

From Spirits to God: Stories of the Kalash Converts from Before and After their Conversion

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Conversion to Islam is an ongoing phenomenon in the minority Kalash community in Pakistan. This article covers conversion incidents and their narration. The introduction of Islam alters the lives of the “kafir” [i.e., unbelievers in Islam] Kalash. The researcher’s intention was to discover the motivational factors behind the decision to convert as depicted through conversion narratives. Are converts under pressure from the social sphere to change religion, or it is an independent decision? How does the Islamic faith reach them? What differences do they find in their new faith as compared to the old one? Moreover, how do they adjust in the community? The data was collected from randomly selected converts whose personal narratives were recorded and transcribed. Later, the researcher analyzed the data. In this study, narrative is presented as a framework for understanding the individual converts. In the analysis, the commonalities and differences in converts’ perceptions of their new religion are discussed, as well as the trajectory of their faith alteration, their efforts of adjustment, and socio-economic development around the Kalash and its impact on the conversions.

Say: O disbelievers! I worship not that which ye worship;
Nor worship ye that I worship. And I shall not worship
that which ye worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship.
Unto you your religion and unto me my religion. (*Al-Quran*, 109:1–6)

And if thy Lord willed, all who are in the earth would
have believed together. Wouldst thou (Muhammad) compel
men until they are believers? (*Al-Quran*, 10:99)

The present research is a study of conversion narratives (from traditional beliefs to Islam) of the Kalash people of Pakistan. The converts’ conversion stories serve as the source of data. These stories include their conversion incidents, pre-conversion, and post-conversion lives. Very little research has been done in the area of the conversion of

the Kalash, which is the reason that the attempt has been made to discover the worldviews related to the conversion process. The intention is to understand how conversion has changed their identity, what the socio-economic undercurrents are, what has influenced them to convert, and what efforts they have made to adjust in their community.

There are a number of growing religious movements in Pakistan. The *Islahi jamma'at*, for example, are a devoted group of Muslims who believe in the spread of *Sufi* ideas from the perspective of the spiritual interpretation of Islamic values. The teachings of a Sufi saint, Sultan Bahoo, hold a central place. *Ahl-e-Sunnat* is a major denomination of Islam, whose followers interpret Islamic values from the life of the Prophet Muhammad along with acknowledging the four Imams who gathered the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and interpreted his teachings. Followers of *Shia*, another sect of Islam, believe in twelve pure Imams who took the hereditary responsibility of guiding the Muslims after the prophet Muhammad. *Tehreek-e Minhajul Quran*, led by religious scholar Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri, aims to bring radical changes in politics. *Jama'at-e-Islami* a predominantly *Sunni* organization founded by Modudi, is a major political party. *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* is a militant anti-Shia organization, a sub-branch of *Sipah-e-Sahaba*. Then there is the *Tablighi Jama'at*, a predominantly *Sunni* denomination, which takes the Quran and the life of the prophet Muhammad as the ultimate model for the interpretation of Islamic values. Naturally, every denomination of Islam wants increase the followers among their ranks. Among these movements, however, only the *Tablighi Jama'at* organizes conversion/proselytizing missions to different places throughout the country and outside it. Bringing Muslims back to fundamentals and converting non-Muslims is something the followers of *Tablighi Jama'at* strive for.

Islam reaches potential converts through “people, institutions, or groups” (Rambo, 1993). The converts’ stories highlight these institutions and groups. They tell about the separation of the individual’s identity from the mainstream social script. Conversion is an important incident: its narration helps in “sense-making” and is integral to the identity creation process (Maruna, 2001). These life stories are chronological (they are representations of sequences of events), they are meaningful, and they are inherently social; they are produced for a specific audience (Elliott, 2005).

Many newspapers have reported forced conversions and their effects on the community, resulting in some isolated incidents of violence

where the locals, allegedly non-Kalash, burned effigies built by the Kalash. Efforts to preserve Kalash culture are already going on; some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been working in the area to maintain their religious and cultural status. Islamic missionaries work to convert the Kalash, whereas NGOs try to help them maintain their traditional ways.

The followers of Islam consider themselves superior to all other religions because Islamic discourse calls itself “true” and “last.” Islam enforces the idea of the last true religion far more than other monotheistic religions or any other religions. Therefore, the converts sometimes reinforce this superiority by saying that the conversion has elevated their social status, but this is not a major motivation behind conversions.

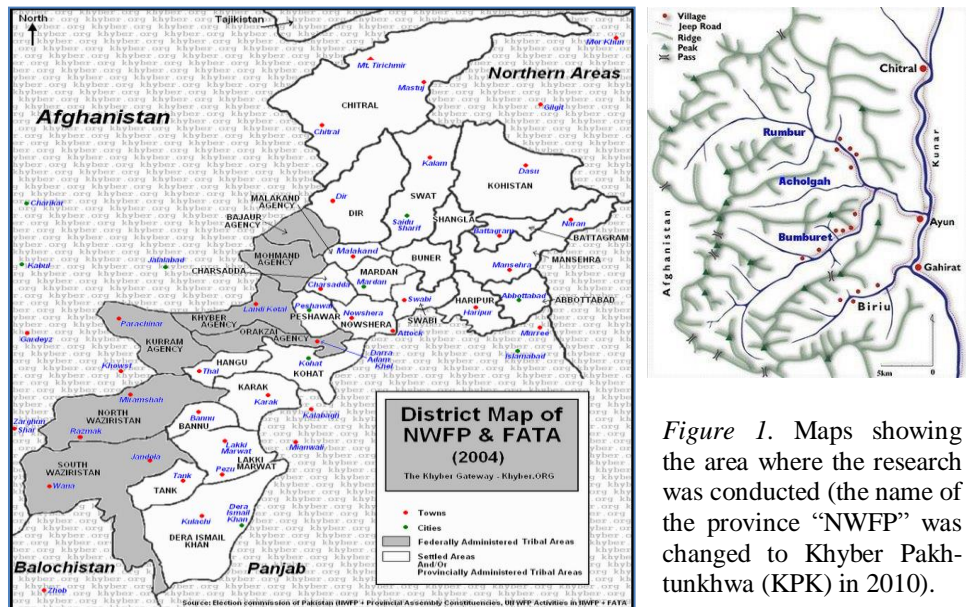


Figure 1. Maps showing the area where the research was conducted (the name of the province “NWFP” was changed to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) in 2010).

Faith, Identity, and Narrative

We live in a world where identity matters. It matters both as a concept, theoretically, and as a contested fact of contemporary political life. The word *identity* itself has acquired a huge contemporary resonance, inside and outside the academic world (Gilroy, 1997, p. 1). Identity is amorphous. It is like a marking on a totem or a genetic code. For the most part, identity is a semi-unconscious acceptance of the norm. Identity helps to recognize those attributes that a person shares with the rest. It also

recognizes differences among individuals, by which a person is accepted as a member of the society. Identity is a sense of location in a culture. It is a place where persons categorize themselves as different individuals.

Interestingly, the identity of an individual breaks down into many different identifiers. These identifiers include gender, climate, ethnicity, geography, politics, caste system, history, language, nationality, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, culture, traditions, economics, race, aesthetics, likes, and dislikes. Similarly, ethnic identity consists of people who share common individual possessions, a common culture, language, ancestors, and often a common religion. It also includes geographical characteristics that play their part to create a certain ethno-geographical individual (Yandell, 2001).

The interpretation of faith depends on its context, how this notion assimilates itself to derive specific meanings. Faith exists as a sense of attachment, a result of cognitive reasoning, or a form of the will. In relation to faith being inseparable from identity, it is important to point out that fixation which creates a single entity of identity and faith. Identity and faith are inseparable because faith is the center of any religion.

The concept of faith differs with different ideologies. Therefore, it can easily be said that, for most people, identity works within the boundaries of faith. For the faithful, there cannot be anything rational beyond the marked outlines of faith. In most cases, identity and faith form one cohesive unit. Nevertheless, faith also creates\moulds\forms identity in such a way that a common faith often makes a coherent social group with a common religion (Weedon, 2004). Therefore, identity becomes hybrid; it assimilates various pieces of identifiers and creates one cohesive whole. This term, *hybridity*, becomes the only explanation of what a person becomes: a kind of centripetal force pulling everything towards its center and assimilating it into one unit. The identity of a Kalash, after conversion, becomes hybrid in every sense of the word.

The Kalash faith is a combination of rituals, festivals, and mythology. They acknowledge a number of deities who rule in their respective domains. There is a creator god and a pantheon of local gods and goddesses. Shamans have a dominant role. A unique association of music, dance, and gods is found. The round drums, the sacrifice of goats, and wine are central to all religious ceremonies. There is a common belief in the mountain fairies known as *pari*.¹ Their religion is closely related to the Vedic religions. Their rituals involve chanting, dancing, and music.

¹ A Persian word for fairy.

From death of an old man to the celebrations at the festivals, music holds a central place. Religious ceremonies often involve sacrificing a goat and sprinkling its blood at the altar. The Kalash have received many influences from the pre-Islamic Nuristan. Purity is the fundamental aspect, just as in Hinduism. Women are considered impure during menstruation and childbirth. They need to be purified, for which there are various ceremonies. Their religion is bound to their culture. It rests in what they do in their daily lives. Whatever Kalash tales and folklore speak, what their legends and songs reflect, the way they fit into the social fabric, their myths of creation, their deities, and their demons all combine to form the faith of the individual Kalash. Therefore, when this faith alters, the ultimate result is the creation of a narrative that carries the event of conversion with it.

Here, the question is when a Kalash's identity becomes an issue, and at what point people need to secure their identity. The answer is simple: when identity is at stake or some crisis comes upon it. This crisis can be due to cultural invasion, modernity, or, in the Kalash's case, the event of conversion.

The connection between narrative and identity is peculiar. Narrative helps to document the identity and any change in it. Conversion is, in a way, an adoption of new rhetoric system that a narrative documents. Therefore, the converts need to publicly display their changed affiliations. Conversion cannot be a secret act, or so it is told to the converts. The open announcement of the conversion is a proof, a *testimony*. According to Rambo (1993),

Testimony is the narrative witness of a person's conversion, and it entails two interacting processes: language transformation and biographical reconstruction. We have seen that conversion is in part the adoption of a new rhetoric or language system. Since language is a powerful tool for the transformation of one's consciousness and perception of the world, it is not surprising that testimony is the adaptation of this modified rhetoric to explain one's conversion experience, to tell one's own story (p. 137).

Testimony by converts is a general declaration by them about not practising the old religion any longer. A change in religion also finds its outlet in the narration. An expression of faith in language becomes an expression of what people believe in. The language creates and manifests faith as an understandable entity. In such narratives, the newly acquired

faith and molded identity form the outline. Therefore, it is appropriate to claim that there is a crucial and inseparable connection among faith, identity, and narrative. Without narration of it, identity would cease to exist (Weedon, 2004).

An individual can create a text in relation to its context through a story. It also offers the capability to look at ambiguity and complexity that an individual faces in a social context. Narrative analysis takes a story as an object of study that can provide information about the transitions taking place. The stories can highlight the adjustments of an individual or a group to make sense in their lives, and can serve as means to relate them to the rest of the social sphere (Franzosi, 1998; Riessman, 1993).

The Constituents of Kalash Identity: The Meanings of Being a Kalash

The Kalash culture has been the centre of fascination for tourists, anthropologists, and historians (Buneri, 2010; Jahangard, 2006; Newby, 1958; Robertson, 1897). The word *Kalash* literally means the “wearers of black” (Barrington, Kendrick, & Schlagintweit, 2006; Jahangard 2006). Historically, there were two *kafir*² tribes: the Red *Kafirs* of Nuristan, and the Black *Kafirs* of the southern part of District Chitral (Barrington, Kendrick, & Schlagintweit, 2006). The notion of being a Kalash does not appear too complicated when it narrows down to the essentialist identity

² *Kafir* (Arabic: كافر ka:fə[r]) comes from the Arabic root word *K-F-R* كَفَرٌ, which means “to cover up,” “deny,” or “reject.” The word is translated into English as “faithless,” “disbeliever,” “infidel,” “unbeliever,” “atheist,” or “ungrateful” (Cowan, 1976; Farid, 2006). As Harper (2001) explains, the word is derived “from Arabic *kafir* ‘unbeliever, infidel, impious wretch,’ with a literal sense of ‘one who does not admit the blessings of God,’ from *kafara* ‘to cover up, conceal, deny.’ It is used pejoratively and applied by Muslims to all non-Muslims. In this article, the word *Kafir* is used in two different ways: first, as an identity, and second, as a judgmental remark. In the case of use as the identity, the “K” of the word *Kafir* is capitalized. However, where *kafir* is used as a judgment, the “k” is lower case. That said, the word and its variations (*kefir*, *kaffir*, *cafer*) have been used differently in different cultures (“Kaffirs,” 1911). For example, “in Ottoman times it came to be used almost exclusively for ‘Christian.’ Early English missionaries used it as an equivalent of ‘heathen’ to refer to Bantus in South Africa (1792), from which use it came generally to mean ‘South African black’ regardless of ethnicity, and to be a term of abuse since at least 1934” (Harper, 2001). In South East Africa, it is a racial term first used by Somali and Arab traders to identify black natives. In Sri Lanka, the word is an ethnic identity for the descendants of Portuguese traders; such Sri Lankans are proud to be called *Kaffir*.

of being a *kafir* (infidel) (Issigonis, 2002). *Kafir* has become predominantly a highly contextualized term based upon the cultural practices of the Kalash. The term *kafirs* represents a cultural group whose social standards do not reflect a specific inclination.

The Kalash, an ethnic group, live in three remote mountainous valleys in the north of Pakistan. In 1959, there were 10,000 people; currently the population is estimated to be 4,000 (Malik, 2006; Shah, 2008). Their culture, changed very little over the past 3000 years (Malik, 2006), will probably not survive beyond the next few generations, as modernity and missionaries are altering it. Recently, a few people have reported Kalash conversions (Malik, 2006; Parkes, 2000; Rana, 2011; Shah, 2008). If measured by such criteria as literacy, income, and health facilities, the quality of life of the Kalash is very low. However, their quality of life is not very much different from that of the average Pakistani (Naqvi, 1996).

The first documented exploration of Kafiristan was done by a British expedition led by Colonel William Lockhart in 1885 (Naqvi, 1996, p. 676, n.1). They were followed in 1890 by S. G. Robertson, who in *The Kafirs of the Hindukush*³ (1897) presents the earliest description of Kalash conversions in his extensive study of Kalash history, geography, religion, practices, rituals, and conversions. The arrival of the Kalash in this area is debated among scholars (Barrington, Kendrick, & Schlagintweit, 2006; Jahangard, 2006; Newby, 1958). One suggestion is that the Kalash came from Afghanistan under threat of forced conversion by King Ameer Abdul Rehman (Jahangard, 2006). Another suggestion is that they are the descendants of a mixed race, the Tajiks, who once occupied the lowlands of Badakhshan, and that they were driven into these mountains over time (Holdich, 1896). Robertson (1897) suggests that they were slaves of the Red Kafirs, and to escape enslavement, they crossed the valleys and settled in what is known today as Kalash⁴ (Robertson, 1897). Still another theory is that they descended from Bactrian colonies, and that many can boast of Greek ancestry (Denker, 1981). Some, including the native Kalash themselves, believe that they are actually descendants of the injured soldiers of Alexander's army who

³ This mountain range lies at the boarder of Pakistan and Afghanistan and extends towards India. The range culminates at the northern borders of Pakistan, near Gilgit. This mountain range is called *Hindukush* in Pakistan and *HinduRaj* in India.

⁴ The valley is called "Kalash Valley": located at the southern gorges of Hindukush mountain range in the north of Pakistan in the District Chitral, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

remained behind when he crossed the Hindukush (Barrington, Kendrick, & Schlagintweit, 2006; Holdich, 1896; Jahangard, 2006; Malik, 2006; Mayfield, 2008). Newby (1958) proposes that the *Kafirs* were already living there when Alexander the Great crossed the Hindukush; the stragglers from his army lived among them, hence their Greek ancestry. Rehman (2011) claims that the Kalash migrated to Chitral from Afghanistan roughly around the 2nd century BCE. Some historians have speculated that the Kalash migrated from *Kafiristan*⁵ because of the fear of forced conversions to Islam and settled in Chitral. Their ancestors migrated from a place they call *T'siyam* in their folk songs (Shah, 2008).

Meanwhile, the Kalash remained as slaves of the “Mehtar of Chitral,”⁶ because at that time Chitral was a princely state, and the British had no part to play in its administration. Nothing changed after the British left the subcontinent in 1947. Chitral became part of independent Pakistan, but the only difference the *Kafirs* experienced after independence was that a Pakistani civil servant took charge. Later, in 1969, Chitral ceased to be a princely state and the government took direct control of its administration. In 1972, the *Mehtar*, the ruler of Chitral, was denied the privilege to rule and the slavery of the Kalash ended (Osella & Soares, 2010). The “discovery” of the *Kafirs* led to a boom in tourism, and also brought in large numbers of Muslim missionaries who wanted them to convert. The effects of conversion were less visible because older Kalash converts were not only related by blood to the Kalash but tolerant to the extent that they even participated in their rituals. The distinct identity of the valleys thus continued, because the old converts still had much more in common with their Kalash fellows (Naqvi, 1996). When conversion was a relatively new phenomenon, these older converts shared a lot with their fellow tribesmen. One such example is “N2”⁷: he had converted almost twenty-four years before and he narrated that he had always associated with the non-converted Kalash.

⁵ The name is commonly given to three villages: *Bumborait*, *Birir*, *Rambur*. It can be roughly translated as “the dwelling place of Kafirs.”

⁶ *Mehtar* was the title of the ruler of the princely state of Chitral, in which the research area is located; it means “king” in the *Khowar* language.

⁷ Respondents are labelled *N1* to *N10*.

The Present Study

The study area was the Kalash village of Bumborait,⁸ where the government had built a primary school and a *Bashaleni*.⁹ The villagers' main sources of income include agriculture, manual labor, livestock, and tourism. The people were very hospitable and, in fact, the sole source for identifying the converts. During the search for converts, which took most of the time, inhabitants guided the researcher towards a separate settlement. It became apparent, and later the data verified, that the community was separate and identified based on religion. The interviewed participants were not very well off. Few had received formal education and they had never been out of their village. All of them had been converted by the persuasion of the *Tablighi Jama'at*.¹⁰

The selection of participants was random. They were not scrutinized according to a specific stratum of the community; rather, every convert who agreed was interviewed. Random selection ensured the objectivity of the research, because there was no influence of any kind in the selection of the converts for the interviews (Cox, 2001; Shkedi, 2005). A number of people were approached for the interviews. Out of 15 or so individuals, 10 agreed to be interviewed. Those who did not agree were occupied with other errands. Although it was thought necessary to include both male and female converts in the survey, only one woman was interviewed for two reasons. First, the *Tablighi Jama'at* consists of men, and due to cultural constraints, they cannot interact with women. Therefore, it is easier for them to interact only with Kalash men. As a result, the number of male converts is higher. By converting males, the *Tablighi Jama'at* can communicate with women of the respective household through the converts. Second, it is not permitted for women to interact with "other" men. Therefore, giving an interview to a male researcher was not possible. For the same reason, not a single married convert gave permission to interview his wife. On the last day, a local informant came with the news that one girl had agreed to be interviewed. Her unconverted parents had given their consent, though reluctantly. She

⁸ The largest Kalash village.

⁹ Maternity home: a separate building exclusively reserved for menstruating and pregnant women. As a custom, the Kalash Kafir women spend the menstrual period, pregnancy, and up to forty days after childbirth, at this place until they are "purified."

¹⁰ The global Islamic missionary movement that is proselytizing and revivalist in its teachings. The focus of this organization is to urge Muslims to return to the orthodox Islam, and help others convert to Islam by Dawah (invitation).

can in no way be understood as representative of all the women converts, but at least the interview provided a glimpse into what that specific woman experienced, and it is better to have one woman's story rather than none at all.

The research team consisted of two people: the researcher and a local informant. On average, the researcher was able to interview one respondent a day. Most of the interviews took place in the converts' homes, beside a stream, or in the local mosques. Interviews were voluntary; respondents were free to respond or not to the questions. All interviewees went through the process by themselves. Interviews were in the form of semi-structured conversations. All respondents were asked a set of prearranged questions in the form of prompts. Most of the questions were open-ended. These prearranged questions helped to keep their stories on track. All respondents were provided with a relaxing environment and there were minimal external influences during the interviews. Despite these efforts, the responses were cluttered with extra information; the respondents were keen to include all the details of their conversion because nobody had ever asked them before. Hence, it was not possible to keep them to any time limit.

The respondents' stories were recorded with their consent, and they were informed about the expected use of their responses as the basis of an article. The reliability of the collected data could be guaranteed, because the researcher was in direct interaction with converts. This first-hand experience and interaction helped the researcher know about the respondents' views on conversion and he could clearly perceive respondents' biases as well as their psychological and emotional states (Cortazzi, 2001; Herman & Vervaeck, 2005; Mertova & Webster, 2007).

The interviews were conducted primarily in Urdu. However, as some of the older converts were not fluent in Urdu, the researcher arranged for assistance from a native speaker of their language, Khowar.¹¹ The converts narrated their conversion stories in Khowar; later, a translator helped to transcribe and translate the interviews. The responses of the converts were recorded as they were speaking, along with the translation of the responses by the native speaker. The use of the mediator was essential because of the researcher's unfamiliarity with the native language, and mediation did not change the utterances much. The native speaker helped to translate the exact words and then gave a brief summary of what the respondent had said.

¹¹ The language spoken in the District Chitral.

This method was used for several reasons. First, conversion is a whole process that encompasses both the individuals and their social sphere. Second, narrative responses to open-ended questions were the source of data, rather than questions with a limited number of options to answer. Narratives, as opposed to other approaches, provide a foundation to reveal the extensiveness of conversions. Therefore, for an analysis of a process as extensive and comprehensive as conversions, it was appropriate to use this method.

Discussion and Data Analysis

This study of the Kalash conversion narratives aims at providing information about the needs, differences, incidents, or motivations that force a Kalash to convert. What differences and commonalities did they find between the old and the new faith? The narratives provide an understanding of the community's stance on conversions. The discussion points out the instances in the communal life of Kalash that compelled them to convert.

The following table indicates information extracted from the respondents' narratives: age, gender, marital status, number of children, modes of income, education, and the years since conversion. The ages of the converts ranged from 19 to 60. Most of the converts were married. They included two students, a landowner, labourers, shopkeepers, and an unemployed man. The table also highlights the number of years since the individuals had converted. They began to convert about 27 to 30 years ago when religious movements were rapidly growing in the country. The oldest convert, aged 60, accepted Islam around the same time. The table also shows the increase in conversions. The number of converts has been far greater in the past 10 years as compared to the past 25 years.

Table 1. Summary of Respondents

R	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Children		Income	Education	Years Since Conversion
				M	F			
1	30	M	M	2	2	Manual labour	None	8
2	50	M	M	5	2	Agriculture, labour	None	24
3	65	M	M	6	3	Land owner	None	27
4	45	M	M	0	0	Unemployed (elder brother handles expenses)	None	10
5	40	M	M	3	0	None	None	10
6	21	M	S	0	0	Shopkeeper	None	14
7	21	F	S	0	0	Student	BA (14 yrs formal education)	2
8	19	M	S	0	0	Student	Intermediate (12 yrs formal education)	3
9	60	M	M	2	2	Unemployed	None	24
10	24	M	M	2	1	Mostly manual labour in Lahore	Matriculation (10 years formal education)	7

Pre-Conversion Lives

The respondents' narratives were conceived of as journeys of discovery. There were recurring references to becoming "pure" and "elevated." Islam is not totally alien for the Kalash, as their community and "larger cultural group" has a significant number of practising Muslims. Most of the Kalash have Muslim friends, too. Sometimes, these friends instigate a conversion. After the visits of *Tablighi Jama'at*, the frequency of Muslim friends' asking the Kalash to convert increased. The "friends" worked in liaison with the missionaries. These friends were also motivated by the missionaries' highlighting the extent of spiritual benefits that they would receive in this life and the afterlife for helping.

When asked about why they thought that their pre-conversion lives were no different from their present lives, their responses pointed to the extent of social interaction, not religion, suggesting that the most

important aspect of their lives was social interaction. For example, they maintained that it did not matter what religion they practised; the important thing was that they still belonged to the same community, and still joined their relatives in the annual celebrations. While they all acted differently in the religious sense, they had not totally lost their familial ties. The community, on the other hand, had come up with a working strategy to incorporate a sense of belonging with their “displaced” relatives. Even those converts who did not attend the annual celebrations and were contemptuous towards the practices still maintained interaction with their community and relatives. The converts may have denied the old ways, but they were still part of the family.

All converts used the word “unclean” to describe their previous religious practices. Whether they were talking about their motivation or explaining Islam, in both cases, the representation of the hygienic and the unhygienic served as a yardstick. The source of this vocabulary was Islamic discourse, as they looked at their previous lives under the magnifying glass of Islam. The whole discourse narrowed down to one idea, indoctrinated by the missionaries, which enabled them to construct a reality that satisfied their subjective urges.

The converts looked at their pre-conversion lives as a time when they were “not adhering to moral or ethical practices” (N1, N2, N9, N10). It was a time when the converts were *jahil* (ignorant), living lives of personal disorder (N6). It is important to note that the practices only became “immoral” after conversion, hence a highlighted reason behind their conversion. Their “personal disorder” was because of their indulging in activities that were “sinful” and a “deliberate violation of moral norms.” The whole paradigm of moral and immoral was turned upside down. The converts referred to their previous lives as living in dishonour (darkness) and moral degradation (N1, N7, N6). Most of the converts were contemptuous because they were not as “hygienic” and “honourable” as they became after accepting Islam. “Hygienic” was the most frequently used word in the narratives of the Kalash. The differences between the unhygienic (filthy) and the hygienic were understood by them as the main difference between the old and new religions: as a binary opposition. The converts referred to the performing of ablutions (washing) that Islam emphasizes.

The *Kafir* Kalash also traditionally accentuate purity but it is something that is achieved with elaborate ceremonies in the presence of a shaman. Islam, on the other hand, offers the chance to become pure just through a ritual cleaning, which is why the converts emphasized personal

hygiene as a merit of the new religion. However, *purity* and *hygiene* are essentially two different concepts: purity is something built in, a state of being, an honour or a privilege, whereas hygiene is something achievable. A comb is considered impure; no matter what you do, it will always remain impure. Women are not allowed to enter the place of worship (*Jestagan*) because they are considered essentially impure. Islam provides them with a chance to “cleanse” themselves of this religiously forced impure state.

The stories of the converts had economic undertones: the job they were doing before and after conversion, their source of income, their standard of living, the amount of their debts, and how conversion did or did not make a change in their economic situation (N1, N6, N8, N9, N10). In essence, the motivation behind their conversion was the possibility of improving their financial status/situation. The extent of economic betterment was always interpreted as a blessing of the new religion. Some of the converts were disillusioned with the new religion because of not experiencing the desired benefits (N5, N7). Others directly associated their improved economic situation as an uninterrupted result of conversion (N2, N8).

All the converts were in favour of a morality which would not serve as retaliation for their previous lives. They believed that conversion would erase their previous “ignorant follies.” In this way, converts could now decontaminate themselves from their previous “sins” rather than worry about the punishment. The promise that their previous “sins” would be forgiven was a charming one. Moreover, they would be as “sinless” as a newborn baby (N1, N3, N5, N7). The new religion offered them a chance to be “elevated” and “purified.” Their narratives are marked with the notion of benevolence in both of the worlds.

The converts were placated with the notion that after conversion they would no longer suffer: *Allah* had a special place for them where they would live for eternity (N1, N8, N9). It satisfied the converts. They would not have been worthy of going into the *jannat*¹² had they still been a *kafir*, because it is reserved for only the “chosen ones.” This narrows down, arguably, to the fundamental reason behind almost all of the conversions: the utility a religion promises. The promise serves its purpose very well: to inspire, motivate, and convert. The Kalash imagined Muslims as higher in status both religiously and socially. The rest of the Muslim community reinforced this idea with qualifications from the

¹² According to Islamic teaching, *jannat* (Paradise) is a place where the righteous will dwell for eternity.

Quran, the traditions, and general belief. Therefore, conversion looked charming because it might give them a chance to become “equal in status.” In theory, Islam believes in, and propagates, equality. However, the converts were still not considered equal. There is a stereotype—*Sheikh*—for the ones who converted. A local village where the converts live is called *Sheikha'nanda*: the living place of *Sheikhs*. The “stigma” of having once been a *kafir* never leaves them. They are still considered low in status because of their *Kafir* lineage—but slightly more equal than the non-converts.

Converts, before conversion, are made to believe that they are filthy *kafirs*, pagans, impure and unclean. They are made to believe that their religion is not valid, their beliefs precarious, their prayers useless. By undertaking conversion, they have a chance to let go of all these stigmas; revive and revitalize themselves by achieving “one” “pure” and “just” religion. Therefore, conversion is never given as a mere option, but as solution to their current state.

The Conversion Incident

Conversion is a complex phenomenon: it involves continuity and modification, association and dissociation, at times involuntary. It looks back, and at the same time, it looks forward to a journey whose meanings change with the passage of time and from person to person. The event of conversion is a point of change in a continuum. The life of a convert alters because one of the facets of identity alters, and with that, the convert’s complete social status revolutionizes. The event of conversion becomes a reference point after which all converts identify and situate themselves. The convert is now ready to assimilate/internalize the distinction between “us” and “them.” Conversion to Islam presents one of the best empirical grounds to explore some of the dichotomies involving Islam and the *Kafirs*.

Conversion in women typically occurs because of love.¹³ Converts and non-converts alike narrate this as fact (although our female convert did not substantiate this claim, since she was unmarried). When a man chooses to speak for a woman of his culture, it signifies the woman’s lower status or subdued gender role. Even though there was not any significant evidence of this motivation behind the Kalash women’s conversions, it was a generally believed and accepted reality. It was

¹³ Interestingly, however, there was one woman subject in this study, and she was unmarried.

observed that when the male spouse converted, the wife also accepted the faith, because she could not live without the support of her husband. Choosing the new religion was not really a choice for the women; rather, invisible social and emotional pressures pushed them to convert. The economic, social, and emotional dependency of the women helped the men to manipulate their decisions. Ironically, the missionaries, while maintaining that the women were neither influenced nor forced to convert, considered their conversion valid.

Kalash women and men interact freely. Marriage by the Kalash takes place mostly with the consent of both partners. With free choice, a Kalash woman can also choose a Muslim man as her husband. After this choice, conversion becomes necessary. In situations in which a Kalash woman was in love with a Muslim man, conversion was said by one respondent to be the only solution for their union (N2). Tourists with minimal knowledge of the Kalash identity have also initiated the conversions. The Kalash also think that Muslims lure women into a relationship, but when their curiosity ends, they leave them unattended. Sometimes they get married but due to cultural differences, they cannot maintain a family and at last, these women are divorced. They return to their parents' home and live the life of a rejected person who does not belong to either community. Neither the converts nor the missionaries acknowledged this disturbing outcome of their enthusiastic efforts.

There are significant examples that reveal the social rejection of the converts that varies from none to complete, from the indifference of relatives to the excommunication of the convert. For some converts, only the parents refused to live with them (N4); others fainted from the fear of rejection (N6), yet some faced utter rejection from their family (N1, N2, N3, N6, N7, N9). However, this rejection was mostly not final. Some believed that Islam was nothing more than a "slightly different set of beliefs"; such members of Kalash society emphasized that they saw no reason for opposing conversion.

Usually, the female converts are immediately sent to a *madrasah* for "religious education." In other words, the process of indoctrination of fundamental Islamic values formally begins. This sudden shift of status, from a *kafir* Kalash girl to a Muslim Kalash girl, is overwhelmingly welcoming. Mostly, the conversions occur on the festival of the Sixteenth of May (*Joshi*: the annual spring festival that, after a long winter, brings life and hope to the Kalash). Usually, at the time of the festival, the women are free to convert, because it is the occasion when a married Kalash woman can choose a new husband if she is not happy with her

previous one. It is also the time when an unmarried woman can declare her liking for a Muslim or Kalash man.

Conversion for the Kalash is sometimes, at first, an experimental process. Later, this experimentation becomes a permanent change when it is accepted deliberately and consciously. It is an innovation, where individuals need to re-introduce themselves to a different morality and work towards the development of association with the “other ideas.” One convert said, “after suffering with insanity, my wife and I thought of converting. We thought that it might change our circumstances and may result in a cure of my wife” (N3).

The “real crisis” resulting in conversion can be, first, an internal crisis, when one “experiences a need” to convert because of some subjective motive. Second, it can come externally, when one’s beliefs are molded or transformed by a preacher. Conversion was “a well thought out act” for several respondents (N1, N3, N4, N5, N9, N10), and they had “no other manipulation.” It was “nothing more or less, but God’s blessings” (N1, N2, N3, N8), converts maintained. However, their extreme indoctrination by the preacher ensured that the conversion event was inevitably reconstructed into a perception that they had chosen the new religion freely. Imagine ten people converted in separate instances becoming so “in-tune” that each made exactly the same statement. No convert could think independently or critically, hence could not decide for themselves. Their decision was not independent, even if they said it was. They were the perfect subjects of power structures: not questioning authority, but rather accepting it as it was presented. The converts cherished themselves as the chosen ones because they were told they were.

The people of *Tablighi Jama'at* were looked at as the men of God, and so the converts took the word of the preacher for the word of God. Whatever the people of the *Tablighi Jama'at* told them, the converts believed, because they were assumed to be the ones who could understand and convey the message of God. “The people of *Jama'at* carry the word of God with them, God speaks through them.” Such a belief among the converts led to an unshakeable surrender to the people who had brought the word. Kalash converts took the new faith as an obligation because now God Himself had sent a person with His word (N1, N2, N6, N8, N9). One respondent stated, in response to a question about his conversion incident, “Some people from *Jama'at* came and invited me to join new faith they told me that it is a ‘religion of light’ and cleanliness,

so Allah gave me *hidayat* (guidance)” (N7). This simple statement shows the docility of a convert, and the intensity of the preacher’s manipulation.

Will was necessary for the final decision of the individual to convert; however, it was not free will. Physical, psychological, and emotional realities were now looked at by the converts from a new perspective, even if there was no stereotyping, social victimization, a real urge to convert, to feel elevated/happy, or any disillusionment with the previous religion, yet these reasons for conversion were presented (N5, N6, N7, N9, and N10). Converts, to express their reality, adopted the point of view of the preacher.

Post-Conversion Lives

After conversion, the very first thing converts do is draw a line between “us” and “them”: converts and non-converts, Muslims and *kafirs*, the chosen ones and the ones cursed for eternity. Soon after, converts learn that anyone having different beliefs from their own is wrong and immoral, because the new religion has highlighted and enforced the difference. The very reason for the religion reaching the converts in the first place was this difference. Then the religious discourse made the convert feel disgust for those who were “immoral.” Conversion has become the reason for the clash in the otherwise harmonious society. The new religion is promoting hatred and violence. The ideas clash with previous norms. Dangerously, all the converts thought this division natural. N1 said, “We ate Haram and did Haram [forbidden acts] but, after conversion, the difference between Haram and Halal [permissible] is clear.” According to N2, after conversion the change was that

I pray and do whatever people perform in the mosque. I don’t go to that place where they slaughter or in their festivals. I will pray five times, go to Tabligh, will not eat Haram, will eat Halal, will not eat whatever they slaughter, will eat anything that is Halal. I will only eat that animal which I will slaughter with my own hands. Whatever Allah has permitted and is written in Quran, will give Zakat and all.

In the opinion of N5, “Kalash are not only Kafirs but also very ‘unhygienic’ people. This is the reason (being filthy) for not going into the cultural activities.” Similarly, N10 said: “I never felt any need to join

the ‘filthy’ Kalash. Their practices are ‘filthy,’ ‘immoral,’ and ‘un-Islamic.’”

The Kalash converts repeatedly used such words as “clear/enlightened” (*roshan*), “hygienic” (*sufa, saaf*), “beneficial” (*faida*), and “peace” (*sukoon*) to talk about life after conversion. The frequency of such words was very high. It can have multiple interpretations. First, the respondents may have had a problem in translating their mother tongue in Urdu. To counter this problem they started using the language and vocabulary of the people who brought the faith. They may not have been able to find appropriate words to express their thoughts exactly, and as a result, they learned all the words that might carry a shadow of what they wanted to express. Second, the converts were very vulnerable, and the missionaries did not possess the expertise and understanding of the problems an individual might face while communicating in another language with a separate discourse. Therefore, converts appropriated the language of *Tablighi Jama'at*, to the extent of mimicry. They were provided with a limited number of possible meanings. The understanding of the language in these particular instances therefore became loaded, hegemonic: a convert received something beneficial (*faida*) as he received the faith. A blessing was something reserved for the convert after receiving the faith. The word “blessing” (*rehmat*) has many interpretations, too. Here, language has become the instrument of propaganda. The converts had not only acquired the essential vocabulary, with very limited understanding, but also kept repeating it. They never used the words “creatively.” Their understanding was limited to performing the “rituals” rightly.

N6 insisted, “Now my converted life is better I have seen some ‘light’ and my heart is at peace. I thank Allah that I am spending my life in a good manner.” The problem with words, in this context, like “light,” “at peace,” and “better” is that all such terms are used subjectively. Consequently, interpretation is difficult. We can only deduce the meaning by guessing the person’s intention as best we can, in the context of the person’s social “reality.” The change the convert was talking about was in religion, which subsequently led to a change in behaviour. The personal attitudes, morals, world view, and social understanding of the convert altered, no doubt, but the “real” change for the convert was in the extent of his social interaction with his community. By not admitting this new “reality,” the convert was unconsciously trying to justify his decision by maintaining that the change in religion had not led to anything different.

The convert was in denial, hence the persistent stance that there had not been any change in his life.

The next stage of conversion is the commitment, devotion, attachment, and faithfulness to the new religion. The commitment of the convert is voluntary surrender, whereby the individual “willingly” accepts the new faith. “Surrender” is the inner process of commitment and is one of the most difficult aspects of conversion to understand, and is also, according to Rambo (1993), “very likely the aspect hardest for a convert to achieve in any lasting, pervasive sense” (p. 132). This observation was confirmed by the converts themselves (N1, N2, N3, N6, N9, N10) as they explained, “Religion is not an easy task, it’s too much hard work look at the companions of the prophet, they too suffered.”

There is another side to this as well. If a convert decided to revert, the larger social sphere would never allow it. In one instance, a convert decided to return to his old faith. The Muslims, after hearing this, started to protest; the effigies and other sacred images of the Kalash were burned or destroyed. The reverted convert had to be declared a lunatic, who was unaware of his social condition, hence not accountable for what he said or did. So there is an unseen force, the intimidation of social pressure, that never permits democratic liberty for the converts. Once a convert, always a convert.

Conversion leads to extreme self-consciousness; the converts now act in accordance with the Islamic norms because they are supposed to act this way. Those who achieved the desired results were content, while for others, the expectations after conversion were not fulfilled. Such converts were not satisfied with their conversion. They, however, could not choose to revert. Some of the converts said that their lives had not changed after conversion because it did not bring any material “benefits.” Some benefits of conversion were seen to be the birth of children (N7) or economic stability (N3, N4, N6, N8, N9, N10). This utilitarianism was also consistent in their narratives. One of the reasons behind their conversion was the registration of the “fact” that they would have the favors of the almighty in the afterlife. The virtuousness of the new religion, therefore, was seen by some converts to be its utility in this world and the world after.

The most abrupt change after conversion was alienation from the culture. In all the cases, rejection was from the family, primarily the father as head of the family. The initial anger of the father (or elder brother and other members of the family) was part of the narration of every convert. The parents’ angry reaction was because the conversion

posed a challenge to the social hierarchy in which they were the central authority figures in any given family. “My will is followed in my house,” said N2; “My children must surrender to it.” Sometimes, the Muslim community registered the family reaction. For example, N6 said,

In the Shahi mosque, after Friday prayers I went towards the Imam and declared that I wanted to become a Muslim. The Imam asked me about my family and after knowing that my parents were still Kalash the Imam refused because of the possible reaction from my family. I was so angry over Imam’s refusal that I cursed him and thought of not converting at all.

After conversion, converts experienced social alienation hand in hand with hybridity. A Kalash was now a Muslim, too, no longer a *kafir*. It was the new identity: a combination of both worlds entangled in a complex association. The weight of ancestral religious understanding in relation to the new ideas was now in a complex interplay with everything else. The newly converted individuals had to mimic the previous norm (N1, N8). In this way, converts could ensure the continuity of relations with their family. The cultural fabric could be re-knit; older affiliations were no longer valid, but they did not cease to exist (N1, N2, N5, N8, N9, N10).

Socially, life after conversion brought happiness because converts were made to believe their decision was valid. This feeling came from interaction with the other, relatively larger, Muslim social circle in which conversions were a celebrated event. N8 said, “I got a lot; found a lot, understood a lot, felt a lot.” He further added, “I felt that I found a lot of friends I went through very drastic changes, I suddenly learnt that all of my prayers were being heard.” By converting, they attained the status of being “normal” within the larger social group. Now, they were no longer contemptible, “ignorant,” and “disgustingly dirty” *kafirs*. The larger part of society could easily adopt them—but only for a limited time. Some converts complained about negligence in the behaviour of Muslims. When you convert, “the Muslims celebrate but later they forget you” (N1, N3, N6, N8). Despite having converted, they could not get rid of the stigma of *Kafir* identity, because now they would be called “Sheikhs,” a title identifying them as converts. The stigma of having a family that is still *kafir* never leaves the converts.

Marriage became a complicated issue for couples after one of them converts. Because Islam does not acknowledge a marriage between

a Muslim and a non-Muslim, marriages became void after conversion (N2, N3, N8, N10). This “normal” status was dictated by the new religion. If one of the spouses converted, the other had to convert, too, or they would no longer be able to live together (N2, N3, N8). This is how the logic of power works: at one end, you are a morally degraded outcast, but if you choose to be one of “the high caste,” you must accept the progression of the morality of the powerful in your personal matters. You do not have a choice.

Contemporary Islamic missionaries have begun to gather influence in areas like *Kafiristan*. This outside influence has led to the increase of conversion among the native people. The individual Kalash converts adopt a new set of beliefs with the old ones to form an association in between. As a result, they produce new, hybrid social realities. During this process the whole reality of a convert becomes labyrinthine. Conflict is an appropriate word for what a convert goes through. Social violence and religious pressure result in converts making decisions that they would not have made otherwise.

This article has analyzed the life narratives of some of the Kalash converts: their motivations, the changes in their behaviours at social and emotional levels, the outcomes of their conversion, racial and geographical elements for determining the old and new identities, their efforts to readjust, and the reasons for alienation from the existing culture. The researcher has looked at the conversion as a process, which does not occur in isolation. It is a social event and a multidimensional progression. It is a time-bound incident, a social reaction, a psychological understanding, a physical elevation, a spiritual experience, an acceptance of a metaphysical reality, and a change in identity.

The act of changing a specific religious conviction has a number of motivational forces. For some it is economic; for others it is a different social or a spiritual experience, a call from the divine; and for others it is simply an act to fit into the larger cultural group. Different converts gave different reasons for their conversion. For some *kafir* Kalash, the already existing religion had become unacceptable, on account of its being immoral, unethical, filthy, unhygienic, obscure, and unnatural, resulting in an attitude where the conversion seemed, from the individual converts’ perspective, inevitable. Furthermore, the Kalash were made to think of themselves after conversion as elevated or blessed as compared to the rest of their social sphere. However, some of the converts were disillusioned with the new religion because of its not being able to satisfy their needs.

Nevertheless, the social pressure/new religion never let them “stray.” They could not revert even if they wanted to. The religious institutions established this sense of elevation or superiority, which resulted in the creation of a situation in which individuals no longer associated with their social sphere. They were made to believe themselves inferior. Therefore, to become superior, they converted.

Their conversion narratives showed that their motivation was not intellectual or theoretical, a personal investigation of faith that resulted in transformation. The individuals had a lot of external influence but there was no “ecstatic awakening.” The motivation behind conversion and resulting narratives were based on intense emotions, where the individuals tried to find the truth and related their findings to divine blessings. A certain level of affection of individuals for the followers of the new religion helped in their transformation—for example, a convert took interest in the practices of a religion or a friend instigated the conversion—but for the most part, the outside motivation came from the powerful arguments of the preaching missionaries (*Tablighi Jama’at*).

The conversions in Kalash were neither experimental nor strictly spiritual; rather, a promise of utility was consistent. Some thought it would be better for their health, mental or physical, to convert; others found inspiration from the person who was once their boss. The converts also reported that they had converted because they thought that their economic conditions would become better. Some others thought conversion had resulted in their having healthy children.

Conversion is like a rupture in a person’s life. It is a transformation on the personal, social, psychological, and emotional levels; therefore, one cannot expect to sustain the existing social status in reality. Conversion causes ideological alterations, with the disposing of old gods so that they can assimilate the new. A change in faith, for a Kalash, results in an immediate change in the status of the paraphernalia. For example, a Kalash individual has to conceive the idea of an omnipotent and omniscient God who commands all, and cannot be perceived in opposition to physically present gods. A Kalash woman now looks for help from Allah (God) rather than the goddess *Dizalak* for a safe childbirth. Converts have to internalize the differences of ideas between the two religions. They have to understand the difference between these ideas, and why one is more relevant to their life than the other.

A conversion narrative is an expression of a modification in “identity”: Kalash converts have to deal with intricate relationships between religion and their identity and all those elements that contribute

to make the identity, as a single differentiable unit. Conversion results in creation of such an individual who is characterized by the display of a new religion plus an old identity.

Conversion and continuation: an individual convert makes efforts to carry on in the same social sphere. Converts go through a number of adjustments to achieve successful assimilation with the new society, such as the creation of a narrative that will help them to make sense out of the changes that have occurred around them. Hence, a narrative turns out to be, simultaneously, an assimilation and a means of association. Some of the converts tried to make friends with the non-converts; others tried to adopt the prevailing norm to fit in. They attended the *kafir* festivals, not only to show their tolerance, but also from an urge to stay connected with their culture, and to be accepted as an individual of a different faith. Previously, their common religion was the base upon which their relations were acceptable. Once their religion changed, it affected their relations, too. Their narratives highlighted that the new faith was the source of social cohesion in a different community.

There were recurrent expressions of becoming superior after converting to Islam. The conversion occurred mostly to a *Sunni* denomination. The whole discourse also found its way into the narratives. The people were not interested in any other denomination; rather, they pronounced followers of other denominations infidels (*kafir*). The conversion itself becomes a violent act when the converts, having been *kafir* themselves, start after conversion to consider the other sects of Islam as *kafir*. The reasons are essentially the same: followers of other denominations observe slightly different sets of beliefs.

The Kalash society has so far managed to live in peace, but tensions could be felt in the narratives and the attitude of people towards others. For example, some Kalash complained about attacks on their religious sites and the destruction of their sacred effigies. Muslims of the surrounding areas also did not accept the converts as their “fellows,” equal in “status.” A stereotype of “Sheikh” was used to identify the converts. Looking at the narrations of the actual incidents of conversion, it is apparent that converts did not focus on the incident of religious change. The entire narratives were divided into before and after. The inquiry revealed that there were some classic examples of incidents associated with religious change (falling unconscious, being peaceful, and rebirth).

The data shows that there is no evidence of women converting because of the urge to be married to a Muslim, though some unconverted

Kalash claimed this to be true. When the converts thought about converting, they received most of their help from the people of *Tablighi Jama'at*. The converts never tried to learn from books on Islam because most of them were illiterate. Even the literate ones never consulted books. Most of the conversions took place in mosques. The converts thought of the mosques as the only place where they could visit and receive the new faith. The majority of the converts faced a negative attitude from their families, although for some the initial negative attitude subsided. The negative attitude was usually reserved for the males. All of the converts insisted on being identified as Kalash Muslims. The converts also stated that they must separate themselves from the *kafir* community, both in social relations and dwellings, but as this was impossible for all the converts, they continued to have social relations with their old communities.

The conversion narratives showed that one of the major factors behind acceptance and rejection of an individual was religion. The other factors performed interdependently with religion because religion served as the foundation for the formation of such cultural groups as the Kalash. Alteration of the basic structural unit of religion resulted in different modifications in the behaviour of individual converts. These modifications in the converts' behaviour were a source of the contempt for the *kafir* Kalash community and affection for the Muslim side. The modified behaviors of the converts made the whole "social building" shatter. This behavioural change is subjective in nature because all individuals look at the "issue" from their own perspectives and interpret events according to their own understanding. In this case, the Kalash individuals leave their religion and choose to follow Islam. The resultant narrative marks and creates the boundaries of difference and association between the social sphere and individual being. Their narratives also highlighted their conversion in an intact tribal society, which brought the converts and their society in opposition to each other. The converts turned out to be single detached beings with no grounds to attach themselves to the prevailing social sphere. The Kalash community is physically together but religiously separate. The people interact, but their contempt towards the Other is there. One can feel the acuteness of the separation of individuals from the rest of the community, which did care about the ideas of a religion and the consequences of being different.

Finally, many NGOs are in the region with a promise of development and growth, and a desire to maintain the religious minority status of Kalash. The NGOs have brought with them foreign standards of

“development and growth” (Parkes, 2000). People have started to adopt these standards so that they can experience the perception of being “developed.” This idea of development has served as a front for the missionaries, resulting in a conflict between positivist and fundamentalist ideologies. The Kalash are caught in the middle. Such efforts have also made the Kalash believe in the foreigners’ idea of what it means to be a Kalash. Both ideas, in essence, are foreign. They should not have to be anything because of any kind of foreign subjective understanding. Nevertheless, the influence is overwhelmingly visible. The Kalash have started to see themselves not as they are, but as others see them. The NGOs want to keep the Kalash individuality and offer incentives for that, but the missionaries want to include them in the mainstream.

In this research, it is important to point to the role that the Muslims have played to facilitate the conversions. The people of *jama'at* are Muslim but the Muslim friends and acquaintances living in the vicinity have frequently been a source of the decision to convert. The friends and relatives were often seen to instigate the conversion of the unconverted Kalash. Probably the biggest difficulty faced by the Kalash converts has been full recognition and acceptance within the Muslim community, as they have had to overcome the prejudices and cultural perceptions of the born Muslims.

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