift in worldview, which changes the individual in considerable ways. William James wrote in 1906 that to be converted signifies the change “by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy” (Harding 2000:33). In the classic study *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1984 [1966]) describe the alternation of religious conversion and the transformation of subjective reality. A successful alternation requires, among other things, that the old reality be reinterpreted within the apparatus of the new reality. They argue that this reinterpretation results in a rupture in the subjective biography of the individual in terms of “B.C.” and “A.D.,” that is, pre- and postconversion. Everything in life before the conversion is now understood as leading toward it, and everything following it as flowing from its new reality. Formulations such as “Then I thought . . . now I know,” which are common in the conversion narratives, reflect this kind of reinterpretation of earlier experiences and actions (ibid.:179).

However, for the women in this study there was no “biographical rupture” in the sense of what Berger and Luckmann call a “cognitive separation of darkness and light” (ibid.:180). Naturally, the women reject certain values and ways of living but they seldom express a fundamental denial of their previous life or self. Instead the women reorganize their biography and through a conversion narrative they create self-coherence and continuity by negotiating meaning between past and present, between the one I was then and the one I am today.

As I discussed in the first chapter, I understand and treat conversion as a continuing process rather than a one-time change and a total break between a “before” and an “after.” This is not only a theoretical assumption, it is a hypothesis that rests on the converts’ experiences. In comparison to much of the experiences analyzed within the conversion literature (which in the West has mostly focused on the Christian tradition), most of the converts highlighted the official conversion not as a particular sudden moment of intense emotion but rather as the outcome of a long period of reading, talking with Islamic friends and
Becoming Muslim colleagues at work, as well as visiting and living in Muslim countries (cf. Poston 1992). Also, beyond the particular moment of the formal conversion ceremony, which is not particularly stressed by the women, their narratives of becoming Muslim reflect changes, but while talking about these life-changing experiences they also mediate coherence in life, feelings of “being back home.” In the midst of transformation the new belief is understood and integrated within a particular subjective, interpretative world. Becoming Muslim presumes not only a change in the convert’s internal world and actions but also in the shaping and telling of her life story. A main idea underlying the discussion in this chapter is that the conversion is a continuous process of integrating a rupture in worldview with a coherent life story, an integration that is achieved here during the interview exchanges, through the conversion narrative. Thus, the conversion narrative, the talking about the conversion, constitutes a significant part of the conversion itself. The conversion _evokes_ a conversion narrative. I attempt to show that the narratives are strongly motivated, prompted by feelings and reflections, intended to assign personal meaning to the changes in life and to mediate a sense of continuity and a certain self-understanding to others.

It is conspicuous that the act of narration is an important psychological and social tool to demonstrate a consistent biographical account and to come to terms with and reflect on particular events and experiences. The presentation of a coherent self, between the one I was in 1976 and the one I am today, as well as being able to give socially acceptable and comprehensive explanations are fundamental functions of the narrative. The conversion narrative is thus a salient means through which the women negotiate their Muslim identity and try out alternative ways of making sense of the transformation in life. The event of narration not only organizes events and experiences into a tangible and coherent biography; it also makes possible the integration of a religious system into a personal life story (cf. Stromberg 1985). To tell a conversion narrative is thus not just to represent the transformation but also to give it meaning as well as to relive and strengthen it in the moment of telling. With narrative I mean here story or talk. Rather than approaching the narratives of the women as all set, completed “texts,” I distinguish their transitional character reflecting an ongoing meaning-making in the particular encounter of the interview.

**Narratives as Transitional Phenomena**

As an anthropologist studying cognitive/emotional and cultural aspects of identity and conversion, making analysis and assumptions