A Critical Exploration of British Millennial Muslim Converts' Identities, Conversion Narratives and Educational Experiences

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This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the University's requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2024

Declaration

I declare that all of the material in this thesis is the result of my own work and was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Worcester, except where indicated by specific reference in the text. I declare that it is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Worcester or any other University or similar institution in the United Kingdom or overseas. Any views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University of Worcester.

SIGNED: Jeremiah Oluseun Adebolajo Olusola DATED: 02 February 2024

Abstract

This thesis expands understanding of millennial Muslim converts within the context of post-9/11 Britain. Three currents of discussion constitute the practical and theoretical considerations that form the basis of this study. First, in examining the experience of religious transformation within the lives of converts, the concept of conversion is explored from a variety of angles. Second, the thesis investigates the identity formation of convert Muslims within a contextual backdrop wherein they have become the subject of controversy and social scientific inquiry. Third, the study uncovers the impact of their conversions and identity formations upon their educational experiences.

In the years following 9/11, some scholars have made the unsettling inference that there now exists within contemporary Britain a disdain for religious identity. However, there has been little sustained reflection upon the effects of this on the convert Muslim demographic, particularly within educational discourse. This thesis disrupts that trend by reflecting upon the experiences of fifteen millennial-born convert Muslims whose conversions occurred within the context of secondary and post-secondary education in Britain. By highlighting the unique insights available through my own positionality as a convert Muslim, I assert the place of converts within the wider discourse on Muslims in education; not reductively, as the subjects of psychological and phenomenological fascination, but as an experientially distinct, yet constitutive, part of the whole religious group. In doing this, I present arguments for the enfranchisement of convert Muslims' voices in readings of convert identity and in research within and about Muslim populations.

My methodology is oriented towards ethnography; a methodology based on prolonged observation and reporting, to produce analytical and explanatory accounts of the participants. The desire to look backwards at the conversion experiences of my participants, and forwards to the implications of those experiences, angles my approach towards narrative inquiry also. To encapsulate and describe this grouping of methods, I have used the term 'narrative ethnography'. Based upon a thematic analysis of my narrative-ethnographic data, three interrelated findings emerge from the study, which contribute to existing scholarship in the fields of education, the sociology of religion and conversion theorising.

The first contribution relates to the lived religiosity of convert Muslims and how this manifests, because of their conversion experiences, within their social, educational and digital environments. The second contribution relates to the distinct identity configurations of millennial convert Muslims, which, I posit, are characterised by forms of resistance, scriptural literalism and unique behavioural nuances. The third contribution relates to converts' educational experiences. In this regard, the study identifies educational spaces as the site of marginality, struggle and tension for the converts.

In making original contributions to theoretical discussions about conversion, postsecular thinking and digital methodologies, the study rests at the interface between the sociology of religion and education, informing the development of pastoral services for Muslims in education, and may be brought to bear on formulating educational material and practices which adequately reflect the diverse forms of religious adherence in modern Britain.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to The Almighty Allah, Who has guided me through the completion of this journey. To my mother and father, who instilled within me the zeal for education and a work ethic which they modelled in full, thank you. To my beloved wife, for your enduring support in storm-tossed seas and weathers calm, I am truly grateful. To my horcruxes, I love you all.

Acknowledgements

This thesis represents the culmination of a journey which may not have been completed without the help and support of numerous people. I am incredibly grateful to each of the participants who lent me their time, space, privacy and insights during the course of this study. It has been a pleasure to meet such varied people who are all united by the common experience so central to this study.

I reserve a special thanks for Professor Stephen Parker and Professor Richard Woolley, my supervisors who have encouraged and supported my work from my initial proposal and subsequent interview through to the end of this doctoral journey. I am sincerely grateful also to Dr Elizabeth Russell, who became my supervisor during what might have proven to be a tumultuous time. Were it not for her consistent guidance and invaluable input from the early days of this study, my methodology especially would not have taken shape as it has. There is something to be said about the ability to intuit when an admittedly stoic researcher like myself requires reassurance and encouragement or, indeed, criticality and deeper insight. My three supervisors have this ability.

I am especially thankful to Ruqayyah for her help, patience and, most of all, her enthusiasm about my work; to Blessing and Mum for their generosity and checking in; to my entire family, mother, father, siblings and all, for their love, hope and encouragement.

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Glossary

Alhamdulillah	All praise is due to Allah
Al-Fitrah	The natural predisposition
Al-Islam	The religion of submission/Peace through surrender
Al-sirat al-mustaqeem	The straight path
Allah	Literally, The God (The name befitting the one true God)
Dawah	Propagation of religion
Deen	Way of life
Deen Al-Islam	Islamic way of life
Eman	Faith
Hadith	Narrated traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him)
Hijab	Literally covering (usually referring to the head scarf covering)
'Ilm	Knowledge
Imam	Leader (usually referring to the authority and head of a mosque or prayer leader)
Khutbah	Sermon
Kuffar	Disbelievers
Kufr	Disbelief
Muslim	One who submits (referring to one who belongs to the religion of Islam)
Masjid	Mosque
Qur'an	The Islamic holy recitation (usually in book form)
salalahu alayhi-wa selem	Peace and blessings be upon him (the Prophet Muhammad)
Sans	an archaic word meaning 'without'
SubhanAllah	Glory be to Allah/negation of all imperfection and affirmation of all perfection to Allah.
Sunnah	Traditions of the Prophet (Peace be upon him)

Tablighi jama'at	Literally meaning 'a congregation of preacher'. Referring to a transnational Islamic missionary movement
Tadebor	Contemplation
Tawhid	Oneness of Allah
Thobe	A long, flowing Middle Eastern garment
Ummah	The universal body of Muslims considered as one distinct, integrated nation

Abbreviations

FBV	Fundamental British Values
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
ISoc	Islamic Society
NRSVUE	New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition of the Bible
UW	University of Worcester

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 My Story

As a sixteen-year-old black male, having been born in London and raised in a predominantly white town in the county of Essex, I had long become accustomed to the experience of standing out. During my early schooling, I was the only black child in my school year and one of only a handful of non-white students in the school. However, in 2003, at the end of my secondary schooling, when my father made the decision to move the family to a small village in the Lincolnshire countryside, I faced the prospect of spending my Further Education (FE) years as perhaps the only black student in my sixth form.

While this vignette of my early educational experience might appear to be leading to a description of my encounters with racial discrimination, it is not. For I was a popular child, friendly with most social circles, frequently performing in school drama productions, as well as belonging to several school sports teams. My earliest memories of truly feeling different came much later.

Unavoidably, however, a sharpened awareness of less overt manifestations of racism have caused me to apperceive subtle interactions during my schooling. For example, the seemingly innocuous tendency for some teachers to remark on how 'articulate' or 'well-spoken' I was, despite me having quite the same cockney accent and limited vocabulary as every other child I knew, now cause me to wonder if this reflected an unintentional microaggression (Torino, et al., 2018); a latent suggestion of surprise that the son of two Nigerian immigrants could communicate in the way that I did. And while, at times, my inclusion in such things as my sixth form's 'Oxbridge' mentoring scheme and *Youth Speaks* competition team feels, in retrospect, like a form of tokenism, I ultimately consider the colour of my skin to have been largely unremarkable during my schooling. It is this fact that serves to highlight the impact of the form of discrimination I was to later experience within England's education system.

For, a mere two years after my move to Lincolnshire, less than three months after the 7th of July bombings in London, at the age of eighteen, I became a Muslim.

At the time I knew almost nothing about the cultural impact of the 9/11 attacks and the ongoing 'war on terror'. Yet, the ensuing policy milieu was to feature prominently in my life moving forward. Indeed, it was my conversion to Islam that was to introduce me to more overt and complex displays of discrimination. Three weeks after my conversion to Islam, I began my undergraduate degree in Politics at a public research university in the south-east of England. It was during this period of my life that I became acquainted with many of the contemporary national and international perceptions surrounding my newfound religion. Where any racism I had experienced as a result of my skin colour had been what Coates (2011) refers to as 'insidious; or concealed' racism (p. 1), the discrimination I began to experience due to my chosen religion was overt and had 'passed the dinner-table test' (Allen, 2013; Batty, 2011). Where there had previously been no obvious hostility in the attitudes of my friends due to the colour of my skin, after my conversion there was a clear shift in the behaviours of those I had grown up with, their parents and within my other socialisations. My experiences indicated that, while my peers did not view my race as culturally divisive, my chosen religion was a reason for reproach. For example, where my penchant for eating traditional Nigerian food had never been a subject of interest to those around me, after my conversion, my dietary requirement for halal food became a discussion of socio-political significance. I recall a particularly heated debate in a Contemporary Political Theory seminar in which one of my classmates delivered an impassioned indictment of 'the brutality of halal slaughter techniques'. Similarly, my sartorial choices, on the occasions in which I chose to wear a *thobe* (long, flowing Middle Eastern garment) or prayer hat, frequently drew comment and criticism in supermarkets and town centres in Lincoln and Essex. All of this was compounded with a growing Islamophobic undertone that I had started to notice in the media and in the implementation of public policy initiatives.

It was during my second year of undergraduate studies that these policies had a more personal impact on my educational experience. I was permitted, for one week, the honour of conducting the *khutbah* (Friday sermon) for my Islamic Society (ISoc). Shortly after the sermon, however, I was approached by a prominent committee member of the university's

ISoc. He proceeded to warn me to be careful with the tone and language of my sermons, informing me that he had credible reason to believe that I – and a few other members of the ISoc – were being monitored for signs of extremism. When I asked why we were being watched, and by whom, I was informed that somebody within the University was concerned with radicalisation within the ISoc. In later discussions with members of the Society, it was suggested that converts had been known to carry out terror attacks and join 'fundamentalist' organisations around the world, and that my occasional choice to wear Islamic clothing on campus meant that I was suspected of fundamentalism. While it remains unclear whether or not I was in fact being monitored during my time at university (credible reports on this topic would suggest it was possible. See Dodd, 2006), my international travels shortly after graduating were frequently disrupted by the security services. I was stopped at airports, questioned by security authorities during my trips, and often interrogated about the activities of fellow Muslim friends and associates. I would later learn that this was an experience shared by other converts. One participant, Umm Musa, illustrated this by showing me a series of information cards, depicted in Figure 1. She explained that she and her husband were routinely stopped during travel and that they had taken to carrying information cards, designed and distributed by a Muslim human rights advocacy group, which offered advice about how to avoid escalation and wrongful accusations when approached by the security services.

Figure 1: Information Cards – Source [author]

My own experiences with the ever-expanding counter-terrorism agenda and my aforementioned encounters with Islamophobia coincided with my immersion into the wider Muslim population in Britain beyond university. While I had expected that these interactions within the wider Muslim communities in the UK and amongst heritage Muslims,[1] in mosques and Islamic organisations, would result in an absence of marginality, it introduced me to another form of marginality; one which forms an important theme to be explored within this thesis: The distinct experiential disjuncture between convert Muslims and heritage Muslims. This disjuncture, for me, first came to light in the form of an invitation I received to engage in *tablighi jama'at*, a transnational Islamic missionary movement which is focused upon exhorting fellow Muslims to return to the correct practice of their religion (Noor, 2012). As part of this invitation, I was encouraged to wear traditional South-East Asian clothing and engage in a number of cultural practices common to some South-East Asian Muslims. While the professed aims of the organisation sat well with me, falling in line with the theological edict to proselytise (Hadith 253), the seeming endeavour to target only heritage Muslims appeared, to my mind, to fall short of the Islamic duty of *dawah* (calling all to the way of Islam) (Qur'an 16:125). In limiting its call to those of Muslim heritage, I perceived the organisation's activities to be more in line with the Islamic concept of enjoining good and forbidding evil (Qur'an 3:104). Additionally, the requirement to wear South-East Asian clothing and engage in other cultural practices without a clear scriptural basis brought into stark relief a potential dissonance between cultural and religious practices amongst Muslims. Continued interaction within the Muslim community drew my attention to the ethno-cultural diversity amongst Muslims, both in Britain and internationally. This awareness left me with a sense that the discrimination and marginality I had experienced since converting stemmed, in part, from a misguided belief in a Muslim homogeneity that did not exist. By my third year in university, the various differences in practices and cultural norms amongst my fellow Muslims had become quite discernible to me. However, given the shared primary religious sources of the Qur'an and Sunnah, it would be an overstatement to suggest that there was not a theological commonality between myself, a convert, and most other British Sunni Muslims, or that we did not share many of

[1] This is a commonly used descriptor for Muslims who are born to Muslim families. The origins of the term are unclear and a number of alternative terms are used interchangeably within the literature, including 'born-Muslims' and 'life-long Muslims'.

the same experiences and concerns with discrimination and securitisation in the wake of 9/11. Nonetheless, my interactions with other Muslim converts revealed a much deeper commonality in our shared experiences.

1.2 Development into a Research Study

The profound commonality I perceive as existing between British convert Muslims has led to my interest in researching this particular demographic and exploring the ways in which they form their identities. In particular, I have been interested in exploring the educational experiences of those who undergo the particular type of religious development that is commonly referred to as conversion. The circumstances of my own conversion and the socio-political context within which that occurred have explicitly influenced my career, my later educational choices and the choices I have made for my children. It is now, through the lens of a researcher, that I wish to better understand the relationality between conversion, identity formation and educational experience, both within my own life, and in the lives of other millennial-born converts. In that sense, therefore, this study acts as both an appraisal of the conversion experience, and as a contribution to the body of literature exploring convert Muslims in contemporary British education.

While the events of 9/11, 7/7 and the 'war on terror' have affected all segments and multiple generations of the Muslim community, both in Britain and internationally, it is the millennial[2] generation of Muslims (to which I belong) that hold my interest in this regard. It is this generation of Muslims who experienced, during their secondary, further and/or higher education, the introduction and early implementations of the policy initiatives that proceeded 'the war on terror' (Busher and Jerome, 2020; Thrall and Goepner, 2015: 1). As I will go on to discuss, the experiences of Muslims within this context have inspired complex examinations of identity, belonging and religion within the field of education (Panjwani & Moulin-Stożek, 2017; Sahin, 2013; 2018), in some instances leading to more culturally coherent forms of pedagogy (Ahmed, 2012; Gilliat-Ray, 2020; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2017). Convert Muslims, however, have been largely under researched within

[2] Born between 1981 and 1996

this literature. This study, then, offers a much needed and original contribution to understanding the educational experiences of convert Muslims and how those experiences are impacted by conversion and subsequent identity configuration. A specific focus upon convert Muslims of this generation offers a potentially novel perspective. Their engagement within education as both non-Muslims and as Muslims provides an informative picture about the ways in which islamoprejudice manifests in the lives of smaller minorities within the wider Muslim population. The aforementioned foci combine to delimit the participants of this study to those British, millennial-born Muslim converts who have embraced Islam during their secondary, further or higher education schooling. It also makes relevant the conversion processes of my participants, as well as their social and educational experiences following conversion.

Three currents of discussion emerge to constitute the practical and theoretical considerations that form the basis of this thesis. First, in seeking to understand the homogenising experience of religious transformation within my participants' lives, the theoretical concept of conversion is explored from a variety of angles. Second, the study investigates the identity formation of convert Muslims in general and within the contextual backdrop I have described in this chapter. Third, I uncover the impact of their conversions and subsequent identity formations on their educational experiences. These currents of discussion are reflected in the research questions (RQs) that guide the current study:

1.3 Research Questions

1. What were the experiences of a self-selected group of millennial Muslim converts (born between 1981 and 1996) during their secondary and post-secondary education in the UK (post-9/11).

2. How might a fine-grained exploration of the conversion narratives and identities of Muslim converts inform the educational needs of the UK's convert?

3. What, if any, implications arise from these recounted experiences?

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

The remainder of this thesis will be structured as follows:

Chapter 2 examines the three main bodies of literature which are relevant to this thesis: conversion studies, identity configuration and educational experience. The chapter begins with a brief reflection on the way in which I managed my search for literature. It then moves on to exploring various definitions of conversion, including Islamic conceptualisations, before settling upon an understanding of conversion that I will carry forward throughout the remainder of the thesis. I move on to discuss understandings of conversion patterns within the literature, offering critique of existing conversion motifs and limitations in prevailing explanations for conversion to Islam. In section two of the chapter, I turn to an examination of how converts configure their identities within contemporary Western contexts. I discuss the relevance of Islamophobia, racialisation, Orientalism[3] and other forms of negativisation which colour the lived experiences of British convert Muslims. This leads to the final section of the chapter in which I focus upon the literature related to the educational experiences of convert Muslims. Highlighting first the dearth of literature in this space, I posit a way in which to locate convert Muslims in relation to heritage Muslims within the wider discourse. I trace the historical context of the Muslim population's interaction with the education system of the UK, including how policies such as Prevent and Fundamental British Values (FBV) have taken shape and come into operation. In the absence of extensive literature on the educational experiences of converts, I offer nascent insights into the ways these policies have impacted the experiences of converts specifically.

Chapter 3 attends to the development of my methodology and the theoretical considerations that emerged from the literature review to influence the philosophical and methodological orientation of the thesis. Having identified, what I perceive to be, the over-enfranchisement of secular Western readings of conversion in chapter 2, I establish a

[3] The term is used here to refer to 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and… "the Occident."' (Said, 1978: 3), by which, from a historical perspective, the British and French (although not exclusively) cultural and imperial enterprise dominated, restructured and had authority over peoples of the Orient. Orientalism casts the culture, language, religion and identity of Europeans as superior in comparison with non-Europeans, most notably the peoples of the Middle East. (Said, 1978).

justification for centring a faith-based, Islamic epistemological stance in seeking to understand convert experiences. Furthermore, with the literature review indicating the presence of Islamophobia and Orientalism in constructing reductive conceptualisations of Islamic conversion in modern Britain, this chapter asserts the importance of a critical stance in challenging those conceptualisations. I also advocate for the value of 'insider' research in formulating new understandings of the convert experience. This chapter culminates with a detailed consideration of how I shall bring together narrative and ethnographic research tools to allow me to 'hear and see' the narratives and experiences of my participants in novel ways.

Chapter 4 continues my discussion of methodology as I outline the rationale underpinning my research design choices and the practical application of my chosen dialectical methodology. This chapter engages with the complexities of combining ethnographic immersion with narrative inquiry and the ethical considerations that are embedded in that endeavour, particularly as it relates to positionality and reflexivity. I lay out my process of participant recruitment, the sites of the research and the ways in which data are analysed.

Chapters 5-7 present the findings of my research. Chapter 5 describes the lived-religious cognition of my participants and the patterns of conversion present within their narratives. I report on the behavioural and experiential commonalities amongst my participants. Crucially, the chapter begins to develop an understanding of my participants' identities as closely tied to their religious cognition. Chapter 6 shifts focus to the identity configuration of the participants and their social experiences during the period of their conversion and schooling. Bringing Chapter 6's findings into conversation with Chapter 5's, a clear picture of the converts' specific form of lived religiosity takes shape. Chapter 7 presents findings that relate more exclusively to the educational experiences of my participants. With the data indicating that some British millennial-born Muslim converts experience education as the site of tension and struggle, particularly within the post-9/11 context, this chapter acts as a springboard for a more sustained consideration of the relationship between my data, the literature and my research questions.

Chapter 8 brings my findings to bear on the research questions that have guided this thesis. I divide this chapter into three sections, each of which address a single research question. Here I discuss the meaning of my findings and how they relate to the three bodies of literature explored in Chapter 2. I end the chapter with a description of the academic, theoretical and practical implications that arise from my study.

Chapter 9 summarises the purpose of the research and reflects upon the approach taken to achieve that purpose. In doing this, the chapter draws out the conclusions reached within the study and reaffirms the connections between the three strands of my study: conversion, identity and educational experience. The synthesis of these three strands, wherein lies some of the novelty of this research, represents a significant contribution to knowledge. Finally, this chapter scrutinises the limitations of the project and forwards suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Conversion, Identity and Educational Experience

2.1 Research Management Reflections

To conduct my initial search of literature, I utilised the University of Worcester's Library Search functionality. This in-house system utilises a federated search engine called Summon which sits atop a large body of resources that include the university's library catalogue, e-book collection, publisher subscriptions and research databases (see section one of Appendix 10 for a comprehensive list of databases included and excluded from this search functionality). My literature search strategy involved a four-step process outlined in Appendix 10: (1) Identifying the RQ, (2) identify the main themes within the RQ, (3) selecting keywords and terms related to the themes and (4) developing search strings. It is to be noted that this process began with the RQs that were developed during the early stages of my project. Each of these RQs evolved throughout the project and were informed by my iterative search for literature. As the thesis developed from the initial proposal and literature review stages, I began to refine my searches by applying relevant filters using the library's 'advanced search' capabilities. This enabled me to add disciplinary focus to the search results, specifying, for example, 'education', 'sociology & social history' and 'religion'. This also enabled me to single-out literature from specific periods of time. For example, I included or excluded literature from the pre/post-9/11 eras, according to the topic of research within my ongoing writing.

The four-step search method (see Appendix 10) yielded the following themes: *Millennial Muslims/Muslim converts/Muslims in UK education/Muslim education experience/Muslim identity/educational needs of Muslims/religious conversion/conversion to Islam/Education policy/UK Muslims*. Using my own knowledge of the research topics, employing various synonyms and considering the various ways in which the themes I had identified may be expressed, I selected keywords and terms related to each of those themes. These keywords and terms were as follows: *Millennial Muslims/Young British Muslims/social media/Religiosity/Conversion/Religious Conversion/Conversion to Islam/Muslim converts/Female conversion/Male Conversion/religious change/converts in Media/Prevent/Fundamental British Values/History of Muslims Britain/British Muslim*

education/British Islam/Muslim identity UK/Racialisation/Muslim education needs/Muslim converts/Convert Muslim identity/Multiculturalism/British multiculturalism/Multicultural education/Prevent/Securitisation policy UK/British Muslims/Islam in the UK.

Based upon these key terms, and after undertaking training in Boolean searching with my university's subject specialist academic liaison librarian, I constructed a series of search strings through trial and error. These search strings consisted of various sentences, phrases and combinations of words that utilised Boolean operators, phrase searching and proximity searching (see section two of Appendix 10 for examples). The results of these searches were used in various ways. At times, I would read the abstracts or full papers of results or utilise the resource in my bibliography. At other times I would perform a cursory appraisal of the results, selecting subjects, keywords and authors for consideration. While several of my references were found using the search strings detailed in Appendix 10, I also relied extensively upon backward citation searching (reference mining) to delve more deeply into the specifics of topics and authors I was exploring. I did not choose to undertake a systematic review, as it is defined by Grant and Booth (2009), in which I would have developed a tabular summary of, for example, every search string, data mining trails, the number of search results found and the references selected from each search. While I did not deem this type of recording and systemisation of my literature search necessary for the management of my study, throughout the duration of the study I have come more acutely aware of the added value such recordkeeping would have added to this field of study. The growing academic interest in religious conversion and the uptake of religiosity in modern secular societies means that the systematic recording, appraisal and synthesis of research literature around this subject may have been used to enhance future research. This limitation in the management of my literature search means that the information presented in Appendix 10 does not represent an exhaustive list of the search strings and databases I used during the construction of this thesis.

2.2 Section One: Conversion

2.2.1 Introduction

A detailed reflection upon my own religious conversion experience and the implications of that experience in shaping my identity has remained an area of personal and academic significance to me for a number of years. The subject of conversion has long been one of academic interest also, spawning a variety of theories and academic outputs in the fields of psychology (James, 1902/2015; Starbuck, 1897a; 1897b), sociology (Lofland & Stark, 1965), theology (Rambo, 1993) and comparative religion (Underwood, 1925). James (2015) spoke of conversion in terms of a 'self-surrender' constituting 'the vital turning-point of the religious life' (p. 296). Starbuck (1911) wrote of conversion as 'The act of yielding… giving one's self over to the new life, making it the centre of a new personality, and living, from within, the truth of it' (p. 116-7). For the purposes of understanding the impact of conversion upon the identity configurations and educational experiences of convert millennial Muslims, it is important to understand the phenomenon of conversion from an array of angles and elucidate those factors which distinguish convert Muslim experiences from, for example, heritage Muslims who display high degrees of 'social fluency' in both British and Islamic cultures. In other words, what distinguishes the convert from other Muslims in my exploration of identity and educational experiences amongst Muslims in contemporary Britain? What motivations do converts have in converting? What insight can distinctive patterns of conversion offer into the identity formation of this group and what implications arise therefrom?

Such questions demand consideration of the phenomenon of conversion, not only in the Islamic context specifically, but in terms of religious conversion more generally. To approach this, I will begin by defining conversion. I will draw upon the works of Starbuck (1897a; 1897b), James (2015), Underwood, (1925), Lofland & Skonovd (1981) and Rambo (1993; 1999), as well as Barker & Currie (1985), Gillespie (1991), Köse (1999) and Köse and Lowenthal (2000) in examining patterns of socio-psychological experience and identity formation found amongst religious converts. This will be followed by discussion of the phenomenon of conversion to Islam more specifically, framed within discussions about secularisation and the contemporary tensions that exist between Islam and Muslims and wider British society.

2.2.2 Definitions of Conversion

The theories and definitions surrounding religious conversion are myriad, with conceptions of how to correctly define this particular type of religious development differing across religious doctrines and between academic fields. Broadly speaking, a consensus appears to have formed from within the seminal academic works on the topic, with almost all conversion theorists referring to a process of gradual or sudden change in moral character, in which one or more obtain a spiritual or religious insight previously unattained (Barker & Currie, 1985: 305; Gillespie, 1991: 67). For example, Starbuck (1897a), in defining the journey 'to spiritual insight and activity' as 'the whole series of manifestations just preceding, accompanying and immediately following the apparently sudden change of character involved' (p. 268), appears to limit conversion to sudden changes. This definition neglects those religious conversions which are gradual in nature. James (1902/2015) refines this understanding, describing conversion as 'the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities' (p. 270). Proceeding with an acceptance of James's more encompassing definition of conversion, drawing upon the works of various conversion theorists and supplementing this with his own studies in comparative religion and psychology, Underwood (1925) goes on to define conversion as 'a reaction taking the form of a psychological surrender to an ideal, and issuing in moral development' (p. 258). However, in choosing to enliven their definitions with examples drawn mostly from Christian literature, each of the above works present Christian religious tradition and conceptions of religion and divinity as normative in defining conversion. This resonates with Knibbe and Kupari's (2020) contemporary assertion of 'the Protestant bias often embedded in conventional academic definitions of religion' (p. 156). While Underwood's definition attempts to remedy this limitation, invoking historical accounts of conversion in various religious traditions in an effort to demonstrate the compatibility of his definition with both Christian and non-Christian religious conversion narratives (p. 258-9), his bias is also evident. The preface to his work notes, 'I have tried in the last chapter to present the case for the supremacy of Christian conversion…' (p. 6).

With the subjects of my own research being Muslim converts, and in recognising the Christian normative presented by many of the classical texts on religious conversion theory, I turn now to the Islamic conceptualisation of conversion, central to which is the concept of *Al-fitrah* (humankind's innate, natural state of being) and the belief that all people are born in submission to Allah, therefore in the state of Islam. For those raised as Muslims, the reaffirmation of one's *deen* (religion/way of life), through understanding and willing submission to the practices of the religion (Adnan 1997: 5), is considered as remaining upon *Al-sirat al-mustaqeem* (the straight path); remaining Muslim. In the case of one raised in a religion other than Islam, this process of understanding and willing submission to the practices of Islam, is considered to be a conversion or 'reversion' to a state of *Islam* (submission). The individual who enters into Islam from an upbringing other than it is thus often referred to as a 'revert'. While neither of the primary sources of Islamic doctrine (The Qur'an and the *Sunnah*) use the term 'convert' or 'revert' – instead referring, variously, to Arabic equivalations of 'accepting of Islam' and 'submitted' – Islamic scholars writing in the English language, as well as conversion theorists discussing the Islamic concept of religious conversion, commonly refer to Muslim converts as 'reverts'. Indeed, my own experience and some studies in the field point towards this term being preferred by some who have accepted Islam (Al-Qwidi, 2002; Suleiman, 2016 : 91).

Despite the difference in nomenclature and the use of the term 'revert' to capture the Islamic notion of one's return to the Islamic way of life (*Deen Al-Islam*), the process of religious development described by the term 'revert' is similar to those described as 'conversion' in previously mentioned definitions. In all cases, a process of moral, religious, spiritual change is implied, with the Islamic doctrine putting in place no limitation or standard regarding the gradualness or suddenness of the conversion. However, just as the Islamic position may not find the term 'conversion' sufficient in capturing the central element of *Al-Fitrah* in the transcendental change from one religion to the state of *Al-Islam* (submission), other religious doctrines will undoubtedly find the Islamic concept of a return to an innate state of submission to Allah unreflective of conceptualisations of conversion in their own religion. In conceding that the notion of 'reversion' does not accurately encompass all of the vast number of experiences that might reasonably be categorised as religious conversion in the literature, it will suffice to employ the term conversion and a

definition which recognises the scope and limitations of my study's exploration of convert Muslim experiences and identity, and which is closely aligned to other scholarly definitions of conversion. For the purposes of this study, therefore, when referring to conversion, I will assume the following definition: the processes in which an individual(s) accepts and surrenders to the faith and doctrines of a religion or spiritual creed other than the tenets of their previous way of life.

2.2.3 Conversion Motifs

Having discussed key delineations of the term 'conversion' and settled upon a definition that is appropriate for my own discussion of the topic, I now turn my attention to an exploration of conversion patterns and an assessment of the varying motivations, narratives and experiences which distinguish one type of conversion from another. I will begin with a look at Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) conversion motifs. Their conversion motifs framework (1981) offers six categories in describing patterns of those converting to a religion. While little work has been undertaken to investigate the contemporary validity of these motifs or design a method for assessing their applicability to religious converts in the contemporary British cultural climate (it is to be noted that Köse & Loewenthal's (2000) work deals with Islamic conversion in a pre-9/11 Britain), the motifs provide helpful descriptors in categorising a wide range of conversion processes. For the purposes of discussing the conversion histories of the Muslim converts in this study and the ways in which those narratives contribute to forming their identities and educational experiences, I will present a brief outline of Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) conversion motifs, followed by a critique of the same.

2.2.3.1 Intellectual Conversion

The intellectual conversion motif is epitomised by minimal or no social pressure to convert and is considered, according to Lofland and Skonovd at least, to be relatively uncommon (p. 376) (an assessment that I will examine in the forthcoming critique of the framework). The motif describes individual, intellectual investigation and conversion through reading, studying and attending lectures, sometimes in a *sans*-social manner. Conversion can take

place, according to this motif, in isolation of devotees to the religion. Important features of this motif include the convert being affectively awakened and having a degree of belief in the religion prior to active ritual participation. This manner of conversion, Lofland and Skonovd theorise, is on the rise in the West due to what they refer to as 'disembodied modes of religious communication' (literature, movies, television, video, etc) and the ease with which people can now privately elect to seek out truth (p. 376-7).

2.2.3.2 Mystical Conversion

The mystical conversion motif is one which is preceded by powerful affective and/or ineffable experience. In contrast to the intellectual conversion, it is often 'wrought upon' and not 'by' the convert. It is further characterised as leading to a feeling of submission, preceded by social estrangement (a prototypical example being the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus in the Christian tradition). It is noted that this type of conversion is, perhaps, the best known and most heavily focused upon type of conversion (a point that requires problematisation from a critical standpoint and will be dealt with in section 2.2.4.3). Features of this motif included little in the way of social pressure, a brief experience of a critical conversion period (the resulting stress may extend for weeks or days), followed by belief, then ritual participation in the religion.

2.2.3.3 Experimental Conversion

The experimental motif is most accurately characterised as 'participation before conversion'. With such a conversion experience, reconfiguration of religious identity, behaviour and ideology can be tentative, slow and pragmatic, with the convert being led by curiosity to 'try' the religion before making any significant changes. Religious conviction develops later. Features of this type of conversion include little social pressure to the convert, prolonged conversion periods and is usually not accompanied by intense emotional arousal. This motif shares many of the characteristics of non-religious socialisation processes.

2.2.3.4 Affectional Conversion

The affectional motif describes the conversion experience in which personal attachment and strong feelings towards a person or persons practicing the religion plays an important role in the conversion. This motif is widely documented and, arguably, overemphasised (Rambo, 1999; Spoliar & van den Brandt, 2020); something I will discuss in further detail shortly (see 2.2.4.4). A degree of social pressure (in the guise of support and attraction) is a feature of this motif, as well as a degree of affective arousal, with faith developing after ritual participation.

2.2.3.5 Revivalist Conversion

The conversion motif met with the most cynicism and widely considered to be debunked, according to some studies (Altheide & Johnson, 1977; Lang & Lang, 1960), revivalist conversion patterns describe a process in which the convert is first affectively enthralled in a group setting, with the subsequent contagion and/or social pressure leading that person to experience intense emotional arousal in the form of joy, fear or guilt, resulting in a conversion experience.

The cynicism surrounding this motif may be the result of a combination of factors, ranging from studies of revivalist pastors and their organisations in which this type of conversion was deemed to have been staged (Altheide & Johnson, 1977; Lang & Lang, 1960), to a growing rationalism and secularism within the study of conversion; something that may animate a tendency to reject the types of intense emotional or spiritual arousal described by this motif.

2.2.3.6 Coercive Conversion

Coercive conversion refers to the conversion experienced by one who, through compulsion (in the form of emotional stress and/or physical threat), accepts the ideological system of a religion. Such a conversion is characterised by high social-psychological pressure and defined as requiring an inordinate amount of time and financial resources to achieve sincere ideological conversion. This type of conversion has often been referred to as a process of

‘brainwashing’; one in which the person comes to believe in the religion through systemised, psychological coercion.

2.2.4 Critique of the Motifs

In sharpening my awareness and comprehension of the phenomenon of conversion through the richly descriptive motifs offered by Lofland and Skonovd (1981), there is a temptation to consider these categories as exhaustive and neatly discrete. The ability to categorise Muslim converts comfortably and accurately into one or more of the aforementioned motifs would provide diagnostic clarity and render my analysis of the complex mass of observational and narrative data produced by this study wieldier. However, the spirit in which these motifs were written – acknowledging the potential intersections between the features in each motif and the myriad experiences detailed by religious converts throughout histories, religions and cultures, and accepting of the varying prevalence of particular conversion motifs according to time and location (p. 379, 383) – means that further critical problematisation is needed in applying this framework to Muslim conversion patterns in contemporary Britain. What follows, therefore, is a critique of Lofland and Skonovd’s conversion motifs, with reference to what is gleaned from the literature about conversion to Islam in the post-9/11 British context.

2.2.4.1 Secular Normativity in Conversion Theory

The first critique I will discuss, relates not to the descriptions of the conversion motifs themselves, but to the claim made by the authors, who assert that intellectual conversion is relatively uncommon. It is my view that this assumption reflects a wider tendency to undermine the religious perspective as unintellectual and biased (Stark, 2003), in contrast to the secular viewpoint which is perceived to be rationalist and objective (McCutcheon, 2003). This unhelpful binary, upheld by secularism’s hegemony in the Western academy (Rambo, 1999: 261), infers that the involvement of intellectualism in religious conversion is, in a sense, incongruent. My own experience, and the experiences present in works related to Muslim converts do not concur (Brice, 2011; Köse & Loewenthal, 2000; Spoliar & van den

Brandt, 2020; van Nieuwkerk, 2006a, 2006b). This serves to reaffirm the limitations of such secularist outlooks and the need to interrogate their prevalence in the literature.

2.2.4.2 Globalisation and the Rise of Disembodied Religiosity

Relatedly, Lofland and Skonovd go on to assert that intellectual conversion motifs are on the rise in Western society, suggesting that the increase in 'disembodied' religious communication, in the form of literature, videos and media, may account for the ease with which people can now elect to seek out information, truth and religious enlightenment in a *sans*-social manner. Given the fact that these motifs predate the internet, one might infer that the proliferation of the internet, social media, digital advancements and globalisation, since the writing of Lofland and Skonovd's work, will broaden the prevalence of 'disembodied' religiosity; an inference supported by numerous studies (Brouwer et al., 1996; Metcalf, 1994; Poewe, 1994). This fact, along with my aforementioned critique, indicates a need to revaluate the prevalence, description and application of the intellectual motif. Furthermore, the social context of religious freedoms (Drinan, 2004; Trispiotis, 2019; Yousif, 2000) may play a significant role in understanding the sense of liberty a modern British person might feel in electing to seek out religious enlightenment and follow their chosen religion without fear of opprobrium. Put simply, contemporary freedoms may play a significant role in the experiences of converts and the processes of conversion. For example, my own Western, liberal upbringing and the legal, social and intellectual freedoms I have enjoyed growing up, which have provided fertile ground in which to explore religion and philosophy, are important to consider, as is the role of the internet in conversion pattern.

2.2.4.3 Christian Normative

My next point relates closely to my critique of the tendency to presume a Western viewpoint in discussing conversion within academia (Hefner, 1993; Kaplan, 1995; van der Veer, 1996). It is to be noted that Lofland and Skonovd go on to assert that the mystical conversion motif is the most well-known type of conversion. While much of the classical literature in the field may support this assertion (Clark 1929; James, 2015; Starbuck, 1897a; 1897b), a critical eye might quickly deduce the reasons for this renown. With this motif

being the one that most closely describes the biblical conversion of St. Paul on the road to Damascus (NRSVUE, 2022: Acts 9:1-31), the earliest Western scholars of religious conversion appeared to focus heavily upon this pattern (Clark 1929; James, 1902; Starbuck, 1897a; 1897b). Its prominence in the literature, therefore, reveals a Christian-Western normative view of the phenomenon of conversion; a view which might disenfranchise the intellectual and spiritual interpretations of other religious voices. Taking account of the need to problematise such limitations within academia, the pervasiveness of the mystical conversion typology, while fascinating, requires review.

2.2.4.4 The Misogynist's Motif

Lofland and Skonovd (1981: 380) allude to possible reasons for the general overemphasis of the affectional motif within religious conversion literature. However, particularly amongst women (Loewenthal, 1988) and notably within the Islamic context (Ahmed, 2010; Hermansen, 2006; van Nieuwkerk, 2006b), the heavy focus upon the affectional conversion motif requires specific interrogation. The assumption of an affectional conversion narrative amongst Muslim women has contributed to well-documented essentialisations of Muslim women (Shomer, 2015; van Nieuwkerk, 2006b). These essentialisations presuppose that a woman would not, in the modern world, and of her own volition, choose to convert to a religion that is perceived to be limiting of her freedom, without the powerfully motivating factors of either coercion or emotional reasoning (Rambo, 1999: 261; Spoliar & van den Brandt, 2021). Such an outlook and its prevalence in describing patterns of conversion amongst Muslim women, I would argue, is a form of misogyny, representing a dismissal of a female's capacity to rationalise. I would further argue that such an outlook, in contributing to essentialisations about Islamic identity, is misleading in its failure to accurately describe the true, lived experiences of Muslim converts (Pędziwiatr, 2017; van Nieuwkerk, 2006a; Winchester, 2015). The literature implies that the underlying assumptions upholding the affectional conversion motif must be challenged (Cady & Fessenden, 2013; Rambo, 1999: 261).

2.2.4.5 *'Degrees of Social Pressure'*

A point of further note, when considering the breadth and application of Lofland and Skonovd's motifs, is the concept of 'major variations', which distinguish each motif in the framework. As illustrated in Figure 2, the variations in 'degrees of social pressure' when converting range from 'low or none' to 'high' degrees of social pressure to convert. However, given the context of stigmatisation and Islamophobia present within the post-9/11 British context, which I have touched upon in my introduction, and will elucidate further in section 3 of this chapter, a gap in this model seems evident: Namely, the inability of the model to account for degrees of social pressure *not* to convert to Islam. The model fails to capture the effects of varying degrees of social (political, economic and personal) disincentive in the conversion process.

		Conversion Motifs					
		Intellectual	Mystical	Experimental	Affectional	Revivalist	Coercive
Major Variation	Degree of Social Pressure	Low or none	none or little	low	medium	high	high
	Temporal Duration	medium	short	long	long	short	long
	Level of Affective Arousal	medium	high	low	medium	high	high
	Affect Content	illumination	awe, love, fear	curiosity	affection	love (& fear)	fear (& love)
	Belief-Participation Sequence	belief-participation	belief-participation	participation-belief	participation-belief	participation-belief	participation-belief

Figure 2: Lofland & Skonovd's Conversion Motifs - Adapted from (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981)

2.2.5 Limitations of Conversion Frameworks

The brief critique offered above indicates that this single framework's attempt to encompass the multitude of social, psychological and theological influences operative in a person's decision to convert to a religion is imperfect. It is here, therefore, that I turn my attention to

other theories in contemplating patterns and motivations for conversion in the contemporary British context with which my study is concerned. Little work has been done on theoretical models of conversion to Islam in the west (notable exceptions include Al-Qwidi, 2002; Köse, 1996; Roald, 2012). Many of the earlier (pre-9/11) works on the topic were concerned with *dawah* (proselytising) (e.g. Poston, 1992), historical perspectives (e.g. Bulliet, 1983) and attitudes and identity (e.g. Adnan, 1999). Given the contemporary geo-political standing of Islam, later works on the topic of conversion to Islam in the West have tended to focus upon issues such as gender (e.g. Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017), terrorism (e.g. Flower, 2013), growth and demography (Brice, 2011), media portrayals (e.g. Sealy, 2017), identity (e.g. Sealy, 2019; 2021c; Younis & Hassan, 2017), racialisation and Islamophobia (e.g. Moosavi, 2015a), or some amalgamation of the above (e.g. Bunzl, 2005; Jawad, 2013; Sealy, 2021b; Spoliar & van den Brandt, 2020; van Nieuwkerk, 2006a). While theoretical models of conversion to Islam in the West have not been left entirely unaddressed within the literature, the sparce work in this area (e.g. Al-Qwidi, 2002; Köse, 1996; Roald, 2012) embodies a limited conceptualisation of conversion, based mainly upon psychological and sociological theory. What follows is a review of the literature in this regard.

2.2.6 Conversion to Islam in the West

To preface this review, and in advocating for a broader theoretical approach to conversion to Islam in Western contexts, I draw attention first to the critically astute observation forwarded by Rambo (1999), who, drawing upon the human sciences to provide theoretical resources for those studying conversion to Islam in western Europe, notes that, almost without exception, conversion theory, underpinned by scientific psychology, is built upon the works of people of American and Western European racial and cultural heritage, who may reflect an understanding of selfhood, family life and norms that are dissimilar to other cultures (p.263). It can be inferred, therefore, that such theories may be ill-equipped to describe conversion patterns related to Islam. Buckser and Glazier's (2003), anthropological anthology on the topic of conversion is illustrative of this point. Despite its detailed attempt to consider conversion in both Western and non-Western terms and across a range of religions, the multiple ethnographic case studies presented in the book lack any thoughtful

treatment of conversion to Islam (Howell, 2006: 685). Recognising this, in the afterword to the anthology, Rambo notes,

> *Research on conversion should include more serious studies of Islamic conversion. Especially since September 11, 2001, it is imperative that Islam be better understood and recognized as a force exerting a powerful political, cultural, and religious influence around the world… In the study of Islamic conversion, care must be taken to see the phenomenon with new eyes. Christian-based categories must be set aside, at least temporarily, so that the nature and scope of conversion to Islam can be examined without preconception or bias.* (in Buckser & Glazier, 2003: 197)

Such an observation cautions me to be open to other subjectivities when understanding conversion to Islam; to search for a satisfactory explanation for the spiritual yearnings, experiences and enlightenments that motivate conversion to Islam specifically, in a social environment that is arguably hostile to it. Conversely, the complexity of the phenomenon of religious conversion cautions me to remain open to, and not discounting of, socio-psychological explanations for conversion. As such, below I examine theories related to the influence of secularisation upon conversion patterns amongst British Muslim converts.

2.2.7 Secularisation

Of particular interest when examining patterns of conversion to Islam in modern Britain is the apparent paradox of this phenomenon in the face of the large body of literature in the field of 'secularisation theory' which predicted a continued and inexorable secularisation of Western civilisation as a corollary of the Enlightenment endeavour, industrialization and developments in science and technology (Berger, 1969: 133; Martin, 1967: 100; Wilson, 1976: 85). Indeed, while it can hardly be denied that institutionalised religion as a whole has suffered under the secularisation of modernity (Berger, 1996), studies have demonstrated that conversion to Islam in Western Europe has thrived (Jawad, 2013; Köse, 1996; 1999); a phenomenon that raises relevant questions for this study: Has secularisation and modernity effected conversion patterns for Muslims in 21st century Britain? Have factors extrinsic to Islam been the cause of conversion to the religion?

An important contribution to the literature in this regard is the work of Köse (1996; 1999), whose in-depth study of seventy British converts to Islam reveals that the social conditions created by institutionalised religion's apparent inability to adapt to secularisation, may be relevant in addressing these questions. In his 1999 article, Köse draws upon interviews from British Muslim converts and, supporting his argument with statistics related to the decline in church attendance and scholarly opinions about the 'less institutionalized nature of Islam' (p. 302), reveals a social situation in which Muslim converts describe a process of detachment and rejection of the over-secularisation of society prior to conversion. Köse's work references converts' disenchantment with what they perceived to be Christian churches' tendencies to compromise to the impositions of modernity, giving way to contradictions between religious doctrine and the practices of the church and its devotees. The study demonstrates that by the time the participants had reached their late twenties (much older than what Starbuck (1897b: 79) suggests as the ordinary age for conversion) many of them had undergone a cognitive restructuring in which they concluded that converting to Islam fulfilled their desire to find the confluence between religious principles and practices which they had perceived to be absent in their previous religious affiliations.

In addition to converts' perceptions of a steadily decreasing influence of religion upon wider society, Köse's study reported that participants exhibited discontentment with secularisation's influence in their personal lives, resulting in a professed demand for spiritual guidance and meaning. This description is particularly evocative of socio-psychological explanations in conversion theory, which point towards individuals requiring direction in their lives through the structure and meaning systems that religion provides (Jung, 2001; Luckmann, 1967; Spilka et al., 2003).

The conversion narratives presented by Köse are reminiscent of James's (1902/2015) definition of conversion: 'the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy because of its firmer hold upon religious realities' (p. 270). However, while the theories used to explain these conversion accounts go some way towards describing the extrinsic social factors that may lead to conversion, they do not adequately explain why, for many, Islam in particular provides an attractive choice in the fulfilment of

the ‘existential vacuum’ (Frankl, 1988) left in a ‘post-Christian’ Western culture (Gilbert, 1980; Vahanian, 1967).

2.2.8 Why Islam

It is theorised that one of the reasons for which converts seek refuge from secularisation within the Islamic way of life may be what Wallis and Bruce (1986) describe as a search for more ‘traditional faith’ (p. 49); a response to feelings of psychological disillusionment that they have associated with society and the predominant religion of that society (Köse, 1999) (Christianity, in the case of British converts). Köse’s study reasons that converts to Islam, due to their social interaction and cultural exchange with Muslims from outside of Britain, will gain new, interesting and practical insights into living a meaningfully religious life from those who come from societies in which religion remains a fundamental and more overtly present part of daily life. This description of a desire for the centrality of religion brings to mind James’s (1902[2015]) notion of conversion; ‘to say that a man (sic) is “converted” means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his (sic) energy’ (p. 280). Taking his point further, Köse pulls from his study’s conversion narratives to suggest an underlying mistrust of modernity which is remedied, in the minds of some converts, by Islam.

The notion that cultural exchange plays a role in explaining the phenomenon of conversion to Islam is intriguing, as is the view that some conversions are corollaries of a mistrust of modernity. Coupled with data related to the declining attendance at churches, reported perceptions of the weakening of Christian practice and the void left by twentieth-century patterns of modernization, Köse’s work offers into the sparce literature on theoretical models of conversion to Islam some important concepts. However, questions remain. What motivates those converts to Islam who convert in what Lofland and Skonovd (1981: 376) describe as a ‘*sans*-social’ manner, with little to no interaction with Muslims? How can the study account for those who report and display being undisturbed by modernity and the trappings of secular life? How do explanations of disenfranchisement with *Christianity* explain the conversions of previously non-religious, or non-Christian people? With Köse’s

article reaching the conclusion that conversion to Islam in Britain is the result of cognitive dynamics within society and the need for converts to associate with a community that is 'less willing to restrict religion to the level of individual consciousness' (p. 310), his work goes some way towards describing extrinsic social factors that may lead to conversion. However, Köse's work draws criticism for failing to answer the central questions with which the study was concerned (McLoughlin, 1998). Most notably, why are people converting to Islam specifically? It is also criticised for situating itself within outdated psychological theory to address religious conversion (Hussain, 1999), further exhibiting the inadequacy of Western psychological and sociological theory alone in explaining the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in contemporary Western settings. These criticisms lead me to look beyond the explanations offered by Köse's study, towards theories which address, more directly, conversion to Islam in Western settings.

2.2.9 Counterculture

Paradoxically, the current geo-political climate surrounding Islam may provide answers as to what motivates some to embrace the religion in Western settings. One particular theme that emerges from the literature on Muslim converts (Chaudary, 2020), and which may provide further insight into why Islam becomes an attractive choice for some, at least within a hostile context, is the notion of counterculture. The term, coined by Roszak (1969), may be defined as 'significant social criticism' of, and acting against, the 'politics, education, the arts [and] social relations (love, courtship, family, community)' of the dominant culture of the time (p.1).

Shanneik's (2011) study detailing the experiences of Irish female converts to Islam in the 1980s introduces the view that many converts are attracted to that which runs 'counter to what is dominant in their society' (p. 506). Exploring the conversion narratives of twenty-one Irish women, Shanneik describes an attraction, within her convert participants, to various models of counterculture, even prior to their conversions to Islam, implying that this attraction and the desire to 'break with their former lives' (p. 508) resulted in attachment to any number of alternative scenes, one of which, she theorises, happened to be Salafi Islam. According to Shanneik, the convert participants simply regarded Islam 'as another form of

counter-culture which… acts as an identity to express difference' (p. 514). What appears most questionable in the interpretation offered by Shanneik, for the conversion narratives within her study, is the seemingly imposed assumption that their conversion and practices in Islam were merely an articulation of either their affiliation with Catholicism or with alternative lives they had been interested in before conversion. Strikingly, the paper uses what might reasonably be considered pejorative language to describe converts' religious practices and self-identification with Salafism. For example, Shanneik refers to literalist interpretations of Islamic doctrinal texts as 'blind acceptance' (p. 514) and designates converts' reliance on Islamic scholarship as 'unquestionably follow[ing]' Salafi authorities (p. 513). Illustrative of her outlook is this statement:

> *The former Catholic habitus of Irish converts was still present in the women's engagement with the alternative scene and continues to be present in their understanding of Salafism. In the period of their affiliation with the alternative scene, the women were strict followers of their male companions, copying unquestionably their way of life. Having deserted their home community and having experienced disorientation and instability, they followed male authority figures who initiated them at first to the counter-culture and later to Islam. The mentoring role of senior male figures in the construction of alternative identities suggests a continuation of the Catholic habitus in its patriarchal form, questioning the extent to which the converts' experimentation of identities really expressed a break from their Catholic past.* (p. 514)

Here, rather than drawing faithfully from the converts' own interpretations of their conversion, the author posits that their conversions represent 'a continuation of the Catholic habitus in its patriarchal form', bringing into question whether their conversions 'really expressed a break from their Catholic past' (p. 514). Such an outlook, in which the authenticity and motivation of the Muslims' conversion is questioned and their ability to self-represent is dismissed in favour of a 'more credible' interpretation from a Western, academic perspective, is reminiscent of the imperialist Orientalism described by Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) and his later work *Orientalism Reconsidered* (1985: 95-7), in which he states, with an air of sardonicism,

> *references to Islam's incapacity for self-representation, self-understanding, self-consciousness…is perhaps the most familiar of Orientalism's themes - since the*

> *Orientals cannot represent themselves, they must therefore be represented by others who know more about Islam than Islam knows about itself.*

Despite my criticisms of the study's approach and its apparent susceptibility to Orientalist thinking, its concern with counterculture as a theme in understanding conversion to Islam cannot be so quickly dismissed. For, the themes of resistance and counterculture features in other work within the field (Chaudary, 2020; Flower, 2013; McGinty, 2007). Gebauer and de Araújo's (2016) paper, for example, suggests that Islam, for many black converts, is seen as a contribution to the transnational counterculture directed against racism and other forms of marginalisation within post-colonial societies. Citing the role and influence of modern luminaries such as Malcom X within the counterculture and anticolonialism movement in black communities, the authors theorise that the convert Muslim participants of their study were motivated by 'critical engagement with the history of Christianity and its interrelations with European colonialism and racial subordination' (p. 31) in their decision to convert. This provides an interesting theoretical resource for considering the motivations of black converts in other contexts. Standing in contrast to Shanneik's paper, the centrality of counterculture in Gebauer and de Araújo's work does appear to stem from the self-representations of the converts within the case studies (as opposed to the imposed interpretations of the author). The converts themselves, in Gebauer and de Araújo's study, express the view that Islam is devoid of the colonialism and racial subjugation present in European Christianity's historical legacy and point to the adoption of Islam as a fulfilment of self-empowerment and liberation from European colonialism's past and present racial impositions in a more authentic way than could be achieved through adherence to Christianity. In this sense, Islam is adopted as an indicator of resistance, a countercultural reaction to historical racism.

This study's construction of a 'Muslim blackness' (p.31) that stands in opposition to the perceived 'whiteness' of 'European colonialist Christianity'; its insistence upon a racialised explanation for an ostensibly religious phenomenon, appears to reinforce a contentious conflation of religion and 'race',[4] which stand in contrast to efforts against the

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[4] Race is a contested term which some have argued is a social construct shaped and defined by social groups as a means of defining taxonomies of ethnic, national or geographical standing. This is in contrast to the view that race refers to the

essentialisation and racialisation of Islam. Importantly, I believe that the study seeks to inorganically situate religious conversion within the fields of post-colonialism and cultural blackness (much in the same way Köse's study seeks to situate conversion within the fields of psychology and sociology), resulting in an acute emphasis upon political motivations in conversion and, consequently, a reductionism in relation to the religious and spiritual factors that motivate conversion.

2.2.10 Limitations of Secularisation, Sociopsychology and Counterculture as Explanations

The presentation of counterculture as a framework for understanding conversion to Islam may be summarised as 'conversion as a form of social critique and resistance', or the result of a disorientation with social norms and a previous way of life. In all of these senses, the 'counterculture argument' becomes almost indistinguishable from the arguments relating conversion to a dissatisfaction with secularisation or the apparent weakening of Christian values in society. Both arguments (counterculture and secularisation), in rationalising the phenomenon of conversion to Islam, fall back upon explanations centred on factors extrinsic to the religion; factors that push people away from their respective conventional social or religious structure. In so doing, these theories fail to give thoughtful treatment to more theologically based 'pull factors' which may be intrinsic to Islam.

While these explanations fall in line with the largely secular disciplines that have produced the studies in question (Rambo, 1999), they arguably fail to faithfully capture the factors that are often cited by converts themselves (Ahmed, 2010; Al-Qwidi, 2002; Sealy, 2021; Suleiman, 2013; van Nieuwkerk, 2006c). Reflection upon the literary landscape in this area leads me to consider that this failure is perhaps a consequence of what Rambo (1999) observed to be the domination of people of American and Western European racial and cultural heritage within the field of conversion theory, which results in the application of particular, narrow, Western 'perception[s] of personality, motivation, self, mental health norms, etc., [which differ] to the entire world' (p.263). As I have intimated, the failure to

existence of measurable, biologically inherited genes. In this instance I am placing the word in inverted commas to highlight the contested nature of the word. Having acknowledged this contestation, I will not continue to place the word in inverted commas.

recognise and appreciate the religious motivations of Muslim converts might also be a broader reflection of a residual Orientalism that endures in Western academia (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020).

Whatever the reasons for these limitations may be, while the theories reviewed above do demonstrate that counterculture and secularisation might be considered important factors in describing conversion motifs, the inability of socio-psychological theories like these to adequately encompass my own conversion narrative and the narratives of converts in numerous other studies (Al-Qwidi, 2002; Brice, 2011; Jawad, 2013; Köse, 1996; van Nieuwkerk, 2006a) leads me to argue that, far from offering a faithful account of what converts themselves have reported to be the motivations behind their conversion, trends in conversion theory, at least as they relate to the context of my research, are presumptive of a secular, socio-psychological reasoning. They may be considered, therefore, dismissive of the intrinsic attraction of Islam, as described by converts in some of the abovementioned studies. They seem focused, instead, upon rationalising the phenomenon within a secular paradigm. This point is alluded to by Rambo (1999), who states,

> *Theories of conversion often tell us more about the one making the attribution than the person or group that has converted. Generally, the theory is an attempt by a scholar to make sense out of something otherwise inexplicable to his/her worldview… Given the secular orientation of most academics (at least in the United States, the United Kingdom, and most of northern Europe), it is no wonder that conversion is a perplexing phenomenon to them… Sociologists emphasize social factors when explaining conversion. Psychologists credit the inner workings of the psyche as the greatest influence… anthropologists posit cultural forces as the only plausible explanation of conversion.* (p. 261).

In seeking to avoid this limitation and in taking consideration of a more critical, nuanced approach in exploring converts narratives, I will engage cautiously with socio-psychological conversion theories' assumptions as I turn my attention to the growing body of literature related to British converts' identity. In discussing the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in a post 9/11 Britain, it would be remiss of me not to address the socio-political landscape within which Islam finds itself. Issues of marginalisation, racialisation and Islamophobia, historical hostilities between the Western world and the Islamic world, and the associations between Islam and terrorism appear to provide major disincentives to convert to Islam. With

the possible exception of the counterculture argument, these ostensible disincentives and their potential implications for conversion patterns and convert identity formation are largely unexplored in the current literature dealing with conversion to Islam (Buckser and Glazier, 2003: 197), further emphasising the need to develop our understanding of conversion patterns within the contemporary Western context. To address this, it is prudent to look beyond theory, towards the lived experiences of converts within the context I have just described. For this I will move on to a review of selected literature exploring converts' lived experiences in Western settings.

2.3 Section Two: Lived Experience and Identity Configuration

2.3.1 Introduction

Academic interest in the growth of Islamic conversion in the West has inspired a growing number of studies exploring contemporary British Muslim converts' lived experiences. This nascent evolution within the academic landscape may be, in part, due to the events of 9/11 and the broader geopolitical interest that was born of the attacks. I posit that it may also reflect the growing number of converts within Western society and concerns about the broader resurgence of religion in ostensibly secular societies in late modernity. What is apparent from this growing body of literature is the centrality of experiences with forms of discrimination and Islamophobia. Moosavi's (2015a) study indicates that this occurs due to converts' positioning along a cultural fault line between Islamic identity and British identity, which ensures 'intimate and regular contact with non-Muslims', exposing them to more candid expressions of disdain for their Muslim identity and revealing subtle forms of Islamophobia (p. 41). To explore the validity of this claim and to delve into the experiences of British converts, it is helpful to begin with a definition of Islamophobia which can be used to demarcate the manifestations of this particular form of discrimination.

2.3.2 Islamophobia Defined

While Islamophobia's growth in Western society has been the subject of much study in recent years (Allen, 2010; Esposito & Kalin, 2011; Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010; Larsson, 2005; Poynting and Mason, 2007; Sayyid and Vakil, 2011; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020;

Sheridan, 2006), the development of a unified definition for the word remains elusive. Broadly speaking, 'Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.' (APPG, 2018: 50). This definition of Islamophobia, in using the word 'racism', brings into question the role of race in exploring how converts (who are racially diverse) experience discrimination upon becoming Muslim. Scholars such as Franks (2000), Köse (1996) and Moosavi (2015a) have pointed towards a phenomenon in which white converts, for example, are racially recategorized, with their experiences of Islamophobia even negating access to white privilege through a process of 're-racialisation' (Moosavi, 2015a). This assertion is both interesting and particularly relevant in discussing notions of identity amongst convert Muslims in the British context, given the large number of converts who are white (Brice, 2011).

2.3.3 White Converts

Any exploration of converts to Islam cannot be limited to a particular race, given the fact that people of all backgrounds convert to Islam (Gilliat-Ray and Timol, 2020; Vroon-Najem, 2014). However, starting with an exploration of what has been written about the experiences of white converts may be useful in revealing some of the subtleties of Islamophobia that distinguish it from other forms of discrimination and expose the symbiotic relationship between racialisation and Islamophobia.

What emerges from the literature in this area is the notion that white converts in England often undergo a process of 'crossing the borders of whiteness' (Franks, 2000) to become ingratiated into the Muslim community, something Köse (1996) describes as being 'Pakistanised' (p. 135) – an allusion, it can be surmised, to the majority of British Muslims being of South-East Asian origin. For Moosavi (2015a), this perception is often expressed by the friends and family of converts, as well as by the public more generally. For others (Franks, 2000: 923–4; McDonald, 2005: 142; Özyürek, 2009: 94; van Nieuwkerk, 2006a: 1), this view is reflective of media and public sentiment across Britain and other parts of Europe which re-racialise white Muslim converts and casts them as 'race-traitors' (Alyedreessy, 2016; Franks, 2000) who give their allegiance to the race of the enemy (Özyürek, 2009). While such barbed language may seem strongly worded, empirical research has pointed

towards this type of 'cultural fundamentalism' (Stolcke, 1995) being in operation throughout Europe following 9/11 (Franks, 2000; McDonald, 2005; Özyürek, 2015; Spoliar & Brandt, 2020; Suleiman, 2016: 1, 49, 78; van Nieuwkerk, 2004). Mamdani (2004) goes as far as to suggest that this form of racism, which conflates Islam with non-whiteness, has been transformative of the way in which European and Islamic identity is conceived of in the body politic today. This can be evidenced in the widely reported (Badran, 2006; Franks, 2000; Jensen, 2008; Köse, 1996; Moosavi, 2015a; van Nieuwkerk, 2006b) experiences of white convert Muslims being considered foreigners, enduring racial slurs such as 'White Pakis' (Suleiman 2013: 37), calls to return home and physical and verbal assaults that imply a kind of racism without race (Rex, 1973). This points to a nexus of exclusionary ideologies which link racialisation and Islamophobia to newer forms of cultural purism.

The 're-racialisation' of white people based upon their financial, cultural, religious, national or social standing, is by no means a novel phenomenon (Garner, 2007; 2010; Nayak, 2004; Sullivan, 2006; Tyler, 2008; Wray, 2006). However, the re-racialisation of white Muslim converts in Britain is relevant to this study and has important implications for interrogating some of the discursive constructs that have emerged within the media (Sealy, 2017), in academia (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020) and within the policy initiatives that have developed in the wake of 9/11 (Rikabi, 2013), which are viewed by some to be predicated on a conflation of ethnicity, race, culture and religion (Lander, 2019).

2.3.4 Polish Converts in Britain as a Lens

Offering a glimpse into the experiences of white non-British Muslim converts within the British context, Pędziwiatr's (2017) article on the identity configurations of Polish converts to Islam in Great Britain is a useful resource in exploring the ways in which conversion may lead to the adoption of new traditions and, potentially, distance from non-Muslim culture and family. While it is to be noted that the study does not deal directly with British converts, who are the subject of my own study, many of the experiences of British-based Polish converts reported in the study mirror the experiences of white British-born converts reported in other studies. This may shed light, therefore, on the types of racialisation experienced by Muslim converts as a whole.

Drawing on data from the 2011 census and fieldwork conducted amongst Polish convert Muslims in the UK, the paper argues that Polish converts are 'twice stigmatised and racialised' (p. 226) both within their host country of Britain and within their country of origin. The study found that Poles who converted to Islam went through a process of estrangement from their previous non-Muslim culture and relatives, resulting from the increasingly mainstream Islamophobia that is widespread in Poland (CBOS, 2015). However, the study also found that the majority of Polish converts engaged in the construction of identities that incorporated their Polish socio-cultural heritage with their new Islamic identity, something Pędziwiatr suggests follows a broader pattern of social remittance [5] in which religious values, beliefs and practices are being deterritorialized and spread to converts across the world. Along with this deterritorialization of Islamic practices and beliefs, Gawlewicz and Narkowicz (2015) point out that a similar social remittance occurs with regards to Islamophobic attitudes, resulting in a similar mistrust of Islam found in other parts of Europe. While the small sample size of Pędziwiatr's research (12 in-depth interviews, augmented with participant observation) means that the findings may not be easily generalisable, the study offers insight into the ways in which converts experience discrimination fuelled by cultural purism and notions of race-treachery, similar to those described in other studies related to British white converts (Alyedreessy, 2016; Franks, 2000; Spoliar & Brandt, 2021). Furthermore, the study suggests that converts negotiate these experiences of discrimination through the configuration of a kind of hybrid identity that infuses Islamic values into their previous cultural heritage. Elements of this type of configuration are corroborated by my own findings in this thesis (see 5.8.3).

2.3.5 Female Converts

Another paper which offers insight into converts' experiences of racialisation, and which employs a similar methodological approach as Pędziwiatr's study, is Ramahi and Suleiman's (2017) article. This paper gives the perspectives of female converts to Islam in Britain (16 semi-structured interviews combined with participant observation). What is unique about

[5] This term is used to refer to Levitt's (1998; 2001) notion of migrants exporting ideas, behaviours and belief back to their sending countries. Her work noted four forms of social remittance: norms, practices, identities and social capital.

this study and relevant to my own exploration of convert identity configurations is the incorporation of data gathered from the non-Muslim family members of converts. Not only does the combination of conversion narratives and accounts of non-Muslim family members paint a vivid image of alterity amongst converts, which can develop even within the intimacy of the family unit, it also reveals manifestations of Orientalism that infuse the type of Islamophobia experienced by converts. For example, the study found that amongst family members of converts was a belief that women in Islam were second class citizens and that they had converted, not of their own volition, as they themselves had suggested, but at the behest of their husbands or partners. This notion, which is mirrored in other studies (Moosavi, 2011: 263-4), is symptomatic of Orientalist notions of the status of women in Islam and reflects orientalist thinking, which discounts the ability of Muslims to self-represent and self-determine (Said, 1985: 97).

The sartorial choice of the hijab expectedly became a central theme in Ramahi and Suleiman's study also, with convert participants speaking positively about the decision to wear it and the impact it has had on their lives, mirroring the findings of other studies (Brenner 1996; Tarlo, 2007; van Nieuwkerk 2008; Werbner, 2012; Zebiri 2008). In spite of this, the study showed a sharp disconnect between the converts' perceptions of the hijab and the perceptions of their non-Muslim intimates who perceived the covering to be 'ridiculous', 'silly', 'unnatural' and a cause for women to 'stand out' 'in this country… [where] a lot of people feel animosity towards Muslims' (p. 25-6). A further theme that emerges from the study is the association of Islam with wanton bloodshed and violence, an assumption harkening back to the crusades (Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 6). Ramahi and Suleiman report that the topics of extremism, terrorism or 'Islamic' violence were frequently raised by non-Muslim respondents, often in 'completely unrelated contexts' (p. 26). The authors theorise that the attitudes expressed by the non-Muslim family members of the converts, regarding both the hijab and the association of Islamic religiosity with violence, are received notions from the media and, again, symptomatic of an Orientalism that resides within media discourse related to Islam. There may also be evidence to suggest that this outlook now manifests in public attitudes (Ipsos Mori, 2018). It is to these perceptions, then, that my attention now turns in seeking to identify one of the potential sources of discrimination against Muslim converts.

2.3.6 Converts and the Media

There now exists a substantial amount of literature highlighting the negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the media (Said, 1997; Sealy, 2017; Spoliar & van den Brandt, 2021). With suggestions that much of the media discourse regarding Islam is saturated with Orientalist thinking (Alyedreessy, 2016; Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Skenderovic & Späti, 2019), Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) and the concepts discussed therein are relevant to the proceeding discussion. However, with the ethno-cultural background of converts unable to easily fit within traditional notions of the Orient, it is a subtler manifestation of Orientalism that seems to be in operation within the media's casting of convert Muslims in Britain today. An important contribution to the literature in this regard is the body of work from Thomas Sealy. His work on British converts offers into the sparce literature in this space empirical knowledge on the representation of British converts in the media in Britain as well as a powerful examination of alterity within multicultural Britain.

In his 2017 article, *Making the "Other" from "Us": The Representation of British Converts to Islam in Mainstream British Newspapers*, Sealy (2017) argues that the British media's portrayal of Islam falls within the epistemological legacy of Orientalism. Playing the role of the principal source of cultural knowledge in Britain, the British mainstream media, he posits, provides its audience with the interpretive framework through which most non-Muslims in the UK come to know Islam, thus playing a central role in the dissemination of misrepresentations and misconceptions regarding the religion. To support this idea, he presents as evidence the significant number of studies (Baker et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2008; Knott et al., 2013; Richardson, 2004) that illustrate the consistent negative portrayal of Muslims in the media and the reoccurrence of themes such as terrorism, violence, gender inequality and cultural threat within that discourse.

To assess the role of the media in representing this emergent segment of the broader Muslim community, Sealy offers the results of a discourse analysis in which 191 newspaper articles between 2008 and 2015 were sampled (p. 198). The findings of his study corroborate Brice's (2011) report, undertaken at Swansea University on behalf of *Faith*

Matters, in which 62% of newspaper stories between 2001 and 2011 linked convert Muslims to terrorism, rising to 78% when the topics of fundamentalism, extremism, violence and criminality were factored in. Furthermore, Sealy's analysis reveals a clear focus on the words 'terror', 'terrorism' and 'terrorist' when reporting on convert Muslims (p. 198). If we are to accept McCombs' (2004) view that the media wields enormous influence over the general public, policy and cultural discourse, this analysis has potentially massive implications for the ways in which converts are perceived.

Delving further into the ways in which the notion of conversion to Islam is presented as a cultural threat, Sealy's article establishes the ways in which newspaper texts are structured to imply a causal relationship between conversion and negative occurrences reported in stories (p. 199, 201, 204). In one striking example, a lead paragraph reads 'In 2001, there were an estimated 60,000 Muslim converts in Britain. Since then, the country has seen the spread of violent Islamist extremism and terror plots, including the July 7 bombings.' (p. 204). In another example, the Sunday Express titles an article 'The Convert to Terror', suggesting not a conversion to a religion, but instead a conversion to a criminal offense or ideological position (p. 199). Further compounding these ideas is the presence of stories which contrast converts' Christian relatives or past Christian-British behaviour as 'God-fearing', 'well mannered', 'normal' and 'integrated into national life' with their newfound religious beliefs, presented as 'militant' or 'radicalised', mirroring orientalist (Said, 1978) tropes which contrast the 'civilised' (p. 39) Occident with the 'barbaric' (p. 172) Orient. A further method of othering converts is in the exclusive focus upon them, even in stories and events in which there are multiple actors (Sealy, 2017: 200). Sealy notes that lead pictures, headlines and article space was almost always taken up by the converts in stories related to terrorism, or criminality (p. 199). While the reasons for this may require further examination (with some level of distortion commonplace in commercial newspapers for various reasons), what may be apparent is the role the media plays in constructing and maintaining discourses regarding convert Muslims.

Sealy's study falls short in making explicit those dimensions of othering that separate Muslim convert discrimination from the more general Islamophobia. While his work contrasts the 36% of stories linking the broader Muslim community to terrorism with the

62% of stories linking converts, Sealy's conclusions move to reassociate what I will refer to as 'convert-specific discrimination' with broader Islamophobic tropes in the post-9/11 context, including terrorism and cultural incompatibility. I suggest that given the points raised within the article and the academic work referenced therein, as well as the plethora of studies demonstrating the reoccurrence of convert-specific discrimination, that a more focused treatment of the novelty of convert-specific Islamophobia is warranted. Much as Islamophobia may be seen to fit within the broader category of Orientalism or racial discrimination, a classification for what the literature intimates is a more evolved model of convert-specific discrimination, which can be seen to fit within the broader category of Islamophobia, is perhaps needed. The absence of such a categorisation appears to me to be a lacuna in current literature.

2.3.7 Female Converts in the Media

Situated within the literature concerning portrayals of Muslim converts is the smaller body of work concerned specifically with the framing of female converts in the media. While a review of this literature reveals that media portrayals of convert Muslim women often contain many of the same discursive narratives as that of convert men, these portrayals are, in some cases, interlaced with more gendered, culturalised narratives in the case of female converts to Islam (Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017; Sealy, 2017; van Nieuwkerk, 2006c). Scholars differ in their theories as to why these discourses on the topic of female conversion prevail, but what is evident from the body of work in this area is that there is a strong fascination, amongst journalists and in the media with female conversion to Islam in the West (Soutar, 2010). This fascination is explained by some as representative of a tendency, which I have discussed previously in this thesis, to envisage Islam as an oppressive religion that subjugates women and is thus conceived of as incongruous with the 'emancipatory' Western culture from which the women are converting (Spoliar and van den Brandt, 2021). And while this outlook has been disputed within contemporary literature (Cady and Fessenden, 2013) and the Orientalist assumptions upholding it have been repeatedly challenged (McGinty, 2007; Suleiman, 2013; Spoliar and van den Brandt, 2020), there is evidence that such views endure in modern media portrayals of Muslim convert women.

Spoliar and van dan Brandt's (2021) work engages with the existing literature surrounding conversion to Islam amongst Western women. It is unique in that it focuses upon media representations of female converts within television documentaries. Through a detailed analysis of two documentaries (one of which is set in Britain) which follow female converts to Islam in Western liberal contexts, the paper offers insight into the framing of convert women across Europe, drawing parallels between the portrayals of Muslim women within the Swiss, British, German, and Dutch media landscapes. Through an approach which includes detailed transcriptions of documentaries, discourse analysis and close analysis of less explicit forms of communication such as presupposition, indirect speech and both scripted and unscripted interaction, several themes arise from the study.

Most notable within the documentaries analysed is the tendency to portray conversion to Islam as negative, incongruent with Western civilisation and inevitably leading to bad consequences for both the convert and society. This tendency is consistent with the findings of other studies concerned with the broader Muslim community (for example, West & Lloyd, 2017). What Spoliar and van dan Brandt's analysis offers into the literature is an exploration of the ways in which these narratives are constructed about female converts through the medium of visual media. For example, in the case of France (where at least 15 visual media reportages examining female converts to Islam have been produced) (p. 4), the issue of the *niqab* (veil) is often framed as culturally incompatible and documentaries tend to focus upon themes such as radicalisation and Muslim women lacking freedom, as opposed to the more intimate, individual narratives of converts themselves. This focus is, according to the study, frequently achieved through the acerbic titling of documentaries: *Voile Interdit* (Forbidden Veil), *Voile sur la Republique* (The Veiled Republic) and *Identite´s Voile´es* (Veiled Identities). In the German context, the authors note a similar construction of a binary between national culture and Islamic culture and between German women and Muslim women presented within documentaries. To exemplify this point, they offer the short reportage entitled *The Role of Women in Islam*, in which the incendiary question 'Is man woman's superior?' is posed. Further examining French, Swiss, and Dutch documentaries and reportages, Spoliar and Brandt identify overtly gendered portrayals of Muslim convert women in documentaries, with undertones of what might be consider cultural fundamentalism (Stolcke, 1995). However, in the British context, the construction of gendered, negative

portrayals of Muslim convert women takes on subtler forms in documentaries and reportages. To exemplify this, the authors discuss the documentary *Making Me a Muslim* (MMM). Here, the narrator and presenter of the documentary is ostensibly an 'insider', a British born Muslim woman (Shanna Bukhari). However, with the documentary focused almost exclusively upon white, veiled/hijabed, overtly practising Muslim converts, the model, entertainer, non-hijabed and professedly not 'regularly practicing' Shanna Bukhari does not appear representative of the subjects of the documentary. Spoliar and van dan Brandt suggest that Shanna may even be fulfilling a discursive role as an ostensible 'insider', able to legitimately criticise Islamic practices (see O'Gorman, 2018). Spoliar and Brandt demonstrate this by, among other things (p. 7-8), noting Bukhari's shock and disgust upon learning that one of the converts is in a polygynous marriage, about which she states, it is 'just not right' (p. 6).

Pointing to the opening of the British documentary, in which the narrator questions, 'You're a young, British female. You can wear what you want, you can have a crazy night out… why are you choosing to leave all this fun and excitement?', accompanied by the visual of a white woman appraising her reflection in the mirror as she puts on a hijab, Spoliar and Brandt posit that this documentary constructs a dissonance between the British woman, who 'can wear what [she] wants', and the convert, who, the narration and visuals suggest, must transform. Furthermore, an overemphasis on the 'affectional motif' (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981) seems to emerge from the documentary, with Spoliar and Brandt suggesting that MMM's focus upon the topic of finding a Muslim to marry in the case of one convert resulted in the reductive treatment of the religious element of her conversion. This reductive treatment of the religious dimension of Islamic conversion, in favour of more secular or even sexualised readings of female conversion has been noted by other scholars concerned with the representation of Muslim women (Bracke, 2011; Sealy, 2017; 2019; van Nieuwkerk, 2006c). Such reductionism in the Islamic conversion of the Muslim woman intersects with other gendered, tropes that situate female Muslim converts as either vulnerable, gullible, irrational or dangerous (Saeed, 2016; Sealy, 2017) and further suggests an inability for Muslim women to self-represent their own conversion experiences accurately. In the documentary, MMM, Spoliar and Brandt suggest that Bukhari's views and 'insider' positioning are used as a framework with which to present the female converts as 'too

religious'. At one stage in the documentary, for example, Bukhari, in defence of her own practices and sartorial choices, asserts 'Yes, I'm a Muslim, but we live in such a Western society'. Through incisive analysis of the use of the word 'but', the study illustrates how a dichotomy between Islam and the West is established, with Bukhari tacitly suggesting a need to adapt Islamic practice to Western conceptualisations of gender equality. Conversely, as the paper highlights, many of the women in the documentaries discuss being liberated from Western notions of gender equality and intellectual freedom, corresponding with the findings of a score of scholars in the field who reframe women's conversion to Islam as an emancipatory act of resistance against the Western model of gender equality (Jouili, 2011: 48; Kent, 2014: 310; Mahmood, 2005; McGinty, 2007: 474; Zebiri, 2008). This contradiction between the views expressed by the women themselves and the ways in which they are represented within the documentaries further highlights the discord between the self-perceptions of converts and how they are perceived by others.

Gendered narratives are reflected further in the British documentary MMM with the presentation of disharmonious family relations as a corollary of women converting to Islam, something the authors note as absent in documentaries and reportages related to convert men. Spoliar and Brandt's work demonstrates that the representation of convert Muslim women within British documentaries, as well as those in the wider European context, reaffirms gendered narratives and the media preoccupation with the female convert as a cultural anomaly. This is achieved through the emphasis of prevailing themes such as female familial relationships, marriage, seduction, sexuality and sartorial choices.

The presentation of the female converts as being in dissonance with the Western conception of an empowered, free, female citizen typifies the Orientalist view of Islam as repressive, culturally alien and dangerous. The result of this, suggest some scholars, is the stifling of reasoned debate (Saeed, 2016: 65), the dismissal of the female Muslim's ability to self-represent (Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017) and a difficulty in hearing the voices of female converts within the discourse (Jouili, 2011: 62). Given my critical sensibilities and research intent, hearing the unstifled voices of female Muslim converts and exploring their narratives and experiences within education presents itself as a relevant area of enquiry for this study.

2.3.8 From Orientalism to Islamophobia to a New Type of 'Phobia'?

What emerges from the body of work examined thus far is the crystallisation of a discrete brand of Islamophobia which Muslim converts are uniquely faced with. Far from occupying the role of cultural bridge-builders, able to fill in, through their transformative experiences, the gulf between Muslim and non-Muslim culture, as has been suggested (Jawad, 2012), much of the literature suggests that converts are perceived as traitors by many within their heritage cultures (Özyürek, 2009), othered by friends and family (Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017) and subject to an emergent strain of discrimination that permeates British culture and appears to have been absorbed into the dominant Orientalist paradigm (Kerboua, 2016). However, the relatively new growth of large numbers of converts to Islam in the West (Brice, 2011), and the formation of newer forms of racism (Özyürek, 2009), points to the development of a newer phenomenon which lies within the established Orientalist paradigm, but which is distinct; a kind of neo-orientalism which is deterritorialised (Kerboua, 2016) and casts those from *within* the Occident who adopt the religion or culture of the Orient as doubly suspicious and inferior. It is against this backdrop that converts must negotiate their religious development and identity formation. In the next section of this chapter, I will explore the ways in which identity configurations amongst converts take place, further shedding light upon their lived experiences.

2.3.9 Convert Identity Configuration

What is evident from the literature on the subject of religious conversion generally (Carrothers, 2004; Gillespie, 1991; Rambo, 1999), and conversion to Islam specifically (Afshar 2008; Sartawi and Sammut 2012; Zebiri 2008), is the significance of accounts of identity configuration and reconfiguration that people embracing a new religion experience. In deploying the term 'identity configuration' here, I am addressing the theoretical construct adopted by some psychologists who speak of the natural psychological state wherein one endeavours to configure 'mulitiple' (Markus & Wurf, 1987), often conflicting or contradictory (Gergen, 1991) selves into a coherent singular identity. This process, by which an individual constructs a unified, coherent, singular identity, according to Erikson (1968, 1975), is the result of a psychological requirement on the part of the individual and society. A deeper

discussion of the complexity of identity theory falls beyond the scope of this thesis, however, what follows is an attempt to review the ways in which literature in the field of Muslim convert identity has sought to explicate identity configurations amongst converts.

The growing body of work on Muslim converts in the West has revealed that the issue of identity configuration is a crucial problematic in understanding the lived experiences of Muslim converts in modern Britain (Afshar 2008; Jensen, 2008; Sartawi and Sammut 2012; Sealy, 2021c; Zebiri 2008). Central to this issue, it seems, is the sharp discord that exists between the ways in which converts perceive and experience their identities and the ways in which others, both within the Muslim community and without, perceive convert identity (McGinty, 2006). Perhaps symptomatic of the ascension of secularism (Davie, 2015: 64) and suspicion of religious devotion in modern Britain (Cheeseman and Khanum, 2009: 47), or perhaps due to the role Islam has come to play in the modern British imaginary, the Muslim convert can be perceived with perhaps more suspicion than general Muslims (Brice, 2011). Furthermore, their identities are questioned and examined in ways uniquely experienced by them; met with dismissal or disdain by some, and excessive scrutiny by others.

One study that I believe exemplifies the sharp discord between convert Muslim perceptions of their own identities and theorisations about those identities is Oestergaard's (2009) study, which explores the role rituals and bodily practices play in the socialisation and negotiation of convert Muslim identity. Beginning with the assumption that conversion usually involves a renegotiation of identity, Oestergaard (2009) highlights the fact that converts frequently self-identify as practising Muslims. She theorises that this 'functions as a strategic means for converts to position themselves in relation to the non-Muslim majority and… to other Muslims' (p. 2). She further asserts that converts' practice-oriented embodiment of Islam, and their adoption of rituals and rules is 'a strategy for converts to prove themselves as "real" Muslims in an environment where they are met with suspicion and hostility' (p.1). This interpretation of converts' ritual practice (*ibadah*) as socially functional is made more explicit when Oestergaard states, 'The argument here is that formal Islamic rituals such as prayer and fasting appeal to converts not just for theological reasons…'. The study goes on to liken converts' ritualisation and embodiment of Islamic practices to a 'habitus' (Bourdieu,

1990a), which Oestergaard states 'is not a fixed entity but is expressed in strategies and improvisations in given situations' (p. 4).

The paper's theorisation appears to mirror the types of secular rationales prominent within theorisations about conversion motives; some of which I have detailed earlier. Key to these types of interpretations is the use of secular paradigms and sociological theory to rationalise what is ostensibly a theological, faith-based phenomenon. The problematic nature of this interpretation is brought into sharp relief when considering the principles of *niyyah* (intention) and *ikhlaas* (sincerity) as prerequisites for the acceptance of any act of worship within Islamic theology (see IslamQ&A, n.da for various Islamic texts in that regard). By reducing converts' *ibaadaat* (acts of worship) to functional social strategies, the study dismisses the sincerity, correctness of intention and thus the acceptability of the acts, in Islamic theological terms; implying that these acts are not directed solely towards the submission of Allah. Further to this, the normative Sunni-Islamic principles of ritual are rule-based (according to the *sunnah*) and conscious (with explicit *niyyah* of worshipping Allah) (IslamQ&A, n.db). This appears incongruous with Bourdieu's notion of habitus, which describes social habits and dispositions which are explicitly not rule-based or determinable (Bourdieu, 1990c) and are primarily unconscious. Indeed, Oestergaard concedes that her own application of habitus to converts' practice of Islamic ritual requires 'a reconsideration of the notion of habitus…' (p. 3). I posit that Oestergaard's attempt to apply the concept of habitus to converts' Islamic ritual acts of worship serves, once more, to dismiss the theological perspectives of converts.

Winchester (2008) offers a similar critique of reductive conceptualisations of religious ritual and embodied practices. While Winchester's own work draws upon Bourdieu's notion of habitus to describe the embodied religious rituals and practices of convert Muslims, his application of the term 'differs from popular philosophical and social-scientific understandings of the linkages between such practices and moral personhood' (p. 1755). Rather than, as in Oestergaard's (2009) theorisation, converts utilising ritual and practice derivatively as a means with which to 'prove themselves as "real" Muslims' (p. 1) and 'position themselves in relation to the non-Muslim majority and… to other Muslims' (p. 2), Winchester avoids this somewhat limited reading of Islamic practice. He details the need not

to import all of Bourdieu's theoretical assumptions about habitus to understand the relationship between religious practice and moral selfhood. Namely, Winchester rejects one of Bourdieu's central assumptions, which is that social actors use their moral character 'as forms of capital to accrue power and distinction in the social world' (p. 1759). It is this very assumption which, I argue, animates Oestergaard's centring of Islamic worship as a primarily social tool and brings it into contradiction with the Islamic concept of *ikhlaas*. Winchester's quite different and less reductive application of habitus, as something dialectically co-constitutive in the development of 'flexible' dispositions over time, is instructive of the ways in which the concept of habitus may remain helpful in providing discursive, conceptual access to converts' practices and worship within social scientific terms. The retention of habitus in this sense will become important for my analysis in chapter 5.

Research on the nature of Muslim convert identity has traditionally been undertaken to focus upon the notion of *change* in identity (Al-Qwidi 2002; Köse 1996; Neumueller, 2012). For example, Özyürek (2015), providing a transnational perspective on Muslim convert identity, describes the cultural barriers and conflicts that occur during the process of religious change. Winchester (2008) characterises Muslim converts as creating 'new moral selves through the regular utilization of embodied religious practice.' (p. 1754). Younes and Hassan (2017) speak of conversion 'disrupting basic notions of national identity and citizenship' (p. 31). While Younes and Hassan's work is unique in its focus upon Muslims who experienced difficulties in relating to their national identities *before* conversion to Islam, the study, nevertheless, is concerned with how conversion *changes* their configuration of conflicting identities. This is evident in the conclusions of the study which note that participants' identity configurations 'all converge ultimately towards the supremacy of the Muslim identity post-conversion' (p. 31), representing 'a theological transformation' (p. 38).

Given the etymology of the word conversion (the Latin term *convertere* means 'to turn', 'change direction', 'shift' or 'reverse'), it is perhaps little wonder that the notion of change features so prominently in discussions of convert identity configuration. However, not only does an uninterrogated focus upon change belie the complexity of socio-cultural and psychological realities in identity formation (Crenshaw, 1989; Macionis and Gerber, 2011), it also belies the numerous convert narratives which speak of a negotiation between dynamics

of change and continuity in post-conversion life (Al-Qwidi, 2002; Alyedreessy, 2016; Sealy, 2021c). In recognition of this, what has arisen in recent years is literature on Muslim convert identities which takes a more nuanced approach in foregrounding the notion of *continuity* within convert identity configuration (Alyedreessy, 2016; McGinty, 2006; Sealy, 2019). An important contribution to this literature is the work of McGinty (2006), who seeks to problematise conversion, from a phenomenological perspective, as a psychocultural issue rather than a religious one and who tackles the notion of change in conversion theory with the notion of continuity, pointing to the significance of converts' attempts to incorporate and reconcile their newfound religion with their 'previous' identity formations; a configuration of identity which centres on continuity rather than change. While the book, and its focus upon continuity, is a welcome addition to the literature on conversion, dealing with Muslim converts specifically, and within a post-9/11 context, its emphasis on the cognitive, cultural and anthropological aspects of conversion means that it falls, once again, within the realm of Western, secular explanations of the phenomenon of Muslim conversion, lacking due consideration of Islamic theological explanations. Remedying this outlook and attempting to deal more directly with the concept of religiosity, while also factoring in change and continuity in Muslim convert identity configuration, Sealy's (2021c) paper on Muslim convert identity argues for the need to understand convert identity configuration from the perspective of the convert and avoid the dismissal of the religious aspect of their identities in order to achieve a richer understanding. This point correlates with the views of Al-Qwidi (2002), Suleiman (2013) and Zebiri (2008).

Sealy's work offers a detailed account of the ways in which the religious aspects of convert identity configuration have traditionally been 'explained away' as cognitive coping strategies or diminished in other ways (p. 24-5). Informed by these findings, my own study explored the presence or absence of religiosity in convert identity configuration. I have sought to continue in the vein of McGinty (2006) and others in giving detailed treatment to aspects of change *and* continuity in convert identity, not as a dichotomy but as a confluence. However, importantly, I will continue in the legacy of Sealy in seeking to avoid reductionism with regards to religiosity in my exploration of convert identity. My approach, therefore, will act as an affront to the neo-Orientalism and over-secularistic approaches to Islamic conversion that I have addressed. In doing this, my study has the potential to introduce something new

into the field of conversion studies which, as Rambo (in Buckser & Glazier, 2003) notes, is ‘in flux’ and ‘approaching a state of paradigm exhaustion’ (p. 195); a statement that appears to recognise and reaffirm the need for existing studies to account for conversion in contemporary contexts.

2.3.10 Recap

In the first section of this chapter, I offered a review of selected literature within the field of conversion studies, providing a definition of conversion and exploring models of conversion patterns presented in both classical and more contemporary literature in the field. What came to light was a sustained focus upon sociological and psychological theory in explaining conversion; something that scholars have suggested does not offer an adequate analytical model with which to understand the complexity of conversion to Islam in the modern Western context. This observation has led me to suggest a need to develop more nuanced ways with which to taxonomise conversion narratives, possibly by drawing upon and adapting models such as Lofland and Skonovd’s conversion motifs (1981). This is discussed in greater detail in chapters 8 and 9. I have argued that such developments would help to address current gaps in understanding converts by focusing, not upon the ‘push factors’ of socio-cultural dissatisfaction, secularisation and attraction to counterculture, but upon the ‘pull factors’ of Islamic theology, spirituality and religiosity that have frequently been reported within convert narratives as being central to conversion to Islam, but which have remained under-researched and under-theorised.

The second section of this review has addressed the topic of Muslim converts’ lived experiences with racialisation, re-racialisation, Islamophobia and newer forms of Orientalism and Islamophobia that manifest in popular culture and media portrayals of Muslim converts. These lived experiences, more recent literature has revealed, play an important role in the ways in which converts configure their identities. As this chapter has shown, identity configuration emerges from the literature on convert Muslims as something of a central problematic. With the theme of change in identity receiving more frequent attention in the literature, the theme of continuity has traditionally been neglected. However, a shift in focus has seen several studies that have paid attention to both themes. Nonetheless, other salient

matters in the study of Muslim convert experience remain under-explored. It is Sealy's (2019) distinct take on Keenan's (2003) incitement to bring a 'theological ear' (p. 20) to understanding seemingly sociological matters that injects something novel into the current literary space on Muslim convert identity configurations, a point I have mentioned elsewhere (Adebolajo, 2022b). His focus upon the concept of religiosity brings into stark relief the neglect that spirituality has endured within contemporary conversion studies in academia. Taking account of the importance of religious identity and theological empathy in discussing the educational experiences of Muslim converts, in the following section I will review literature on the topic of convert Muslims in education and their place in the wider discourse on Muslims in education.

2.4 Section Three: Converts in Education

2.4.1 Introduction

There is a striking dearth of literature concerning convert Muslims' interaction with the education system (Panjwani, 2017: 603). As I have already touched upon, the convert population cannot be easily defined in ethno-cultural terms, making them a problematic population to contain within a discourse that has a tendency to read religiously demarcated groups as essentially ethnic or cultural. In this regard, Mitchell (2006) states, 'It is perhaps a Western bias to assume that religiously demarcated groups are in essence ethnic' (p. 1136). Alternatively, this dearth of literature may be the result of what Scott-Baumann et al (2020) define as the dominance of 'secularity' within education (p. 27 & 92) and the secularist[6] perspective that there is no place for religion in public policy discourse (Beaumont and Baker, 2011). This may be especially true when the identity marker of religion is prised apart from the rhetoric of ethno-racial inclusion. Much of what has been written about British Muslims has tended to, even if inadvertently, focus upon the British-Asian Muslim demographic, with some commentators concluding that much of the literature has little to do with religion (Modood, 2013). Given the cultural and experiential disjuncture between converts and heritage Muslims, it may appear challenging, conceptually, to place converts

[6] The term 'secularist' is used here to allude to Habermas' (2008) distinction between 'secular' as referring to the ideologically agnostic stance towards the validity of another's theological claims, and 'secularist' as referring to the polemical stance against religious doctrine and publicly articulated religion.

within this discourse on British Muslims in education. A central question, then, in my consideration of the educational experiences of converts as a particular section of the Muslim community, is this: How are convert Muslims located in relation to discussions on heritage Muslim educational experiences?

2.4.2 Locating Converts

There has been a pattern within the literature to position converts as something of a bridge between Muslim communities and non-Muslim communities (Jawad, 2013; Suleiman, 2013; 2016), or as possessing hybrid or plural identities (Franks, 2000: 922; Zebiri, 2008: 252). Other literature has described a tendency to racialise and 're-racialize' converts (Moosavi, 2015a; van Nieuwkerk, 2004: 235–236), thus locating them within the ethno-racial discourse about the Muslim educational experience.

While these somewhat disjointed conceptualisations of converts' positionality within the discourse may be relevant in understanding the 'cultural versatility of converts' and their potential to provide important 'bridging capital' (Gilliat-Ray and Timol, 2020: 8), these understandings of convert Muslims in relation to heritage Muslims do not encompass the many forms of relationality expressed by and about , for example, Asian and Black converts who may already locate themselves in minority ethno-cultural groupings. For example, some black and Asian converts describe appearing indistinguishable from heritage Muslims and going undetected within the community (Al-Qwidi, 2002; Reddie, 2009; Suleiman, 2013: 4), others report feeling dismissed and unaccepted (Rogozen-Soltar, 2012). Others describe feeling over-aggrandized or tokenised (Suleiman, 2013: 73). Sealy's (2022) theorisations about the relationality between convert Muslims and the broader Muslim community attempts to address these varying degrees of distance and nearness by locating them as 'strangers' – as conceptualised by Simmel (1950). This notion of belonging positions converts as both near and distant from the heritage Muslim community. They do not conform, nor seek conformity with those things which distance the convert from the heritage Muslim community. They therefore do not assimilate into, but contribute to, the Muslim community (Sealy, 2022: 6-7). The distance described in this theorisation, then, is a positive, rather than negative relational position to the wider group, allowing the 'stranger' to problematise

norms and cultural accretions. While elsewhere I have criticised Sealy's application of Simmel's conceptual frameworks to the experiences of converts (Adebolajo, 2022b: 2), in this instance I consider Sealy's application of Simmel's 'stranger' to be reflective of the findings of those studies on Muslim converts that uncover a sense of non-conformity amongst converts with regard to the cultural practices of some heritage Muslims (e.g. Al-Qwidi, 2002; Neumueller, 2012; Özyürek, 2015).

I would argue, however, that in Sealy's treatment of the relationality of converts to the broader Muslim population within this paper, he does not offer sustained reflection on the sense of heightened marginality converts share with heritage Muslims as a result of the post-9/11 socio-political landscape. As I will go on to describe, this shared marginality often transcends notions of race and culture and relates to theological, doctrinal and political aspects of Islam. Given the generational focus of my study and the plethora of literature detailing the effects of the post-9/11 period on the educational experiences of the wider Muslim community in Britain and beyond, it appears particularly germane to explore that commonality here.

Some have argued that post-9/11 educational policy has targeted convert Muslims in much the same ways as other groups within the British Muslim community (Moosavi, 2015a; Muslim Council of Britain, 2016; Rikabi, 2013). This supports my assertion that the educational experiences of converts may relate, in this way at least, to the experiences of heritage Muslims. Given my commitment not to insinuate a theological distinction between convert and heritage Muslims within the *shari'ah* (Islamic law), I am cautious of presenting too sharp a sociological disjuncture between diversities within the Muslim community as a whole. Indeed, this caution is reinforced by a desire to move beyond nationally, racially, ethnically or culturally grounded understandings of Islam, towards an understanding in which the homogenising consideration is religion. In short, I propose a capacious understanding of the Muslim educational experience that, while recognising the diversity within the Muslim community and the varied experiences this diversity may spawn, begins by locating converts within the broader discourse on the Muslim population's interaction with the education system. I proceed, therefore, by placing this discussion into historical perspective.

2.4.3 Muslims in Education: Historical Perspective

The problematisation of the Muslim population's interaction with the education system of the UK can be traced back to shortly after World War II, when, as a result of severe labour shortages, workers from the Indian subcontinent were invited to Britain to work (Shaw, 1988; Hansen, 1999). While education represented an early point of contact between the bourgeoning Muslim community and the state and marked an important element in the modern history of UK/Muslim relations, the literature examining Muslims' religious (as opposed to racial or cultural) identity as a discrete group in the state education framework was severely limited until the 1980s (Ansari, 2002; Modood, 1994; 2004; Modood et al., 1997). That decade represented a paradigmatic shift away from assimilationist and integrationist theory (Race, 2005: 7) towards a multiculturalism that was, ostensibly, empathetic towards religious subjecthood. It is during this period that attempts to deal with the religious identity of Muslims began to formulate and essentialist understandings of religion began to be challenged more frequently within academic literature. For example, the Swann Report (1985), although criticised by some (Duncan, 1987; Dwyer & Meyer, 1995; Verma, 1989) as continuing to deal 'with Muslims in terms of cultural and ethnic group, rather than in terms of religious principles and priorities' (Nielsen, 2004: 58), is broadly considered to be instrumental in recognising the importance of providing minorities a stake in education and the wider political landscape within a multicultural society (Malik, 2015). It falls beyond the scope of my thesis to offer a detailed delineation of the various forms of multiculturalist theory. However, the rise of multiculturalism in Britain, defined by Parker-Jenkins (1995: 17) as 'creating tolerance for minority children, dispelling ignorance and reducing prejudice to create a harmonious society', spurred more nuanced debates on the nature of social justice and gave rise to more critical explorations of identity. While it would be reductive to suggest that continued debate surrounding the 'Muslim problematic' did not persist (e.g., Muslim faith schools, rising secularism, Islamophobia in schools, etc.) (Parker-Jenkins, 1995; Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005; Runnymede Trust, 1997, 2008), this more acute consideration of Muslim identity dominated public debate on policy for decades (Khan, 2000; Modood, 2010; Nielsen, 1986; Peach, 1990; Vertovec, 1993). However, following the 2001 riots across England, which were characterised as the result of the socio-cultural segregation of Asian and Muslim youth (Home Office, 2001), the attacks of 9/11 and the resultant 'war on terror',

and culminating in the 7/7 bombings, policy and public opinion underwent a seismic shift (Revell, 2012).

No longer was 'the Muslim integration problem' viewed purely through the lens of spatial segregation (Miah, 2015). The issue had become one of cultural segregation, with the presiding call one of combating extremism in the Muslim community and integrating young, Asian men into mainstream British society (Finney & Simpson, 2009). It was suggested that previous policies had facilitated segregation, led to cultural alienation, and acted as a conduit for radicalisation (Taylor, 2009). The government recognised that one of the key areas in which policy might seek to redress this problem was in the schooling and education of Muslims, leading to the formation of educational policies designed to combat the growing problem (HM Government, 2015; Lander 2019). Addressing the slew of policies that emerged during that period, Revell (2012) writes:

> *The scope and range of government intervention in education in relation to extremism and its links to Islam constitutes a coherent and systematic framework that effectively criminalises aspects of theology, education, cultural practices and community that are associated with Islam. (p. 82 & 83)*

With the regulatory gaze of educational policy extending to matters of Islamic theology, the post-9/11 policy milieu was judged by some as a "new assimilationism" (Back et al., 2002: 452) and a disassembling of previously well-established relationships between Muslim communities and local government authorities (Marshall, 2010). Furthermore, scholars in the fields of sociology (Modood, 2004, 2010; Parekh, 2008; Sealy, 2021a), religion (Davie, 2015) and education (Panjwani & Moulin-Stożek, 2017) intimate that the form of multiculturalism which emerged from this period appeared to harbour a theoretically rooted mistrust of religious *qua* religious identity, preferring to elide Muslims' religious and ethno-cultural identity. This has had the result of positioning discretely religious identity as culturally 'other' within the social imaginary (Levey & Modood, 2009; Modood, 2013). It is against this contextual backdrop that contemporary Muslim converts, who, some literature suggests, tend to display discretely religious identities (Panjwani, 2017: 602; Sealy, 2021a; Younis and Hassan, 2017: 31-8), emerge as subjects of sociological inquiry.

While contemporary literature has gone some way in detailing the implications of the aforementioned socio-political climate (Imtiaz, 2011; Lewis, 2007; Modood 2010) and policy imperatives (Miah, 2017) upon the wider British Muslim community, particularly within the context of education (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020), a broad-brush approach to understanding the diversities within this minority has resulted in the aforementioned dearth of literature exploring the experiences of Muslim converts within this realm. While there remains no exact count of the number of Muslim converts in the UK (Pędziwiatr, 2017; Sealy, 2019), it is clear that there is a sizeable and growing population within the evolving Muslim demographic (Brice, 2011; Jawad, 2013; Sealy, 2021a); one that requires a degree of sustained academic reflection. Acknowledging that, the sections to follow will engage with some of the key literature relevant in extending our understanding of converts' educational experiences.

2.4.4 Post 9/11 Context

As I have intimated throughout this thesis, the socio-political context of 9/11, and my own experiences within this context, have been the central inspiration for selecting the millennial generation as the subjects of my study. In this regard, there are two dimensions of this context which will be examined here: the theoretical and the practical. The first dimension relates to the philosophies underpinning the post 9/11 socio-political context within which the subjects of my study found themselves. The second dimension concerns the educational practices and policies which these philosophies have engendered.

2.4.4.1 The Theoretical Dimension: Multiculturalism

I have already touched upon the scholarly view that some exponents of multiculturalist philosophies have treated religious identity with a degree of suspicion (see section 2.3.9 and Cheeseman and Khanum, 2009; Meer, 2010: 200; Uberoi and Modood, 2015). At the same time as giving thoughtful treatment to difference and diversity in areas of race, ethnicity, culture and gender, and the implications of neglecting these identity markers, some exponents of multiculturalist inclusion have reproduced dominant negative discourses relating to Islamic practices (Kymlicka, 2015). Parekh (2008), for instance, implies that

scriptural literalism is non-amenable to rational investigation and criticism (p. 130- 151). Roy (2010), in a later example, has argued that converts' resistance to cultural accretion in religious practice represents an Islamic Salafism that is fundamentalist and problematic for integration. In both examples, the authors appear to pathologise literalist, deculturised interpretations of Islam as irrational and/or problematic. Importantly, theoretical perspectives like these have had profound implications for the formation and application of educational policy (Kymlicka, 2015; Scott-Baumann and Tomlinson, 2016).

In her thesis exploring Islamic dialogic pedagogy as a vehicle for developing Muslim children's personhood, autonomy and identity in a pluralist society, Farah Ahmed (2017) summarises her own experiences as an educator within the post-9/11 educational landscape. In the thesis she details the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove's attempts to bring Muslims 'into the secular-liberal fold' (p. 4) by differentiating between 'Islamism', as representing a political ideology, and Islam, as representing the religion (Gove 2006). Gove's ideological position, she argues, led to direct government interventions within Islamic schools in the form of 'specially commissioned inspection[s]' (Ahmed, 2017: 4). During one such intervention, Ahmed reports, young children were 'left in tears' after interrogation by OFSTED inspectors containing Islamophobic undertones (p.4). Similarly, the well documented 'Trojan Horse affair' in Birmingham (Miah, 2017) led to a succession of OFSTED inspections that have received widespread criticism (Arthur, 2015; Baxter, 2014; Donaghy, 2014). These cases seemingly demonstrate some of the ways in which the pathologising of Islam can lead to marginalising experiences within the realm of education.

Beyond these individual cases, however, two major government policy initiatives – Prevent and Fundamental British Values (FBV) – have been credited with exemplifying the post-9/11 theoretically rooted mistrust of Muslim subjectivity within education (Lander, 2019; Qureshi, 2015; Zempi and Tripli, 2022). Before moving on to discuss these policies in relation to converts' educational experiences, it is pertinent to gain an overview of the government's public responses to the perceived threats of 'Islamism' and their justification for the aforementioned policies. In this regard, former Home Office Minister John Denham forwarded the idea that the broader Muslim community protected terrorists, stating, 'few terrorist movements have lasted long enough without a supportive community' (Denham,

2009); a point which was later reinforced by Hazel Blears, former Communities Minister, and oft-sited architect of the Prevent initiative. She notes, 'It's the stay-at-home mum, the taxi driver, the neighbour, the dinner lady… the student – all of those whose decisions and actions contribute towards making an environment in which extremism can flourish or falter' (Blears, 2009: 6). This construction of a cohesive network of Muslims incubating terrorists, Shain (2013) argues, was used to justify 'a pre-emptive… coercive and punitive state approach towards young people [that] implicates education professionals in the surveillance and containment of 'problem' ethnic minority students.' (p. 75). I argue, however, that Shain's interpretation must go further. In suggesting that the problem relates to 'ethnic minority students' only, she overlooks the experiences of convert Muslims (many of whom are from the ethnic majority) who have also found themselves stigmatised by the policies under discussion. To illustrate this point, I now turn my attention to the Prevent policy.

2.4.4.2 Practical Dimension 1: Prevent

Broadly speaking, Prevent is a government strategy aimed at halting the spread of extremism in the UK. Established in 2006, with a wide remit that included supporting communities in the 'development and promotion of shared values' (Revell, 2012, p. 79), the policy was initiated through an array of toolkits directed at educational institutions (including schools, colleges and universities). Early criticisms of the policy argued that, not only did it fail in preventing violent extremism that existed outside of the Muslim community, but it also contributed to the stigmatisation of Islamic theological beliefs and alienated Muslim communities (Kundnani, 2009; Liberty, 2010; Revell, 2012: 82 & 83). It is perhaps unsurprising then, that the strategy was revised in 2011 (Home Office, 2011). Nonetheless, in spite of previous criticisms and the documented rise of far-right extremism across Britain and Europe (see Busher, 2015; Dodd, 2009; Howie, 2009; Stokes, 2008), Prevent, in its revised form, continued to target areas of the country with higher Muslim populations (Shain, 2013: 75). Although converts' specific interaction with the policy has not received attention in the literature, some insights can be gleaned from a review of the policy itself, its underpinnings and its auxiliaries.

I turn first to the methodology for identifying signs of radicalisation espoused by the Department of Education and the Home Office's *Educate Against Hate* (2023b) website (an auxiliary to the Prevent Strategy), designed 'to provide practical advice, support and resources to protect children from extremism and radicalisation'. Under the section entitled 'What are the warning signs of radicalisation', the website lists 'Converting to a new religion' as a one of the 'behaviours… intended as a guide to help you identify possible radicalisation…' (2023a). This overt reference to conversion as a 'sign of radicalisation' was tacitly confirmed to be referencing conversion to Islam exclusively by former Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities, Nicky Morgan (Channel 4 News, 2016). This type of government sanctioned association between conversion and radicalisation is further evidenced in the 2011 review of Prevent which states, 'people who convert may initially be less well-informed about their faith, they may be vulnerable to overtures from radicalisers who seek to impress a distorted version of theology upon them' (Home Office, 2011: 87). This raises important questions about the implications of such understandings, and the effects of this upon the educational experiences of those who convert to Islam during the operational timeframe of these policy initiatives. Moreover, the presentation of converts as vulnerable, ill-informed and impressionable adds weight to my assertion that a convert-specific form of Islamoprejudice (Imhoff and Recker, 2012) may be in operation in Britain, seemingly permeating education policy and requiring further investigation.

2.4.4.3 Practical Dimension 2: Fundamental British Value

Discourse surrounding the promotion of British values within education policy can be traced back to as early as 1998 (Crick Report, 1998; Jerome and Clemitshaw, 2012). However, it is the introduction of Fundamental British Values into the new Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2012) which ushered in a 'hardened' notion of Britishness that has raised questions about the delimitation of educational spaces within which Islamic identity can be expressed in the UK (Lander, 2019: 1). By formalising the requirement for all teachers in England and Wales to avoid undermining, and actively promote the 'fundamental British values' of 'democracy; the rule of law; individual liberty; and mutual respect for and tolerance of those with

different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith' (DfE, 2012, 2014), the 2012 policy standardises and validates a form of national consensus that some scholars argue can be exploited by politicians and other nefarious actors as a powerful exclusionary tool (Lander, 2019; Revell and Bryan, 2018). Furthermore, according to Hoque (2015: 23), it constructs a narrative in which Islamic values are seen to be 'incompatible' with British values. Lander (2019) is particularly critical of the way in which the policy's close association with the Prevent Strategy broadens the disciplinary gaze of FBV to include a requirement for schools to attempt to prevent alleged non-violent forms of extremism. The capacious language of 'non-violent forms of extremism' (HMG, 2021) seems to suggest a regulation of thought and, research has found, has resulted in Muslims feeling unable to express their religious identity and political views (Islam and Mercer-Mapstone, 2021; Scott-Baumann et al, 2020). Conceivably, this may be especially harmful for those, like convert Muslims, who may be in a process of configuring a new identity.

2.4.5 Summary

I began this section by describing the lacuna in literature dealing with the educational experiences of convert Muslims specifically. In presenting a range of ways in which converts have been located in relation to heritage Muslims within the literature, I have offered my rationale for locating converts within the broader discourse on Muslims in education. Starting with the historical context within which contemporary policies such as Prevent and FBV have taken shape and come into operation, I have been able to extrapolate insight into the ways these policies may impact the educational experiences of converts specifically. The form of multiculturalism which evolved within the post-9/11 context, the regulation of religious identity in public spaces and the securitisation agenda, when taken into consideration alongside the bodies of literature on convert Muslim identity and religiosity, paint a picture of schooling as a potential cite of tension for converts. This is reinforced by the government's construction of convert as 'less well-informed about their faith, [and]… vulnerable to overtures from radicalisers who seek to impress a distorted version of theology upon them' (Home Office, 2011: 87). These outlooks position convert Muslims as an interesting lens through which to examine the contested spaces within which religious citizenship and identity can be expressed. Nesbitt posits,

> *If society is to progress smartly from stereotyping to alert receptivity, both religious education and citizenship education require of us not only a theoretical, distanced, broad brush understanding of religions and cultures but also a fine-grained, close-up awareness. Teachers and others can share the insights provided by in-depth, nuanced studies which draw on the ethnographic skills of participant observation (and listening) and interviews (structured and less structured) of individuals and groups.*

This study seeks to rise to Nesbitt's challenge by sharing the experiences of a group of convert Muslims through in-depth narrative and ethnographic insight.

Chapter 3: Building My Methodology

Given the theoretical considerations that have emerged from the preceding chapter, it is necessary to reengage with some of the key theoretical themes and their implication for the design of this thesis. Before this, I will offer a description of the journey I am attempting to take the reader on when discussing these theoretical concerns and acknowledge some of the challenges and scholastic limitations I believe I have faced in this regard.

In highlighting, as I will in this chapter, the enfranchisement of secular views in social science and educational research (Gilani-Williams, 2014; Merry 2007: 52), I am not seeking to stylize Western methodological approaches to suggest a homogenous paradigm which excludes faith-based voices within research. Indeed, the significance of the 'religious insider voice' in social science research has been the theme of many studies (Ahmed, 2016; Arweck and Martin, 1999; Chaudhry, 1997; Flanagan, 2008; McCutcheon, 1999; Reat, 1983). Furthermore, several of the theoretical tensions which this chapter explores speak to discussions that have happened and continue to ensue amongst writers of various faith communities within academies influenced by Western thought (e.g. Barbalet et al., 2013; Joskowicz and Katz, 2015; Newbigin, 1986). Indeed, to explain my own position throughout this chapter I have drawn on some of those scholarly positions. My intention is to highlight some of the theoretical limitations of existing literature on the topic of Muslim conversion and convert identity in order to justify the methodological approach I have taken. What this approach means, practically, for the design of this study is not an a priori disengagement from Western methodological paradigms of knowledge. Indeed, I am a social scientist and recognise the value of the tools which that affords me. Rather, my approach entails a dialectic between the tools of 'Western'[7] social science and an epistemology undergirded by an Islamic conceptualisation of knowledge[8]. It is, to put it in terms expressive of my overall

[7] My deployment the term 'Western' social science as something qualitatively different to other modes of social science may be seen as an oversimplified essentialism that is problematic. However, while acknowledging the contested nature of the term and the complexities therein, the term is deployed here to denote modern social science that has emerged, and become dominant, as a result of the unique historic and cultural circumstances in Western Europe over the last 500 years (Delanty, 2005) and which has, admittedly, been built upon contributions from a range of other civilisations and cultures over millennia.

[8] The heterogeneity of Islamic conceptualisations of knowledge is to be noted. Recognising the diversity of opinion within Islamic epistemological discourse and scholarly perspectives on the Islamic construction and derivation of knowledge, my -

aim, an attempt to align the 'major personal conflict' of my 'spiritual aspiration' with the demands of the 'focused intellectual activity expected of a researcher' (Al-Zeera, 2021: xiii) or, as Thomte (1980) says, 'the "outwardness" of scientific observation' with 'the "inwardness" of spiritual experience' (p. xv).

To achieve this, I have divided this chapter into three sections. In the first section, I have found it useful to summarise the three overarching branches of literature explored, and the theoretical considerations which have emerged from each to influence the approach I have taken. This will establish a justification for the centring of a faith-based, Islamic epistemology in seeking to understand convert experiences. The second section will move on to describe my epistemology and explain the theoretical dialectic which has helped me to translate that epistemology into a social science project situated within Western academia. This section will make mention of the philosophical and ethical contentions that arise in asserting a 'theological ear' (Keenan, 2003: 20) in academic work on this topic, though a more detailed treatment of these issues will be provided in the subsequent chapter (in the sections entitled Revert and Researcher: Insider and Outsider and Reflexivity). The third section of this chapter will discuss, more explicitly, the 'methodological tools' I will employ to answer my research questions and probe the ways in which my theoretical approach will affect the use of these tools. In this third section, I detail the lineaments of narrative inquiry and ethnography which help to form my dialectic. Chapter 4 will provide a more detailed description of the practicalities of applying my research design.

3.1 Theoretical Considerations from the Literature

3.1.1 Conversion Theory and the Religious Voice

I turn now to the theoretical considerations that have emerged from my review of literature. First, in relation to the subject of conversion, what emerges from the classical literature (James, 2015; Starbuck, 1897a, 1911; Underwood, 1925) is an overtly Christianity-centred outlook which, while remedied by later scholars' attempts to give more detailed treatment

deployment of the term here refers to my own normative Sunni Muslim epistemological position. This is explained in further detail in the section 3.2.

to the perspectives of other religious conceptions of conversion (Buckser and Glazier, 2003; Rambo, 1993, 1999), is dominated by a socio-psychology of an unmistakably Western flavour (Neitz, 2013; Rambo, 1999; Stark, 2003).[9] I have argued that this is inadequate in understanding the conversion patterns of contemporary British Muslim converts. Additionally, the body of work which has arisen to deal more directly with the conversion of Muslims in Britain and Western Europe has been demonstrably lacking in the type of theological focus which the narratives of converts themselves speak of (Brice, 2011; Köse & Loewenthal, 2000; Sealy, 2019; Spoliar & van den Brandt, 2020; Suleiman, 2013; van Nieuwkerk, 2006c). Instead, the literature has tended to address either the extrinsic sociological factors leading to conversion (Köse, 1996) or the supposed psychological factors which explain the stories converts are telling (Iyadurai, 2014; Krotofil, 2011; Starbuck, 1897b). These outlooks serve to rationalise the phenomenon within secular paradigms. This, I posit, has led to a reductionism in the theological understandings of converts themselves, potentially resulting in readings of conversion which are not faithful to the converts own perceptions (Al-Qwidi, 2002) and, in their quieting of the religious voices of converts, may constitute an epistemological 'blinkeredness'. This 'blinkeredness' to theological considerations has been intimated, in varying terms, by several scholars (Day, 2011; Flanagan, 2008; Marty, 1997; McGuire, 2008; Viswanathan, 1998). I assert that this calls for methodological considerations which act as an afront to such approaches and offers an outlook oriented towards the recognition of religiosity in social science research, attuned to the faith perspectives of the converts themselves.

3.1.2 Identity, Lived Experience, Criticality and the Insider Voice

As with the literature on conversion theory, the literature dealing with the lived experiences of convert Muslims in Britain throws up theoretical considerations which have influenced the methodological direction of this study. What the literature reveals is a residual Orientalism (Sealy, 2017) and a nascent form of Islamophobia (Moosavi, 2011; 2015a; 2015b; Murad, 2020) that negativises the ways in which Muslim converts are situated within

[9] While the term 'Western' is contested and somewhat fluid, it is taken here to be expressive of what Rambo notes as 'the severe limitations of scientific psychology that has been primarily developed in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States' (Rambo, 1999: 263).

the social imaginary (Ramahi and Suleiman, 2017; Sealy, 2017; Spoliar and van den Brandt, 2021), colouring how they are thought about, written about and positioned within contemporary educational settings and discourses. Further to this, it has been argued that modern Britain's multicultural educational framework (Bretherton, 2010; Sealy, 2021a) favours collapsing religious identity into the bracket of ethno-cultural or ethno-religious group concerns (Mitchell, 2006). With some literature pointing towards converts having a discretely religious identity (Al-Qwidi, 2002; Brice, 2011; Jawad, 2013; Köse, 1996; van Nieuwkerk, 2006a) which is yet to be adequately recognised within that framework (Bretherton, 2010; Sealy, 2021a), there is a need to 'de-racialise' and 'de-ethnicise' understandings of convert identity in line with their self-perceptions. The negativisation of Islamic identity and reductive treatment of discretely religious identity may be the result of the studies concerning British converts' lived experiences issuing from an outsider's vantage (Suleiman, 2013: 3) – or, at least, studied through an outsider's methodological paradigm (Porpora, 2006: 57, 62); one in which there is a tangible discrepancy between their self-perception and the ways in which they are constructed within social science. It may also be the result of what Davie (2015) notes as 'the decline in religious literacy that is becoming increasingly evident in British society' (p. 113). This decline might suggest an increased propensity to mischaracterise the religious viewpoint.

The implications of this were twofold for my research. First, it led me to design a study which aimed to provide a more authentic, 'insider's' understanding of the convert experience. This is not because 'insider' research is, by necessity, more valuable than the data and insight gleaned from the 'outside', but because it offers a 'different' (Twine, 2000) 'source of fact and insight' (Arweck and Martin, 1999: 159) which is 'no less true' (Gunaratnam, 2003: 92). Such a positionality demands reflexivity and has, as I will detail in Chapter 4, resulted in a sustained reflection on the value of the insider perspective in this type of research. Second, it has oriented my theoretical approach towards a critical stance in which some of the methodologically enfranchised, secular assumptions (Asad et al., 2013: 8) of previous studies into convert experience have been interrogated with my participants, along with Orientalist leanings that can be found in contemporary academic discourse related to Islam (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). This has inspired my attempt to prise apart

the features of religion, ethnicity and cultural identity to reveal a picture I contend is truer to the lived realities of the convert population in Britain.

3.1.3 Post 9/11 Educational Context: Seeing and Hearing Converts

The third strand of literature which threw up methodological considerations that have influenced the design and direction of this study relates to the ways in which converts are situated within the broader discourse on the Muslim population's interaction with a post-9/11 educational context in Britain. Here, the literature revealed that the scholarly interest in the Muslim problematic (Grillo, 2010) and the 'religious turn' (Panjwani and Moulin-Stożek, 2017: 597) in discussing Muslim inclusion within the multicultural (Levey, 2019) framework of Britain's education system has not been capacious enough to include any sustained reflection on the place of converts within that discourse. Continuing in a similar vein to Sealy (2021a), I have argued that this may be a result of a suspicion of the discretely religious identity within multiculturalist philosophy (see section 2.4.4.1); a philosophy which, at times, fails to recognise the discretely religious identity of Muslim converts as multicultural subjects (p. 11). The result of this limitation has been to render my own story and the stories of many other converts I have come into contact with virtually invisible. Simply put, I am yet to see myself and other converts within the current body of literature. While literature in the field has shed light upon important sociological elements of the Muslim experience in a post 9/11 Western world (Roy, 2006), the epistemological conventions which guide most of the current discourse has resulted in readings of convert identity and experience that are not reflective of many converts' experiences within the education system. There is a sense, then, that an outsider's perspective alone can 'never quite manage to grasp some of what is it[sic] stake and of real importance to [the convert] (Sealy, 2021a: 229). This argument is reminiscent of Arweck and Martin's (1999) perspective on the need to include varied voices in faith-centred research:

> *All of this is rooted in an epistemology...in which no single voice has the capacity for the whole truth, but in which every voice is a potential source of fact and insight, and in which valid conclusions and adequate interpretations are more likely, when the multiple voices are sensitively heard and considered.* (p. 159).

All of this implied the need for a research method that did not simply *hear* the narratives of converts, to be interpreted from the outside, but one which endeavoured to hear and 'see with their eyes what outsiders cannot' (Flanagan, 2008: 258). To my mind, this called for an approach combining narrative and ethnographic methods, underpinned by an epistemology that was already aligned to take seriously the religiosity that converts appear to place so centrally. The aim of this endeavour was to 'represent authentically the sentiments and aspirations of the subjects of inquiry…[and] to articulate these on their behalf.' (p. 257). The importance of this authenticity and the need to meet the ethical expectations of Muslim research participants has been elucidated more fully in Ahmed's (2008) paper on improving the quality and rigor of research by being attentive to the ethical standards of Islamically oriented participants. To achieve this however, as a convert Muslim myself, I did not have to 'go into' – but rather, was already embedded within – the field.

3.2 My Epistemology

3.2.1 Establishing the Methodological Tensions

The methodological considerations detailed above, in Section One, oriented this project towards something of an uneasy dialectic between a philosophical stance that was attuned to the theological perspectives of the convert participants, a critical theoretical posture that rejected the colonial underpinnings of Orientalism and affirmed the validity of less enfranchised ways of knowing about the world, and an ethnographic, narrative methodology which placed value in a nuanced reading of the converts' lived experiences and narratives of conversion. Importantly, this dialectic had to take place within the setting of Western academia which, at times, Davie (2015) notes, fails in 'taking faith seriously' (p. 63). To address the ostensible tensions here, I adopted something I describe as a dialectical Islamic epistemological stance. In the following section, I will offer a description of how I arrived at this stance.

3.2.2 My Journey to Authenticity

In seeking to add my voice to the growing number of Muslim researchers attempting to reconcile their faith-based outlooks with the demands of rigorous social scientific study situated in secular (Asad et al., 2013: 8; Rambo, 1999: 261) Western academia (Ahmed, 2017; Al-Zeera, 2001; Murad, 2020; Sahin, 2002), I began with a detailed reading around the nomenclature surrounding philosophical paradigms of knowledge within the social sciences. My initial attempts to align my study with what I will call, for the purposes of this discussion, 'the methodologically enfranchised epistemologies', or what McDonnell (2014) might refer to as 'the current epistemological order' (p. 101) took me to Crotty's three main 'way[s] of understanding how we know what we know' (objectivism[10], constructionism[11] and subjectivism[12]) (Crotty, 1998: 3). These can be considered the central epistemological stances upholding social science research within Western academia (p. 4). What these readings eventually led me to was a deeper reflection upon my own, authentic epistemological outlook and an engagement with a body of literature that was at once aligned with my Islamic beliefs and which helped to resolve the tensions in translating those beliefs into an academic research project (e.g. Ahmed, 2017; Al-Zeera, 2001; Dei, 2000, 2002, 2011; Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001; Memon & Zaman, 2016; Merry, 2007; Murad, 2020; Porpora, 2006; Rasiah, 2016; Shah, 2015). Notably, this body of literature alerted me to a common tendency within the sociological study of religion generally (Porpora, 2006), and religious conversion experience specifically (Bainbridge, 1992), to dismiss the spiritual and apply a 'methodological atheism' (Porpora, 2006: 57) when considering belief in the divine. Murad

[10] 'Objectivism is the epistemological view that things exist as meaningful entities independently of consciousness and experience, that they have truth and meaning residing in them as objects ('objective' truth and meaning, therefore), and that careful (scientific?) research can attain that objective truth and meaning. This is the epistemology underpinning the positivist stance (Crotty, 1998: 5-6)… Objectivist epistemology holds that meaning, and therefore meaningful reality, exists as such apart from the operation of any consciousness' (p. 8).

[11] A constructionist conceptualisation of knowledge asserts that 'there is no objective truth waiting for us to discover… Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon' (Crotty, 1998: 8-9).

[12] 'In subjectivism, meaning does not come out of an interplay between subject and object but is imposed on the object by the subject. Here the object as such makes no contribution to the generation of meaning… We import meaning from somewhere else. The meaning we ascribe to the object may come from our dreams, or from primordial archetypes we locate within our collective unconscious, or from the conjunction and aspects of the planets, or from religious beliefs, or from . . . That is to say, meaning comes from anything but an interaction between the subject and the object to which it is ascribed' (Crotty, 1998: 9).

(2020) criticises this lack of 'any acknowledgement of divine intervention' (p. 122) within some social science that is grounded in Western theory.

Furthermore, Al-Zeera (2001) argues that social science in Western academia tends to demonstrate a fixity upon mono-perspectives and an insistence upon the dichotomization of objectivist and subjectivist positions (p. x-xiv), a point made by Crotty (1998: 15-16) and others (see Dhunpath, 2000; Eisner, 1981: 9). Al-Zeera (2001) goes on to suggest that an Islamic epistemological stance chafes at such a notion, insisting upon holistic intellectual activity that takes account of elements of both objectivism and subjectivism, the worldly and other worldly; the mundane and the divine (p. xii, 45), writing:

> *So as a Muslim researcher, I find myself trapped in the rigidity of positivism and the looseness of constructivism. When a paradigm is rooted in religion, as is the Islamic paradigm… [it]… would encompass both the objective world, which is absolute, permanent, fixed, and metaphysical, and the subjective world, which is relative, temporary, flexible, and material. A person with such a perspective will agree that neither positivism nor interpretivism is suitable as a paradigm and belief system. As a Muslim educator, I believe that neither of the paradigms is appropriate for producing knowledge that is relevant to Islamic society and Muslim communities around the world (p. 45).*

The abovementioned duality; the suggestion that both the worldly and other worldly are to be taken into account, sits comfortably with my attempt to explore the implications of conversion upon identity and educational experience. Before continuing, however, it is necessary to point out the heterogeneity of Islamic conceptualisations of knowledge. The diversity of opinion and outlook within Islamic epistemological discourse is an expansive topic which falls beyond the scope of my discussions here. The epistemological position that I will describe in this section is not intended to be an exhaustive description of scholarly perspectives on the Islamic construction and derivation of knowledge. Rather, it is to be understood as an overview of my particular normative Sunni Muslim position in that regard.

This position is influenced by the works of Muslim social scientists (Ahmed, 2012; 2017; Al-Zeera, 2001) and philosophers (Murad, 2020; Nasr, 1976; 1987; 2012) and is supplemented with my own theological understanding, which is derived from my personal studies in Islamic sciences and social science. Equally the heterogeneity of 'Western' conceptualisations of

knowledge is to be noted – not least because of the problematic nature of deploying the term 'Western' in this discussion (see Tiedje and Johnston, 2017). I reiterate that, far from taking the scholarly observations mentioned thus far as offering an exhaustive description of what might be misunderstood to be a stylised and unitary 'Western outlook', the observations of these scholars should be taken to indicate a propensity amongst some social scientists in the Western context to place religious subjectivities into the background (Taylor, 2007); a propensity which my literature review spotlights within the discourse surrounding Muslim converts.

I have been cautious, therefore, not to find my work in contradiction to my own theological beliefs and critical sensibilities, mindful of Al-Zeera's (2001) exhortation for 'Muslim students and scholars at Western universities [to] develop their own framework for understanding, analyzing, and interpreting their studies from an Islamic perspective' (p.75). A lack of caution in that regards would, to my mind, result in an intellectual dishonesty that would lead to three problems: First, such an approach would arguably contribute to upholding and reinforcing colonial notions of knowledge that remain largely unchallenged within Western academia (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; McDonnell, 2014) and have been identified as perpetuating the colonial enterprise (Connell, 2007; Kempf, 2009; Smith, 1999). This, of course, would be especially ill-suited to challenging the residues of Orientalism that my literature review has brought into hard relief. Second, the approach would constitute a failure to preserve my own critical inclination to embracing 'broader ways of knowing and ways of being to understand peoples, cultures, and practices so different from and increasingly so similar to who we are' (Kanuha, 2000: 445-446). Finally, and of great personal significance to me, it would diminish my ability to add momentum to the growing number of academics reasserting Islamic conceptualisations of knowledge and research design within intellectual spaces (Ahmed, 2012; 2016a; 2016b; 2017; Al-Zeera, 2001; Lawson, 2005; Memon & Zaman, 2016; Merry, 2007; Niyozov & Memon, 2011; Rasiah, 2016; Shah, 2015).

As Habermas (2006) reminds us, '…citizens who adhere to a faith are obliged to establish a kind of 'balance' between their religious and their secular convictions… without jeopardizing their existence as [intended] pious persons" (p. 8). What follows, then, is a description of the

characteristics that underpin the Islamic epistemological stance I have adopted for this study, articulated in a register that is conducive to the social scientific endeavour at hand.

3.2.3 My Islamic Epistemology

The Islamic epistemological position, stemming from the ontological creed of *tawhid* (belief in the Oneness of Allah) (Nasr, 1987) and the acceptance that all reality was created by Allah (Nasr, 1976; Qur'an 54:49), affirms the primacy of the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions (the Sunnah) of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) as the preeminent source of all truth and knowledge (Nasr, 2012: 7, as cited in Diallo, 2012: 175; Qur'an 4: 59). While unaccepting of constructionist conceptualisations of knowledge that discount absolute and objective reality in favour of a relativist paradigm of reality (Crotty, 1998), the Islamic epistemological standing is not parochial in its understanding of competing conceptions of truth (Al-Zeera, 2001: 60), encouraging *tadebor* (contemplation) and leaving intellectual room within which to recognise and value contra paradigms of knowledge in order to arrive at the concept of '*Ilm* (knowledge) (Lings, 2006; Murad, 1999; Umaruddin, 1962). Ahmed (2017: 80-81) argues that this Islamic outlook shares some resemblance to interpretivism in that it posits that the seeker of truth is imperfect (Qur'an 5:48, 17: 85) and may seek to arrive at knowledge through subjective interpretation (Guba and Lincoln, 1986: 65).[13] While I must reiterate the fact that the Islamic epistemology I am advocating affirms a 'unified objective reality' (Ahmed, 2017: 32) and an ultimate source of knowledge, thus standing apart from the relativism of interpretivism (Al-Zeera, 2001: 43), Ahmed (2017) argues for incorporating elements of interpretivism within Islamic epistemologically-based research by transcending the ontological aporia that exists between Islamic conceptions of knowledge and that of secular conceptions. She writes:

> *In interpretivism, interpretations are limited to a particular individual or group. They are valuable in a pluralistic society to gain understanding of the individual or group. It could be argued I am bypassing the more fundamental divide between holistic Islamic epistemology and its principle of an eternal core truth, and the inherent relativism/subjectivism of interpretivism. Alternatively, my approach could be*

[13] 'Interpretivism argues that truth and knowledge are subjective, as well as culturally and historically situated, based on people's experiences and their understanding of them. Researchers can never be completely separate from their own values and beliefs, so these will inevitably inform the way in which they collect, interpret and analyse data.' (Ryan, 2018: 8).

> *understood as a reflection of Islamic wisdom; that the human being should accept her limitations and whilst seeking truth, acknowledge that there is always more to learn, whether she is functioning as a scientist, interpretivist, or religious scholar. The non-Muslim reader will read my work as purely interpretivist. For the Muslim reader, whose worldview is shaped by Islamic epistemology, my work will be judged on how far it is true to the Quranic paradigm* (p. 81).

This transcending of aporetic paradigms does not happen through an unconsidered process of reconciling incongruities, but instead, suggests Al-Zeera (2001), through a process of 'dialectical thinking' which entails logical dialogue and interaction between a range of philosophical paradigms. It is this feature of the Islamic research paradigm that has helped me to settle some of the tensions stated earlier in this chapter. In the following section, I will elucidate on this mode of thinking.

3.2.4 Islamic Dialectical Thinking

Dialectical thinking, Al-Zeera (2001: forward, 26, 75) asserts, begins with an attitude of criticism of the notion that any of the methodological stances can ever truly be impartial and value-free. Thus, the dominant objectivist paradigm, which Guba and Lincoln (1981) assert carries 'an axiological assumption of value-freedom, that is, that the methodology guarantees that the results of an inquiry are essentially free from the influence of any value system (bias)' (p. 28), is rejected by the dialectic Islamic position (Ahmed, 2017; Al-Zeera, 2001).

However, as I have touched upon, the Islamic position is accepting of objectivism's conception of a singular reality (Leaman, 1998). While the immutable laws of that reality within objectivism's outlook is constructed of only 'natural laws and mechanisms', which can be known and measured (Guba, 1990: 20) – contrasting with Islamic notions which hold that Allah cannot be measured and is not subject to natural laws and mechanisms (Böwering, 1997; Qur'an 67: 1-5) – there is common ground to be found in objectivism's acceptance of a universal, incontrovertible reality (Leaman, 1998; Qur'an 7: 54). Here, Bowker's (2015:153) notion of God as the primary, immeasurable cause, and natural laws as the secondary, scientifically measurable, causalities, is useful in framing the congruence between a theological conception of a singular reality and an objectivist conception.

Contrastingly, the constructivist[14] paradigm conceives of a 'fragmented' reality (Al-Zeera, 2001: 44) which is perceived, sensed and constructed by people, bound by time and context (Lincoln and Guba, 1986; Schwandt, 2007: 11). This account of reality differs quite notably from the Islamic stance I have just outlined here, discounting an objective, universal truth that can be known (Crotty, 1998: 8). However, in constructivism's 'axiological assumption that methodology is necessarily value bound, interactive, subjective and based on a participants' views' (Guba and Lincoln, 1985: 28), the paradigm finds accord with the Islamic stance (Ahmed, 2017). Al-Zeera (2001) reiterates the Islamic epistemological view in this regard, noting,

> *The neutrality and freedom from value in scientific and educational research is a dangerous assumption that is fostered by the so-called scientific approach. Suppression of values, principles, and beliefs for the sake of being 'objective' causes severe damage to people and to humanity. It numbs the feelings and emotions and develops irresponsible individuals.* (p. 35).

In the Islamic theoretical perspective I have outlined so far, which is suspicious of claims of value-freedom, a form of criticality emerges. Both the critical and Islamic positions argue that researchers are socialized into believing that the objectivist, 'scientific' method of obtaining knowledge is the only method of rigor and that other ways of knowing are less trustworthy. In defining this socialisation, Al-Zeera (2001) refers to it as a type of colonization of knowledge (p. 36). Raskin (Raskin and Bernstein, 1987) defines the term thus,

> *Without admitting it, colonizing knowledge relates to the elimination of alternate explanations, and the unwillingness to accept the interrelationships between the sort of science we do, how we do it, the questions we ask, and the sorts of 'proof' we require*. (p. 160).

14 Constructivism is sometimes incorrectly used interchangeably with constructionism (Crotty, 1998: 217). The distinction between the two paradigms can be primarily understood in their emphases. Constructivism is a more individualistic understanding of the constructionist position and focuses on 'the meaning-making activity of the individual mind', as opposed to constructionism's focus upon 'the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning'. This important distinction suggests that constructivism, taken in the sense described by Crotty, emphasises the 'unique experience of each of us. It suggests that each one's way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other'. On the other hand, 'social constructionism emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things!)' (p. 58).

The evident parallels between critical approaches and the Islamic perspective will be explored in the following section. Here, it can be noted that in the Islamic paradigm's acceptance of an objective reality, and in its rejection of scientific neutrality, we begin to see an unsettling of the mono-perspective. It is this point which enables my methodological approach to balance between the rigor of qualitative sociological inquiry at the same time as recognising the divine and ensuring my interpretation of data retains 'the integrity of [Islamic] intellectual and spiritual identity' (Al-Zeera, 2001: 76). One important ethical implication of this approach, which will be dealt with in Chapter 4, is the acceptance of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestion that 'confirmability' is a more suitable criterion for rigor than 'objectivity'.

3.2.5 Critical Theory

The implications of the dialectical model of thinking I have described above can be seen in the multi-perspective attitude I have taken in my research design. In speaking of the features of objectivist and constructivist paradigms that align with my epistemology, I briefly touched upon a critical-Islamic understanding of the notion of researcher neutrality which is suspicious of some Western research paradigms' dismissal of other ways of knowing (Duderija 2013: 69). This begins to reveal a further strand of the dialectic that upholds my methodology; the lineament of criticality within Islamic research (Duderija 2013; Gilani-Williams, 2014; Niyozov & Memon, 2011). It is, perhaps, unsurprising to consider that my Islamic epistemology points towards a critical posture when we consider those social scientists who have placed Islamic research methods within the discourse of critical inquiry, on the basis of shared concerns between the Islamic worldview and that of critical theorists (Ahmed, 2017; Connell, 2007; Denzin et al, 2008; Reagan, 2005; Zeera, 2001). Speaking about those Muslim scholars and researchers who search for alternatives to academic secularisation, Duderija (2013) notes, 'they are reinterpreting the normative teachings of the Muslim worldview and developing a distinctly third-way approach [which] refuses to accept… a hegemony of Western secularism…' (Duderija 2013: 69).

While there are recognised philosophical tension between Islamic and critical paradigms, research based upon Islamic epistemological principles has tended to be concerned with a

desire to change social situations (Bahi, 2008; Kazmi, 2000; Sadek, 2012); a desire shared by the critical theorist. In its linguistic disjuncture from *traditional* theory (Jay, 1973), *critical* theory points to a critique of, and desire to change, rather than simply describe and reflect upon, the social situation (Bohman, 1996). In this, both the Islamic research paradigm I have embraced, and the critical research paradigm tend to adopt a concern for less enfranchised peoples (Freire, 1972; Gilani-Williams, 2014; The Last Sermon of the Prophet Muhammad, 2013). This is accompanied by a questioning of the dynamics of power and oppression that exist within our society and the hegemonic aspirants within our political world. Both paradigms proceed from an acknowledgement that our social world is fraught with injustices and inequalities; both call into question commonly held values and the assumptions which reinforce them. It is through this theoretical stance that my study problematises the commonly held assumptions about convert Muslim identity and explores the implications upon the educational experiences of that population.

The points of confluence mentioned above do not, I would concede, resolve the philosophical tensions that exist between critical theory and the theological perspective of the Islamic paradigm, contrary to what is implied by some of the scholars I have drawn from in this discussion (Duderija 2013; Kazmi, 2000; Sadek, 2012). Indeed, an obvious quandary surfaces when describing a faith-based epistemological approach to social science as 'critical': How does my study retain its faith-based foundations within the widely cast shadow and anti-religious sentiment of Marxism, so often associated with critical theory (Asad et al., 2013)? In answer to this, I would argue that Marxism has no monopoly over the critical posture in social science research, nor is it, by necessity, secular (Asad et al., 2013). Additionally, the lack of internal consistency within critical perspectives (Crotty, 1998) discounts any claim to a methodological orthodoxy that disbars eschatological or epistemological differences. Crotty's (1998: 13-14) vision of the process of crafting a research methodology becomes relevant here:

> *In a very real sense, every piece of research is unique and calls for a unique methodology. We, as the researcher, have to develop it… We acquaint ourselves with the various methodologies… We weigh their strengths and weaknesses. Having done all that and more besides, we still have to forge a methodology that will meet our particular purposes in this research*.

It is this understanding of the process of negotiation between 'various methodologies', as a weighing of strengths and weaknesses in pursuit of a way towards answering my specific research questions, that inspired and justifies the lineament of critical theory within my project. It was not, in short, an attempt to resolve the philosophical tensions between the paradigms that build my methodology, but an attempt to hold them in tension through Islamically rooted dialectical thinking.

3.3 Building a Methodology

3.3.1 Reconciling Ethnography and Narrative Inquiry

As I have intimated previously, the dialectical thinking that arises from the theoretical considerations outlined thus far moved me beyond a reconciliation of paradigmatic tensions only, towards a deeper consideration of the methods that would allow me to hear and see the narratives and experiences of converts with eyes that 'outsiders cannot' (Flanagan, 2008: 258). Much like the paradigmatic tensions I have detailed in this chapter, there did, at first sight, appear to be a degree of incompatibility between the lineaments of ethnography and narrative inquiry that this study appeared to require. Given the fact that ethnography has been noted as 'a genre that discredits or discourages narrative, subjectivity, confessional, personal anecdote, or accounts of the ethnographers' or anyone else's experience' (Tyler, 1987: 92), the relationship between the ethnographic and narrative elements within my study required deep examination.

This examination began with a look at the historical development of the ethnographic methodology and, in doing so, highlighted the features of the methodology which were uniquely placed to answer my research questions and achieve the understanding I sought. To demonstrate the versatility of this research style and elucidate the ways in which it has allowed for the formation of my unique ways of being ethnographic, I will outline my rationale and process of reconciliation below.

3.3.2 The Evolution of Ethnography

With the earliest ethnographies being the informal, amateur accounts of eighteenth and nineteenth century 'explorers, travellers, medical doctors, colonial officers [and] missionaries' (Tedlock, 1991:69), it was not until around the First World War that the 'academic orthodoxy' of ethnography began to develop into the research methodology it is widely known as today (Firth, 1985; Stocking, 1982); one in which epistemic value is placed upon conducting fieldwork through extended immersion within cultural groups. And while differences in approach amongst ethnographers continued (Kirsch, 1982), the overarching enterprise was the same; a marrying of participation and observation; the affectional, psychological attachment that cultural participation entails, and the scientific detachment that observation of cultures entails (Tedlock, 1991: 69). The result was the production of data that purportedly reflected the 'native's' point of view' (Malinowski, 2017: 25), thus bringing about knowledge and understanding.

It is to be noted that this form of participatory immersion into the field sometimes resulted in accounts of what ethnographers have called 'going native', a situation in which the researcher becomes so immersed within the cultural group under investigation that she loses a sense of the 'scientific objectivity' (Paul, 1953: 441) of observation in favour of participation (Tedlock, 1991). Within anthropological conceptualisation of ethnography, this represents an irredeemable threat to ethnographic fieldwork (Devereux, 1967; Tyler, 1987), a perceived unbridgeable gap between the objectivism required for the 'science' of ethnography and the subjectivism of the participants under observation. Nestled within such a position, I contest, is an assumed superiority of objectivity, even in the realm of complex human culture and experience. Such a position assumes that objective reality can only be known by the outsider, the ethnographer, and that the participants 'way of knowing', therefore, is of lesser value (Tedlock, 1991: 71). It is in the rejection of this assumption, as detailed earlier (see 3.2.4), that my own ethnographic sensibilities take a sharp turn away from early anthropological understandings of ethnography and instead turn towards a reconsideration of the objectivist position in ethnographic research.

While there exist early examples of dissenting approaches in ethnographic research (see for example, La Farge, 1947; Marriott, 1952; Reichard, 1934) it wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s

(Tedlock, 1991: 67) that the relationship between observer objectivity and participant subjectivity began to be commonly explored in more critical ways (Anderson, 1989: 249-50; Tedlock, 1991: 67) and the attacks on positivist assumptions in ethnography began to intensify (Anderson, 1989: 249-50), birthing ethnographies that were less suspicious of the the subjective narratives of ethnographers (see, for example, Molet et al., 1965; Turnbull, 1961). Tedlock (1991) notes that the 1970s witnessed a shift away from 'participant observation' (attempting, during the ethnographic process, to be engaged, participatory and 'live' the world of participants, at the same time as being totally 'objective' observers, dispassionate, impartial), towards an 'observation of participation' (in which observers are cognisant and reflective upon their co-participation within the ethnographic encounter). He describes this type of ethnography as 'narrative ethnography' (Tedlock, 1991; 2004).

> *The author of a narrative ethnography also deals with experiences, but along with these come ethnographic data, epistemological reflections on fieldwork participation, and cultural analysis. The world, in a narrative ethnography, is re-presented as perceived by a situated narrator, who is also present as a character in the story that reveals his own personality.'* (Tedlock, 1991: 77-8).

In this description it is possible to see a form of ethnography which is aligned to my own belief in the value-laden researcher. Further to this, in Tedlock's mention of a 'situated narrator', his description implies reflexivity. This crucial element of my methodology warrants its own focus and will be dealt with in the following chapter, in the section entitled *Reflexivity*. However, it is worth noting now that the appreciation of reflexivity and participant subjectivity have led to the emergence of other iterations of ethnography within social science (Hampshire et al, 2014; Rose, 1990) and newer types of ethnographers from different cultures, genders, races and religions that bring along new perspectives and critical awarenesses which are to be valued as a 'democratisation of knowledge' (Tedlock, 1991: 80). The coalescence of criticality and the abovementioned diversity in contemporary ethnographic research helps to further justify my choice of this method to achieve new knowledge about convert Muslims' identity and experience. What follows is a more detailed description of my study's particular way of being ethnographic.

3.3.3 Features of my Ethnography

Key to this study's particular way of being ethnographic is the critical intentions that underpin it. Critical ethnography, defined by Vandenberg (2011: 25) as 'intended to help researchers understand relations of power by merging a critical stance with a complex and dynamic qualitative strategy of enquiry' urges 'a more direct style of thinking about the relationships among knowledge, society, and political action' (Thomas, 1993: vii). As I seek to explore my participants' interactions with the British education system and what Scott-Baumann et al (2020) refers to as the 'epistemic injustice' (p. 39) taking place with regards to Islam in British educational settings, this political orientation became an important feature of my study.

The critical posture also enthused another feature of my ethnographic style. It inspired me to treat my participants as subjects within the social world (those who know and act) as opposed to objects (those known and acted upon) (Anderson, 1989: 260). This had implications for the tone and types of questions I asked my participants during interviews. The questions were informed by a desire to foster 'conscientisation' amongst them (Freire, 1972: 30). With the literature having indicated experiences of disenfranchisement and misrepresentation amongst British converts, it was important for me to ensure my participants reflected upon their social reality. My reading of Freire's (1972) notion of conscientisation requires that the disenfranchised 'become critically aware of their true situation' (Crotty, 1998: 154) in order to become engaged in challenging their disenfranchisement and misrepresentation (Freire, 1972: 27-8). The wording of my questions, therefore, were designed to 'help [my participants] emerge and engage in that struggle' (Crotty, 1998: 155) by reflecting upon the lived experiences and social realities that the literature indicated may be present in their lives. This is also reflected in the way that my data is analysed. I was inspired by Mishler, (2009), who argues for a move away from coding interview responses in a way that is removed from social context, towards an analysis approach that encourages participants to actively engage with researchers as storytellers (Anderson, 1989: 260). In the section entitled 'Achieving Trustworthiness', in the next chapter, I will expand upon how this was achieved.

3.3.3.1 Digital Ethnography

Another important feature of this study's unique style of ethnography is again demonstrative of the versatility of the ethnographic method. Recognising that contemporary life has been changed by the ascension of digital technology and social media, and that this has afforded researchers new opportunities for the recording and representation of ethnographic data, digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008; Pink et al, 2016; Savin-Baden & Tombs, 2017) has formed part of my ethnographic style. It is important to note here that my incorporation of digital ethnography is not to be seen as a discrete methodological approach that is 'digital'. As Murthy (2008) puts it, the 'epistemological remit' of digital ethnography 'remains much the same' (p. 838). Rather, my use of digital ethnography is to be understood as a component of my overall methodology. Figure 3 illustrates this:

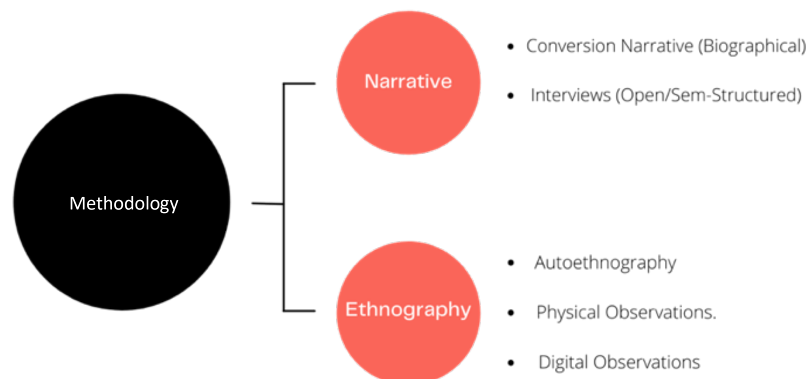

Figure 3: Components of My Narrative Ethnography – Source [author]

While it is true that the media environments which we now occupy provide rich illustrations of modern life that can be mined for data in much the same way as a physical environment, such data are only snapshots of modern life that, rather than warranting a new singular type of ethnography, can help in the construction of ethnographic reportage and analysis. It is the development of an active social media and digital media presence amongst British convert Muslims, coupled with the developing ethical and methodological practices related to these

mediums (Dicks et al., 2006; Murphy, 2008; Pink et al.,2016; Savin-Baden & Tombs, 2017), that opened the door to incorporating this component with my ethnographic work. Early on I concluded that as new technology has come to the fore of people's lives, especially the millennial generation upon which my study will focus, new ways of telling their stories needed to be included within this research. The result, I argue, has been a more accurate portrayal of the role digital media plays in the social story of converts.

The benefits of digital ethnography are numerous, with some social scientists arguing that it creates greater 'intimacy' (Miller & Slater, 2000, p.183) and different, often more personal responses than would otherwise be available through traditional ethnographic methods (Murthy, 2008, p. 842). Therefore, it would have been remiss of me, as a researcher, to eschew the benefits of extending my ethnographic gaze to digital spaces and recognising the changed social landscape which digital technology and social media represent. The task I set myself for this project, therefore, was to adapt to this flux in ethnographic research design and, as Sassen (2002) emphasises, 'capture the complex imbrications of technology and society' (p. 365). It is to be noted that this component of my ethnography carried with it its own ethical considerations, which, once again, will be discussed further in the following chapter along with a more detailed account of how I enacted my narrative ethnography.

3.3.4 Summary

The above is far from an exhaustive account of the evolution of ethnography from its traditional anthropological roots into a methodology that suited the critical, reflexive research that I have conducted. However, what this brief historical account of the evolution of ethnography highlights are the key features of the methodology which align with my own unique research intent. In naming my study's methodology 'ethnographic' I am appealing for what Morton and Mills (2013) call a 'modicum of methodological empathy and solidarity towards other ways of 'being ethnographic' (p. 184–5). In so much as my project has involved periods of observational fieldwork (both physical and digital) within the convert

community[15] (Creswell, 2013: 90) and a desire to understand my participants vision of the world through immersion (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), it is ethnographic.

3.3.5 Narrative Inquiry

My study is also narrative. A detailed clarification of my deployment of the term 'narrative', as it relates to this project, will help to form a comprehensive understanding of the full dialectic I have constructed. To do this, it is first necessary to differentiate narrative inquiry, the qualitative research genre which has been growing in popularity (Dhunpath, 2000; du Preez, 2008), from the term narrative as it has been understood linguistically. This clarification will help to illustrate how narrative inquiry helped my own project to provide intimate, complex social insight. It will also make plain, not only the suitability of the methodology in answering my research questions, but the synergy between the ethnographic and narrative lineaments of my approach.

3.3.6 What I Mean by Narrative

At times referring to the mere expression of qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the term 'narrative' has been deployed equivocally in the social science literature (du Preez, 2008). However, in using the term narrative for this study, the definition I have been concerned with is the more limited definition used by qualitative researchers in recent years (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990): the 'research designs in which stories are used to describe human action… and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot.' (Polkinghorne, 1995: 5).

The linguistic form of story has historically proven to be well suited to conveying human experience as situated in the lived world (Ellis & Bochner, 1992; Kenyon & Randall, 1997; Ricoeur, 1991), justifying the growing popularity of narratives as a qualitative research tool. However, with the almost visceral association of story with fiction in literature

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[15] Here my use of the word 'community' indicates the type of community that is 'primarily relational and contextual, rather than as scalar or spatial' (Appadurai, 1995). This understanding must be dislodged from readings of 'community' that refer to geographically bound communities. It gestures towards my belief that modern communication and technologies have - resulted in 'a world where spatial localization, quotidian interaction, and social scale are no longer isomorphic?' (Appadurai, 1996: 179).

(Polkinghorne, 1995: 7), the concept of story is unavoidably associated with pure subjectivity and considered an afront to traditionally empiricist notions of knowledge. As I have already detailed (see 3.2.4 and 3.3.2), my Islamic epistemological position is comfortable with subjectivity in social science and, therefore, gave currency to the tendency of stories to disrupt the dominance of purely objectivistic approaches by bringing to light the relativistic truths embedded in my participants narratives (Trahar, 2013).
The rich, intimate understandings of the lived experiences of my participants, which narrative inquiry has yielded, brought into further relief the discrepancies between the perceptions of converts evident in the literature and the lived realities of the population. In turn, this spotlighted the challenges faced by Muslims in the context of education.

3.3.7 Emplotment

Having now defined my use of the term narrative in this study, I shall offer a brief explanation of the notion of 'emplotment', which is central to understanding the distinct form of analysis I have deployed in understanding my narrative data. Emplotment is narrative inquiry's conceptual scheme with which singular events in a narrative are given contextual meaning (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). To illustrate the operation of emplotment, Polkinghorne (1995), utilises the following example:

> *'The king died; the prince cried." In isolation the two events are simply propositions describing two independent happenings. When composed into a story, a new level of relational significance appears. The relational significance is a display of the meaning producing operation of the plot. Within a storied production, the prince's crying appears as a response to his father's death. The story provides a context for understanding the crying.* (p. 7)'

The above illustrates the way in which, through the process of emplotment, I have chosen to contextualise the individual happenings within participants' narratives for the purposes of reading them as a whole alongside the other data I collected.

3.3.8 Analysis of narrative vs Narrative analysis

The role of emplotment is important in delineating two distinct types of analysis of narrative data: 'analysis of narrative' and 'narrative analysis' (Polkinghorne, 1995: 12). 'Narrative

analysis' entails the collection of individual events, practices, words and happenings as data which are then connected and configured into temporally emplotted narratives to explain that data. In contrast, 'analysis of narrative' involves the collection of narratives as the data itself which are then analysed in order to produce 'descriptions of themes that hold across the stories or in taxonomies of types of stories, characters, or settings' (p. 12). Polkinghorne summarises the distinction thus, 'analysis of narratives moves from stories to common elements, and narrative analysis moves from elements to stories'. My study employed an 'analysis of narratives'. The rationale for this will be given here, while a more detailed description of the analysis process itself will be given in chapter 4.

While the prospect of rendering the varied experiences, statements, and happenings of my participants into a temporally arranged story, emplotted by way of related elements, appealed to a discursive impulse within me, the complaint from converts in previous studies that their conversions have been understood 'from the outside in' (Suleiman, 2013: 3) cautioned me not to impose upon my data a narrative structure that, rather than being a faithful reflection of my participants' experiences, acted as an analytical framework within which to force my data. I contend that presenting the experiences and events that I have recorded from my participants as a whole, emplotted narrative, would have drawn focus away from the individuality of elements within their stories, detracting attention from things my participants may have originally intended. In that case, I argue that the audience of my research may have been exposed, not to the events as they were collected or detailed by my participants, but to an overly interpreted version of that data; the events having been contorted to fit within the preconceived configurative structure of a story. Such an approach would have been contrary to my endeavour to hear my participants' subjectivities faithfully from the inside.

The alternative approach to analysing narratives – analysis of narrative – suited the methodological dialectic I have established, which combined narrative and ethnographic data collection. This style of analysis allowed me to collect the narrative data and analyse them thematically to contrast, compare and synthesis with the other forms of data (ethnographic) that I collected. This thematic style of analysis will be expounded upon in the next chapter.

3.3.9 Summary

In this third section of the chapter, having briefly charted the evolution of ethnography as a genre, detailing those features of the methodology which influenced my own ethnographic sensibilities, I moved on to define the use of narrative within my study. I have detailed the ways in which narrative inquiry's focus on subjectivity fulfilled my epistemological inclination to challenge purely empiricist traditions. As Dhunpath (2000) notes, narrative research can act 'as a counterculture' to the 'dominance of empirical tradition' (p. 543). In distinguishing between two types of narrative analysis, I have begun to explain how I utilised the narratives I collected alongside the ethnographic data to produce knowledge which answers my specific research questions. As I have alluded to, in the chapter to follow I will describe the practical applications of my chosen methodology.

Chapter 4: Research Design

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the practical application of my chosen methodology. Furthermore, it expands on the rationale underpinning my research design choices and the form of analysis I have determined most fitting for my overarching research effort. Notably, it engages with the complexities of combining ethnographic immersion with narrative inquiry and the ethical considerations embedded in that endeavour, particularly as it relates to positionality and reflexivity. As has been indicated in the preceding chapter, the research design was animated by an Islamic dialectical approach which served to foreground the religious subjectivities and epistemological outlooks of my participants. Guided by the aim of exploring millennial Muslim converts' conversion narratives, identity configurations and experiences within the context of secondary and post-secondary education, with a view to expanding understanding of this population and their educational needs (see 1.2), I have addressed the following research questions (RQs):

1. What were the experiences of a self-selected group of millennial Muslim converts (born between 1981 and 1996) within secondary and post-secondary education settings in the UK (post-9/11).

2. How might a fine-grained exploration of the conversion narrative and identities of Muslim converts inform the future educational needs of the UK's convert population?

3. What, if any, implications arise from these recounted experiences?

4.2 A Note on the Evolution of my Research Intent

Early on in my research journey, given the personal experiences that I have described in the introduction to this thesis and my role as an educator, it was my aim to conduct research

which would contribute to a re-evaluation of contemporary educational policy application at the local authority level, within Islamic schools in my area and within schools that were seeking to develop diversity and inclusion initiatives, particularly those types of institutions which my children and the children of other convert community members attended. In this, I was primarily concerned with remedying the oft-noted (Ball, 2008; Kerr & West, 2010) disjuncture between policy reform and research findings (Hillage et al, 1998). Relatedly, Pring (2000) notes the frequent inadequacy of educational research in finding answers to the types of questions that governments and their policy makers pose. While a secondary consideration had always been to allow my research to be of practical application to more personal audiences such as parents, teachers and school leaders dealing with convert Muslims, my early inclination was to contend that the type of 'little science' (Denzin, 2009) I anticipated my research project would become – personal narratives from a fragmented, 'glocally' based (Meyrowitz, 2005: 23) and small population – should be taken account of by policymakers. As Wright Mills (1959) theorises in his discussions of the 'sociological imagination' (p. 12 & 248), personal issues, explored through the biographies, histories and narratives of individuals, are to be understood and redressed by connecting them to the wider public issues to which they relate. I interpreted this to implying that personal narratives should influence public policy. However, the evolution of my critical, Islamic theoretical sensibilities eventually inspired me to seek out 'new ways of being political in the world' (Casey, 1993: 158), reorienting my initial concern with policy influence towards a reimagined conceptualisation of what it means to be political. This reorientation was enlivened by Casey's (1995) recognition that 'the personal is political' and that 'power is exercised in all relationships, not just those connected to the state' (p.223-224). Therefore, I am now primarily concerned with my study's findings reaching smaller, local, more personal audiences such as Muslim community leaders, schoolteachers, parents of convert Muslims and those involved with chaplaincy in schools and universities; an aim more in line with my increased cognisance of the empirical and scholastic limitations of small-scale studies like my own.

4.3 Methods and Tools

What became important was to ensure that the research design was in keeping with my evolved aim and my reimagined conception of 'the political' as something personal, local and concerned with the deeply intimate, lived experiences of my participants. For this it was apposite to utilise a qualitative approach, which is suited to understanding participants views and personal experiences in detail (Creswell, 2013). Further to this, as the literature indicated, the group with which I am concerned often display unique and specific cultural practices (Özyürek, 2009; Zebiri, 2008), identity configurations (Köse, 1996) and experiential nuances (Moosavi, 2011; 2015b). As a member of this growing 'minority within a minority' (Brice, 2011), already acquainted with the socio-cultural mores of the group, I started to view them as something of an emergent 'culture within a culture'. My continued immersion within the subject community during the course of my study, and my conception of them as a cultural minority within the Muslim community, oriented my methodology towards ethnography (Mariampolski, 2006); a methodology based on prolonged observation, listening and reporting (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), to produce descriptive, analytical and explanatory studies of cultures and their values, beliefs and practices (Cohen et al., 2017: 292).

With my research placing a measure of focus upon the identities of converts and the journeys they undertake towards their religious development, meaning-making through narrative was a key element of the study. As Plummer (1995) puts it 'for many the telling of a tale comes as a major way of 'discovering who one really is.' (p. 34). This can be understood to be referring to the relationality between experience and the accounts given of those experiences, which are, according to Bendar (2007: 214), closely intertwined. Given the need to look backwards at the conversion experiences of my participants, and forwards at the implications of those experiences, the characteristic of temporality (Freeman, 2013) within narrative inquiry was well suited. This is supported by Mishler's (2006) opinion that 'narrativizing reassigns meaning to events [in the past] in terms of their [future] consequences' (p. 38).

To encapsulate this grouping of methods, I have chosen to employ the term 'narrative ethnography', which, according to Gubrium and Holstein (2008b) 'signals the combination of epistemological, methodological, procedural, and analytical sensibilities that must be brought to bear to understand narrativity in social context' (p. 251). My style of narrative ethnography made use of narrative and semi-structured interviews to collect data, combining this with physical and digital field observations to contextualise the conversion histories and patterns of my participants, the formation of their identities and their experiences within the education system. Data were collected in four distinct stages (see Appendix 2 and 3).

4.4 Stage One: Auto-ethnography & Pre-Interview Task

As I was already 'immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people' I was investigating (Creswell, 2013, p. 90), I believe that I already possessed a 'sympathetic understanding' of convert Muslims, which, Kelly (2010) suggests, is 'the foundation of ethnography' (p. 49). Given this positionality and my long term and continued membership and subscription to a number of convert related digital and social media content providers, my data collection began with an element of autobiographical reflection upon my own journey to conversion, identity formation and post-conversion educational experiences. This element of the research is intimated in my introduction (1.2). This reflective process took the form of journal entries that I consider fieldnotes related to my personal observations, memories and experiences (Mason, 2002: 97). For discursive purposes, I will characterise this component of the primary reflexive, ethnographic endeavour as autoethnography (Denzin, 2013). It may also be seen as a precursor to the narrative element of my data collection. These journal entries began in May 2022.

This stage of autoethnographic reflection and recollection took place alongside a pre-interview task set for my participants, developed from Webster and Mertova's (2007) critical events approach to narrative. During this stage, along with collecting basic biographical information about the participants of my study (see Appendix 1) in order to provide detailed profiles of my subjects (e.g. age, level of education, previous religion, gender, etc), I asked participants to identify a timeline of 'critical events' (Richards, 2021; Webster and Mertova,

2007) leading up to their conversions and occurring during their secondary and post-secondary education. Webster and Mertova (2007) defined a critical event in the following way:

> *A critical event as told in a story reveals a change of understanding or worldview by the storyteller… It may have a traumatic component… or other powerful personal consequence… what makes a critical event 'critical' is the impact it has on the storyteller… It is almost always a change experience… The critical event will have challenged the storyteller's understanding or worldview… The event is likely to have changed their experience and understanding, informing future behaviour and understanding…* (p. 73-5)

As well as providing me an early way of determining the significance of past occurrences in my participants' lives, this stage of data collection informed the tone, focus and, in some cases, the starting point of the narrative interviews. The first of these forms was distributed in May 2022.

4.5 Stage Two: Conversion Narratives

For the second stage of data collection, I conducted narrative interviews with the fifteen convert Muslim participants. These took place between July and September 2022. Where possible, these interviews were face-to-face. However, as the timeline of this project began during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, I designed my study to offer participants the option to conduct interviews via video conferencing applications (see Appendix 3); an opportunity some participants took up. Furthermore, as I had anticipated, some female converts elected to participate in video interviews, irrespective of Covid-19. This first round of narrative interviews was focused on the critical events detailed during the pre-interview task and sought a detailed account of the conversion narratives of my subjects, allowing free-flow speech wherein participants were asked to speak openly and freely about their conversion stories and the things leading up to them. I was particularly alive to detailing the motivations and patterns of conversion. Where it was possible, I made pertinent notes about the narrators' body language, tone and other non-verbal informational gleanings. Relevant parts of this are discussed in my findings chapters.

Cognisent of Delamont's (2007a; 2009; 2012) critique of overly introspective autoethnography, this stage of the data collection afforded me the opportunity to discuss, problematise and often triangulate my autoethnographic reflections with my participants. Indeed, one of the key benefits of this stage of data collection was to interrogate my own potentially defective understandings, memories and personal biases (Radstone, 2000). While this stage was useful in refining and sharpening my own autoethnographic recollections and even in remembering details I had forgotten or inaccurately remembered about my experiences, this was not the sole focus of this stage of the data collection. I also used this stage as a way of establishing myself with my participants as both stranger and friend (Powdermaker, 1966); an insider and 'friend' who must interact with them as a researcher, and in that sense, a stranger. This duality in my positionality will be discussed later in this chapter, in the section entitled '*Revert and Researcher: Insider and Outsider'*.

Some observations made during this stage were written as hand-written annotations on the respective participant's observation schedule (Appendix 8). However, I was careful also not to be 'totally wedded to field notes' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 147), conscious of the rich data available to me that could not be easily captured in field notes (see section 6.4 for example).

4.6 Stage Three: Use of Observation

The observational stage of my data collection began after the final narrative interview had been conducted and continued throughout the data collection process. This third stage of data collection took place between September 2022 and April 2023. It involved focused observational work, a method of data collection favoured in qualitative research (Riemer 2008; Wilson, 1977). I conducted what O'Leary (2004) refers to as 'semi-structured' observations, utilising an ethically approved observation schedule (Appendix 8) to organise observational notes and ensure I paid attention to certain events and situational features, whilst also attempting to observe emergent, unplanned for phenomenon (p. 173). This method of systematising my observations achieved two things. Chiefly, it allowed me to note down some specific verbatim words and statements which were uploaded to Nvivo12

for analysis purposes (see section 4.9). This provided examples to support the presentation of my data in chapters 5-7. Additionally, in focusing my observational work on specific, check-listed areas relevant to my study, I was better placed to ensure that the observational work was directed towards answering my RQs and supplementing the narrative interviews. This approach was inspired by my desire for the 'preservation of concreteness' by producing detailed notes and controlling the influence of my own interpretations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 145). The observations, some of which took place in digital settings (see section 4.6.1), were 'candid', overt-type observations, characterised by O'Leary (2004) as offering participants full disclosure of the nature of the study and the role the observations will play in the research (p. 173). This was clarified to each participant in the Participant Information Sheets provided (see Appendix 3).

Due to the anticipated variations and unknowns in relation to the ways in which my participants lived, the places they frequented, worshipped, learned and expressed their identities in the physical and digital world, I considered it restrictive to provide an exact limit on the length of observations. Therefore, observational fieldwork took place over periods ranging between twelve days and three days, dependent upon the consent and comfortability of participants. It is to be noted that the observational fieldwork, which constituted a portion of the data corpus (see section 5.1 in the following chapter), continued throughout the period of data collection. Because I already interacted closely with the convert community and was immersed in what might be described as the 'lifeworld'[16] of the participants of this study, the length of time I spent collecting observational data in the field was guided by Fetterman's (2020) suggestion that observational fieldwork is completed 'when the general picture reaffirms itself over and over again' (p. 12). This view, coupled with Hammersley's (2006) assertion that fieldwork carried out by today's ethnographers is likely not to last as long as ethnographies of the past, led me to the decision to limit the observational portion of data collection to the period stated above. This stage of data collection was closely connected to and informed

[16] The currency of previous 20th-century philosophical and sociological conceptualisations of the term 'lifeworld' (as the experiences, communications and activities that constitute the social world of an individual) are here reimagined to be expressive of the everyday communications and social interactions that take place within the convert Muslim community in mosques, institutions, organisations and digital communities within a globalised world. The term gestures towards the 'virtualized world of near-ubiquitous digitalized information systems' wherein much of our interactions take place (Harrington, 2006: 341).

the round of semi-structured, in-depth interviews; something I have considered as contributory to the ethnographic fieldwork and is especially suited to retrieving detail in ethnographic work (Basit, 2010: 110). Some amount of observational work had taken place with each participant prior to the fourth and final stage of data collection, outlined in section 4.7 below.

4.6.1 Definitions and Applications of Digital Ethnography

Acknowledging the fact that digital ethnography may be practised in as diverse a range of ways as it may be defined, it falls beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the multiple definitions of digital ethnography forwarded by scholars in the field and all of the potential ethical concerns related to those definitions. However, for the purposes of providing clarity on my understanding and application of digital ethnography in this research, in this section I will briefly detail some important definitions of digital ethnography and social media along with the relevant ethical precautions I have taken.

Proceeding from the work of Pink et al. (2016), whose collaborative title *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practices* discusses and combines several definitions for digital ethnography, I will posit that digital ethnography is 'an approach to doing ethnography in a contemporary world. It… explores the consequences of the presence of digital media in shaping the techniques and processes through which we practice ethnography' (p. 1). Pink et al. go on to explain:

> *In digital ethnography, we are often in mediated contact with participants rather than in direct presence… we might be in conversation with people throughout their everyday lives. We might be watching what people do by digitally tracking them, or asking them to invite us into their social media practices. Listening may involve reading, or it might involve sensing and communicating in other ways. Ethnographic writing might be replaced by video, photography or blogging.* (p. 3)

Key to the above definition, is the term 'social media', which can broadly be defined as those online platforms, accessed via digital devices (e.g. smartphones, computers, etc), which facilitate social interaction between participants (synchronously or asynchronously) through the exchange of discourse material (Leppänen et al, 2016). Based upon this definition, social

media may be taken to include the bricolage of online platforms and companies that include Youtube, Twitter, tiktok, Facebook, Whatsapp and other content creation and visual media sites such as Instagram and Pinterest. It may also, in this broad definition, include social news aggregation sites, discussion forums, podcasting platforms, email and video conferencing applications (e.g. WhatsApp video, Skype, Zoom and Teams).

With this definition in mind, my research involved observation of participants' social media use and digital interactions, both past and present to assess the purposes of their usage, the types of discussions being engaged in and the role of digital media in contributing to their conversion processes and/or formation of their identities. This approach entailed making detailed notes and taking limited screenshots of screen/device-based activity. When relevant, it also involved the documentation and recording of online social media profile information, status updates, comments and postings of my participants and, in some cases, their audiences/followers. All of this was conducted with attention to my personal moral sensibilities as a Muslim community member (described in further detail in section 4.10.5.1) and the ethical guidelines underpinning this study.

Given the nascent ethical issues surrounding digital ethnography, my ethical considerations related to digital data collection were also informed by the British Association for the Study of Religions' ethical guidelines (BASR) (2019), who state,

> *While the principle of informed consent is an ideal, it may be unnecessary to obtain consent to attend a public gathering, or in situations where the researcher is explicitly invited to an event. Consent does not necessarily need to be written. Indeed, obtaining written consent can involve difficulties – for example, when researching communities who do not speak English, or where it is unclear who is authorised to give consent. In many situations, undue formalisation of the relationship between researcher and participants might hamper the conduct of the research, and it can be appropriate to assume implicit consent. Researchers should reflect on the ethical demands which pertain to their context.* (p. 3)

Nonetheless, my overarching personal and academic concern was to avoid harming – and indeed, seeking to benefit – the convert community. Therefore, as mentioned above, all observations were conducted with informed consent from the participants (as per the UW ethics policy, 2.5.1). Digital media postings that I have shared were either in the public

domain or provided and used with express consent of the participant. To further guard the anonymity of individuals, all of whom chose pseudonyms, and to mitigate against participants being identifiable, all data extracted from social media sources were checked by participants before inclusion in the final thesis, allowing participants to view, clarify, redact or withdraw data if they chose to. Where it was possible, I have not used direct quotes from social media posts in the final thesis. Instead, I have provided synthesis, paraphrasing or approximation of the post. Other ethical issues are discussed in section 4.10.6, entitled '*Other Ethical Issues*'.

4.7 Stage Four: Semi-Structured Interviews

Following the initial periods of observation, I began a second round of interviews. These semi-structured interviews took place between October 2022 and January 2023. They were focused on and structured around the three central currents of interest in this research and the strands of literature reviewed in chapter two; conversion to Islam, identity configuration and educational experience) (see Appendix 7). These interviews were also guided by my developing observational fieldwork. Basit (2010) notes that 'the beauty of a semi-structured interview is that unlike a questionnaire or a structured interview, there is no need for equivalence for asking the same questions of all participants' (p. 104). This function of the semi-structured interview allowed me to adapt each individual interview to explore the most analytically significant aspects which emerged from participants' pre-interview task, narrative interview and the emerging observational data I had collected.

4.8 Recruitment & Negotiating Entry

While again I must reiterate the fact that I was already an active member of the Muslim community and well acquainted with a number of convert focused organisations and social media networks, and while I had a number of convert friends and family, it is important to note the fact that the Muslim convert 'community' in the UK are dispersed throughout the country (Brice, 2011) and cannot be viewed as living together in the sense of a traditional geographic community (see footnote 17). To give an illustrative example of the ways in which the convert community sometimes operate, the story of my own marriage to a fellow

convert, with whom I have been married for the past seventeen years, is relevant. While both of us were living, socialising and worshipping in different geographical locations, our digital interactions within the bourgeoning online network of converts meant that we were introduced by a fellow, elder convert and eventually married. Given the development of social media and the expansion of other virtualised methods of interaction since that time, the convert network and community has expanded significantly, resulting in well-established networks of converts in Britain that contains scholars, academics, media personalities, journalists and even celebrity-like figures. In this sense my deployment of the term 'convert community' can be understood to refer to those converts sharing in a cluster of commonality, connectedness, and groupness which makes up a collective identity (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Therefore, recruitment of participants within this community did not require the sort of negotiation of entry into a physical, geographical research context that is required in some ethnographic work. Rather, invitations to participate (see Appendix 4) were sent out to networks and communities of convert Muslims. This method recalls my earlier definition of digital ethnography as 'often mediated contact with participants rather than in direct presence' (Pink et al., 2016: 3). It is also worthy of note, however, that this more loosely defined form of community still required the same type of attention to the integrity and ethical expectations of participants that would be required in more geographically cohesive communities. This was especially important given the common and well-documented expectation of Muslim research participants that researchers conduct their projects in ways that respect Islamic ethical frameworks, particularly in the case of Muslim researchers (Ahmed, 2018).

My recruitment strategy generated more than the fifteen participants I required for the study and afforded me the opportunity to select a sample which was reflective of the demographic diversity within the convert community and broadly aligned to the demographic backgrounds of converts in previous studies into British Muslim converts (Brice, 2010; Sealy, 2019; Zebiri, 2008). To facilitate this the consent form included an open box to detail gender and ethnicity (see Appendix 2). While the selection of a demographically representative sample was not an integral element of the study, this gave me the added methodological benefit of aligning my sample with the limited available information on the demographic makeup of the convert community (based upon

extrapolated information on the convert population in the UK (Brice, 2011: 7-12) and those studies with a similar focus (Sealy, 2019; Zabiri, 2008), thus allowing me to draw inferences and comparisons between our studies.

The sample included eight female participants and seven male participants, loosely reflecting the extrapolated gender distribution of convert Muslims in Britain (Brice, 2011; Sealy, 2019; Zebiri, 2008). All of these participants were, as I have mentioned, from the millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996). I was unable to replicate the reported distribution in relation to ethnicity, however. Given the fact that a participant sample of fifteen cannot hope to be representative of the larger convert community, about which there is a dearth of accurate, up-to-date demographic information, it is hoped that the diversity of ethnicities represented within the sample will offer insight into the experiences of a range of British converts. Participants self-identified as Asian (1), Black (3), White (7) and mixed race (4)[17]. Participants' ages ranged from 26 to 42. Eight of the fifteen participants had previous religious affiliations, including Christian (Catholic, Protestant and Jehovah's Witness) (6), Jewish (1) and Hindu (1). The remaining seven identified as either atheist, agnostic or none. In the interest of avoiding an imposition of researcher power, participants chose their own anonymising pseudonyms.

It is to be noted that while I am conscious of the larger sample sizes suggested for ethnographic research (Creswell, 2013; Moser & Korstjens, 2018), I took account of both the narrative lineament of my study, which required detailed, intimate insight into individuals, as well as the fact that ethnographers in the field of educational research have tended towards smaller sample sizes (Guetterman, 2015). This, along with an assessment of existing, comparable studies in the field (Gent, 2006; Kimaliro, 2015; Pędziwiatr, 2017; Ramahi and Suleiman, 2017; Sealy, 2019) (see also section 2.3.5) supported my rationale for selecting fifteen participants as able to provide sufficiently rich and intimate detail about the conversions, identities and educational experiences of millennial convert Muslims.

[17] The capitalisation of 'White, Black and Asian' here is in accordance with Appiah's (2020) recommendation to capitalise the words in order to draw attention to the socio-historical origins of these terms as a social, rather than a natural or biological, identity classification. She notes that 'The point of the capital letter, then…[is] to situate' (Appiah, 2020).

4.9 Analysis

I conducted an interpretive, reflexive thematic analysis of the narrative and ethnographic data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021b). Within chapters 5-7 I develop arguments constructed around closely related themes which I have identified as recurring and/or of analytical significance within the participants' narratives, ethnographic data and my own autoethnographic reflections. Throughout this analysis, 'themes' will refer to consistencies and patterns within and between data which appeared relevant to the RQs that guided this study. Themes are not to be understood as quantifiable measurements of a code or topic's prevalence across the data, but as capturing what I have interpreted to be the meaningful occurrence of something apposite to my RQs (Braun and Clark, 1996: 9; 2006: 82). In other words, within my analysis, a direct equivalency of the frequency of a code or topic cannot be made to its importance.

As a matter of definitional clarity, when referring to the entire body of data, including narrative, ethnographic and autoethnographic data combined, I will deploy the term 'data corpus'. 'Data item' will refer to individual articles of data, such as a participant's entire interview or the notes from a single ethnographic event, which, when combined, constitute a 'data set'. Finally, 'data extract' will be used to refer to smaller sections of text from a data item. For example, a section of a narrative interview that I have coded using Nvivo 12, or a reflective journal entry (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These distinctions will allow me, at necessary times, to reference the data that arises from a single participant or, when required, from multiple participants. In what follows, I have described the process of my thematic analysis, with reference to the various scholars who have inspired my analysis style.

In taking account of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) suggestion that analysing narrative inquiry data requires a process of transitioning from field texts, which 'have a recording quality to them', to research texts, which 'are at a distance from field texts and grow out of the repeated asking of questions concerning meaning and significance' (p. 132), my thematic analysis can be characterised as having started with the early stages of collecting data, persisting until the completion of data collection; an approach advocated by Creswell (2013). This is because, after the initial narrative interviews, I spent periods of time listening to

recordings, developing questions and notes for later interviews and observations and drawing connections between my autoethnographic data and the pre-interview data. This can be understood as part of what Braun and Clarke (2021b) describe as the 'familiarisation' phase of analysis (p. 331).

As this study drew upon both narrative and ethnographic data sets, it produced a large corpus of data. To ensure that these data were wieldy and that the most analytically significant parts of it were described and discussed, I began by engaging in what Mills and Morton's (2013) call immersion; spending a significant period of time reading, re-reading, transcribing, annotating and thoroughly exploring the data gathered throughout the research process. During this initial stage of analysis, the aim was 'carving out pieces of narrative evidence… to border [my]… arguments' (Fine, 1994: 22). From this focused immersion into my data, I formulated initial codes and early themes. It was during this stage that I started to identify the observational data that might be used to support and evidence my initial codes. Following this, the interview transcripts were uploaded to Nvivo 12 to manage the ongoing coding process. This data was password protected.

I chose to upload only limited ethnographic data to Nvivo. In particular, I uploaded screenshots of messages and emails, photos of objects, environments and typed verbatim statements which had been recorded on participants' observation schedules. These uploads added context and discussion points to the narrative and semi-structured interview text I was coding using Nvivo. Given the fact that many observations took place in environments wherein I deemed it inappropriate – for ethical, personal or religious reasons – to take photographs (e.g. after prayer gatherings, during Islamic lectures and events and on public *dawah* stalls, with female Muslim participants and those who did not consent to pictures), my notes from physical observations were broadly descriptive. Furthermore, while most of the social media profiles I accessed were publicly available, allowing anyone to view posts that the participants had made, there were instances in which participants provided me access to their social media accounts, in their presence, to show me relevant comments, responses and interactions online. Only publicly accessible social media posts were uploaded to Nvivo, and only those about which I gained explicit consent from participants have been pictured in my findings chapters.

As common and related elements of each transcript and observational data were constructed into codes, each of these codes were taxonomised and further collated into related themes and subthemes (see Appendix 9). Codes and categories were revisited throughout the analysis process, with their relevance, relationship to other codes and the consistency of initial themes and codes under continuous review. Inconsistencies were remedied by renaming of themes and codes, the inclusion and/or coding of additional data extracts and/or the exclusion and/or recategorisation of existing extracts/codes (which Nvivo called nodes). Finally, themes and sub-themes were named to reflect their relation to my research questions, forming the titles of sections in chapters 5-7. In reporting the findings from my analysis I have offered a descriptive account of the themes that I have interpreted as relating to the literature and my research questions. Interpretation of the data was underpinned by reflexive discussion of my positionality.

The type of thematic analysis I have described above may be criticised as making themes abstract in a way that is not reflective of how they manifest in real life; 'organising material according to the researchers', rather than 'the participant's mind or lifeworld' (Joffe and Yardley, 2004: 66). To address this criticism, I must reiterate two things. Firstly, as noted by Stanley (1992), the type of biographical data I have collected through my narratives are not to be taken, by necessity, as historical fact, but instead as expressions of truth, interpreted by me. The very endeavour of data collection in the method I have described is a 'joint production of narrator and listener...' (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005: 657). Secondly, as highlighted in chapter 3 (section 3.3.2), my ethnographic approach is guided by what Tedlock (1991) describes as 'narrative ethnography'.

> *The world, in a narrative ethnography, is re-presented as perceived by a situated narrator, who is also present as a character in the story that reveals his* [sic] *own personality'* (p. 77-78).

From the above, it is possible to see my concession that the data will indeed be organised and interpreted according to my own value-laden perspective. Even while I have attempted to convey, as much as possible, my participants' lifeworld through my analysis of the data, I

have assigned currency to the subjectivity that my interpretations bring to that data. As Schram (2006) suggests, it is this type of awareness of 'self and other and of the interplay between the two' (p. 9) that centres the notion of reflexivity within this study; an element of the research which is expanded upon in the section 4.10.3 to follow.

4.10 Ethical Considerations

4.10.1 Introduction

The centrality of subjectivity within the form of narrative ethnography I have deployed in this study means that I gave as much attention to myself (as a narrator of the data I collected) as I did to the data collected. This required me to, as a first step towards collecting data, explicitly acknowledge my own prejudices and reflect on the ways my experiences and positionality affected the knowledge my study sought to produce. What came to the fore in this process of reflection was Lather's (1991a; 1991b) conception of reflexivity as an attempt to deconstruct one's own research and the motivations underpinning it. This is reflected, to a degree, within the personal narrative presented in the introduction to this thesis, particularly as it relates to the development of my personal experiences into a research project (see section 1.2). However, in the following two sections I will detail the central role reflexivity and positionality played in this study.

4.10.2 Revert and Researcher: Insider and Outsider

Gaining access to the Muslim community has been cited as problematic (Gilliat-Ray, 2005). This has been noted about the convert Muslim community also (Brice, 2011; Poston, 1992; Sealy, 2018: 71; Zebiri, 2008). The fact that many of these noted problems relate to a mistrust of non-Muslim researchers gestures towards the unique access my own positionality has afforded me during this study. However, the methodological consideration most directly addressed in discussing my positionality in this project is the influence my own sympathies and positionality has had on the research agenda, design and findings; the types of questions asked, to whom, and how answers were interpreted. These considerations, especially as my research is undertaken from the faith-based epistemological standpoint I have elucidated, are highlighted here to reaffirm my objection to what Neitz, (2013)

describes as the 'neopositivist assumption that the researcher's objectivity is essential to producing valid, value-neutral research, and that objectivity is produced through methodologies that reduce or even eliminate bias.' (p. 129-130). As has been made clear in Chapter 4, my theoretical position finds alignment with the critical tradition in its concession that all research is prejudiced by human interests and that validity in research is achieved, not in pursuit of an objective standing, but through careful interrogation of one's prejudices. Rose (1985) summarises this point thus,

> *There is no neutrality. There is only greater or less awareness of one's biases. And if you do not appreciate the force of what you're leaving out, you are not fully in command of what you're doing* (p. 77).

It is this viewpoint that exhorted me to recognise and discuss openly my own prejudices and the ways in which they have affected knowledge production in the way I have throughout this thesis. While this process began with the theoretical discussions in the preceding chapter, what follows is a detailed reflection upon my positionality as a researcher and member of the researched community of convert Muslims who are the subjects of my study. I will contend that my status as a British born and educated Sunni convert Muslim places me as an 'insider' within the participant population. In this regard, Hamnett et al (1984) suggest,

> *Insider's research can provide insights, inner meanings, and subjective dimensions that are likely to be overlooked by outsiders. The outsider can bring comparably detached perceptions to the problem he [sic] investigates* (as cited in Sabagh and Ghazalla, 1986: 374).

Having accepted the above notion of the 'insider' and 'outsider' researcher, I am not offering a reductive suggesting that my status as an 'insider' is necessarily empathetic in a way that an 'outsider' cannot achieve. In this I am conscious of Shami's (1988) note, 'All too often, the insider/outsider question is posed too simplistically as a dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity' (p. 115). Nor am I suggesting that the data I, as an insider, retrieved was better than that retrieved by other 'outsider' researchers. Indeed, as Fay (1996) explains, 'Knowing an experience requires more than simply having it; knowing implies being able to identify, describe, and explain.' (p. 20). Rather, I am suggesting that my insider status has yielded *different* data to that of an outsider (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Twine, 2000). I am arguing that

my empathetic understanding of Muslim converts, from a religious point of view, is in fact a research tool; a view receiving increasing support within the social sciences (Leake, 2019).

Conversely, my role as a researcher complicated my insider status and may be conceived as placing me on the outside of the community I am researching. Subedi (2006) posits, 'This sense of comfort or the belonging one feels can be problematic considering how one may be viewed as an outsider and/or an insider when one is conducting 'home' research' (p. 578). This unsettling of the insider/outsider binary raised the notion of occupying dual subjectivities which influenced my outlook about the way in which I was perceived by my participants. Indeed, this duality has been communicated within the research community in terminology such as 'insider-outsider' researcher (Hamdan, 2009: 377), 'the space between' (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009: 54) and 'halfie' (Subedi, 2006: 573). However, the epistemological stance I have taken in this study, coupled with the motivations that have driven it, the journey I have undertaken towards becoming a researcher and the sixteen years I have spent as a convert Muslim, immersed in the lifeworld of converts, places me closer to what Adler and Adler (1987) refer to as a 'complete member' insider within the community that is the focus of this study. Yet, even as I self-identify as an insider, I concede that, at least in my capacity as a researcher and while I collected data for this research, I grappled with the 'loyalty tugs' of being both a revert and a researcher (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007: 70). Furthermore, the complex intersectional differences and similarities I shared with my participants (e.g. race, gender, socio-economic background) placed me at different positions of 'insiderness' from one participant to the next. Thus, I must agree with Dwyer & Buckle (2009) who argue,

> *because our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher (which includes having read much literature on the research topic), we cannot fully occupy one or the other of those positions.'* (p. 61).

I continue to consider myself an insider researcher as opposed to an outsider. However, in conceding the impracticality of being wholly and completely 'inside' during the research endeavour, I have lent away from the human tendency to frame complexities in a simplistic and antagonistic binary (Gould, 2003), towards Dwyer and Buckle's (2009) conclusion that, 'perhaps it is necessary not to bring this issue [of insiderness and outsiderness] to a close

but to find a way to work creatively within the tensions created by the debate.' (p. 62). An important deliberation that emerges from what I have discussed here is the centrality, within this study, of the closely associated concept of reflexivity.

4.10.3 Reflexivity

During the course of exploring the complex multiplicity involved in occupying the subjectivities of a researcher, Muslim convert and cultural insider within the group under investigation, the notion of reflexivity emerged as a central element of the study. The autoethnographic component of this project is an expression of the fact that I, as a person situated within a context and possessing of a history, considered myself part of the research project. This required me not only to discuss my own beliefs and values in a broad sense (as has been done in section 3.2), but to also interrogate my own interpretations of the literature surrounding my work, the data that came from my participants and the knowledge my research has produced. This process of acknowledgment and self-interrogation is a process of reflexivity (Nixon et al., 2003: 102). Of course, varying notions of reflexivity have been articulated within educational research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Lynch, 2000; Nixon et al., 2003), but each has to do with reflexivity being an exercise in the researcher deconstructing their own prejudices in order to acknowledge and analyse the effects of those upon the research. In so doing, reflexivity leads to improved 'quality and validity of the research and recognizing the limitations of the knowledge that is produced which leads to more rigorous research' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 275).

In the first instance, my own practice of reflexivity was demonstrated in the methodology underpinning this project. The combination of ethnography and narrative I have chosen was a deliberate attempt at collecting and representing my data in a way that required awareness of self. Gubrium and Holstein (2008b) suggest that 'narrative ethnography' is an 'attempt to convey the reflexive, representational engagements of field encounters.' (p. 251). Additionally, the explicit mention and elucidation of my epistemological stance and the influence this has had on my focuses and interpretations represents an awareness of my own 'peripheral vision' (Nixon, Walker & Clough, 2003: 102). Further to this, in detailing the fact that my autoethnographic data influenced the questions I asked during the interview stages of the project, I have engaged in the reflexive process of documenting 'how and why

particular decisions are made at particular stages of conducting the research' (Mathner & Doucet, 1997, p. 138).

Cyclically, at the stages of data collection, analysis and reporting, I have revisited my reflexive journal in order to tease out the biases hidden within my subconscious. I have detailed elements of this thinking in Chapters 5-7, for the purposes of exposing them to the reader (for example, section 6.6). This has ensured that my reflexive process is a tool with which to 'better present, legitimize, or call into question the research data' (Pillow, 2003: 176). The emphasis upon legitimising my research through revealing the potential biases that influence my interpretations points towards the connection between reflexivity and ethical concepts such as validity, reliability and trustworthiness within this research. In the next section I will discuss these issues

4.10.4 Validity & Reliability vs Trustworthiness

Validity in qualitative research interrogates the depth and scope of the data collected and the degree to which it is rich, honest and representative of the participants involved, the data set and the field of research (Cohen et al., 2017).

Reliability, on the other hand, asks questions of the believability of the results: Would the study, 'if it were to be carried out on a similar group of respondents in a similar context (however defined) [would]… similar results would be found'? (Cohen, et al., 2017; 268). Some scholars have mapped the concept of reliability onto qualitative research, presenting the notion as:

> *a fit between what researchers record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched, i.e. a degree of accuracy and comprehensiveness of coverage.* (Cohen et al., 2017: 270)

However, Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that the concepts of reliability and validity are fundamentally positivist, unsuitable for qualitative studies; a position supported by other scholars in the field (Altheide & Johnson, 1998; Leininger, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This has led me to apply alternative criteria for ensuring the rigor of this qualitative inquiry.

It was beyond the scope of this project to explore the range of alternatives given for positivistic notions of rigor. However, given my commitment to challenging some of the positivist assumptions that have disenfranchised faith-based epistemological outlooks in qualitative research, I viewed it as appropriate to adopt Lincoln and Guba's (1984; 1985) notion of trustworthiness (consisting of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Morse et al., 2002: 14)) as a substitute for reliability and validity in seeking to ensure my study is methodologically rigorous. Below, I detail the reasons for this choice and the strategies I used to establish trustworthiness.

4.10.5 Achieving Trustworthiness

4.10.5.1 Credibility

Credibility involves carrying out research in which 'the probability that the findings will be found to be credible is enhanced, and second, to demonstrate the credibility of the findings by having them approved by the constructors.' (Lincoln and Guba, 1984: 296). To satisfy this measure of rigor within my study, I point towards the extended length of time in which I have already been embedded within the convert community. While most of this time has not been in the capacity of a researcher, the prolonged engagement with the convert community and the extent to which I am versed in the cultural, social and religious particularities of this group goes some way towards satisfying Lincoln and Guba's reading of credibility. Furthermore, in accordance with this understanding of credibility, I have undertaken member checking (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1984) throughout the data collection and analysis process. Some instances of this are elucidated in the findings chapters to follow. For this process I shared interview transcriptions and observational recordings with participants, asking them to assess the intentionality, accuracy and adequacy of the data collected. I invited them to add, summarise and, where this was ethically sound, change the information on record (It is for this reason that redactions have been made to, for example, the transcript provided in Appendix 11). This degree of collaborative input from my participants was also in keeping with my intention to reassure my participants about my integrity by maintaining what Ahmed (2018) refers to as 'the other ethical approval'; meeting the Islamic scriptural injunction of fulfilling one's trust

(confidentiality in conversation) (p. 210), being honest (in providing information about the nature and uses of the study) (p. 212), not spying (by gaining informed consent) (p. 213), offering safety from harm (p. 216) and establishing a fair and true representation of my participants (p. 218). These considerations are discussed in less detail in section 4.6.1. Further to this, during the data collection, analysis and reporting stages of the research, I shared emerging interpretations with my supervisory team and some fellow doctoral research peers. These peer debriefing sessions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spall, 1998), in some cases with more experienced researchers than myself, offered me insight into alternative interpretations and allowed me to check and compare my interpretations against theirs, as a way of interrogating the trustworthiness of my interpretations.

4.10.5.2 Transferability

While my study offers insight into convert Muslims, the small sample size I have used and the importance of the individual subjectivities of my participants means that the transferability of my findings must be approached with great caution. Nonetheless, in using 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of my participants historical and contextual circumstances, I hope that my findings will provide others seeking to transfer the results of my study sufficient detail and transparency 'to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility' (Lincoln and Guba, 1984: 316). Transferability is discussed further in the concluding chapter.

4.10.5.3 Dependability

Closely connected to credibility, dependability refers to the 'stability of findings over time… supported by the data as received from participants of the study.' (Korstjens and Moser, 2018: 121). In my study this has been enacted through a check on data known as triangulation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In acknowledging the fact that my own subjectivity has guided the aims, objectives and the interpretations that emerged in the analysis and reporting of my ethnographic and narrative data, I have sought to obtain other perspectives as a way of triangulating the data that emerges. For this, I have compared and contrasted the theories presented within the literature, the varying perspectives offered within my participants' narratives, the reflexive autoethnographic data I have produced and the observational data produced by my ethnographic efforts. This process of triangulation

concluded with respondent validation; a process wherein I reviewed my near-completed research findings chapters with participants to check that they consider my work a faithful representation of their responses. I have heeded Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007) caution, however, not to over-privilege my participants' interpretation of 'his or her own actions' (p. 182) and statements, aware that they are not the sole arbiters of how their actions and statements should be interpreted.

4.10.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the 'degree to which the findings of the research study could be confirmed by other researchers.' (Korstjens & Moser, 2018: 121). This has been achieved within this thesis through the descriptions I have offered of the various steps and procedures I have enacted from the start of the project. These detailed descriptions have included candid discussions of my decision-making and the motivations that have evolved during the project and reflective processes (see for example, 5.5 and my evolving understanding of internal compulsion, 5.6 for my developing understanding of conversion as a process or a moment, 6.6 for my changing understanding of the role of race in convert experiences and 7.2 for my revised understanding of the significance of 9/11 and the process of disclosing conversion).

While confirmability is concerned with neutrality (a qualitative-friendly alternative to objectivity) (Cohen et al, 2017), as I have dealt with previously (sections 3.2.3 and 3.2.4), my theoretical perspective is accepting of the notion that no research is neutral, objective or value-free. However, in seeking to secure the intersubjectivity of my data and ensure that my interpretations authentically arise from the dataset as opposed to arising purely from my own biases, I have closely examined the discrepant instances of data that may be seen to contradict, challenge or enhance the findings and conclusions I have reached (Cohen, 2017). An example of this can be found in Chapter 7 (section 7.2). A more sustained reflection on the inductive and deductive elements of the analysis is presented in section 5.3.

4.10.6 Other Ethical Issues

I have addressed the fact that research undertaken within the Muslim community presents some potential problems related to access and ethics (Gilliat-Ray, 2005; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2017, p. 5). Despite the fact that the entirety of my research endeavour has been candid and overt (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), the fact that my project involved observation of the convert Muslim community in both physical and digital environments obliged me to become versed in some of the methodological limitations and ethical consideration that surround ethnography and narrative inquiry in their various forms. A chief concern in this research, then, was dealing with issues of mistrust and suspicion of researchers that have arisen in the wake of the contemporary portrayals of Islam and Muslims in academic literature and wider society (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). Added to this, due to some of the cultural, religious and familial circumstances my participants were required to consider, ensuring confidentiality became a key concern. In this regard, taking guidance from the University of Worcester's (2018a) Ethics Policy (section 2.5), I secured the confidentiality of my participants by ensuring that all who took part in the study had names, defining features and identifiable characteristics anonymised through the use of pseudonyms. In keeping with the critical intentions of the study, pseudonyms were chosen by participants as a way of avoiding an imposition of researcher power.

Further to this, to ensure that none of my participants are identifiable from their social media posts and activities, social media posts have been paraphrased or redacted. This decision was taken to minimise any potential of harm to my participants. By providing a deeper understanding of convert Muslim needs and experiences, my research was designed with the intention to benefit the convert Muslim community, of which I consider myself a member. To achieve this, and in line with the University of Worcester's (2018a) Ethics Policy, verbal and written consent was sought in the form of UW consent forms, requiring participants' electronic or hand-written signature following a discussion about any concerns regarding the study (see Appendix 2). This was preceded by the provision of a Participant Information Sheet detailing the purposes of the study, the rights of participants to withdraw and other ethical considerations outlined in the UW ethics policy (2018a) and BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018). Further to this, all recordings and transcriptions

collected as part of this study were stored in password protected digital devices, accessible to myself alone. The integrity of 'hard' data such as consent forms and other artifacts collected as part of my study were protected in accordance with the UW Policy for the Effective Management of Research Data (UW, 2018b), BERA's (2018) Ethical Guidelines and the General Data Protection Regulation (2018).

In keeping with the epistemological and reflexive paradigms underpinning this study, I intended for the interview process to provide the intellectual space wherein participants felt free to express themselves authentically and without fear of censure. In order to minimise the harm (AcSS, 2015) that may be associated with speaking candidly, I was required to protect some participant data from entering the public domain. In order to respect the religious doctrinal and cultural values of my participants, I invited some participants to conduct the interview with a *mahram* (Islamic guardian) present during interviews and observations. However, this was only required during two in-person observations with the participants Umm Musa and Shaheeda.

4.11 Summary

This chapter has detailed my rational for the design of my research project. It has described the tools I have employed to extend understanding of millennial Muslim converts in Britain. As well as describing my use of ethnographic, autoethnographic and narrative methods, the chapter has outlined the process of participant recruitment, the sites of the research and the ways in which I analysed the data that emerged. Furthermore, the chapter defined the ethical parameters of my study, detailing my considerations around notions of positionality and reflexivity, followed by a description of my endeavours to ensure methodological rigor in this project. In the next chapter I present the findings of my research.

Chapter 5: 'Everything I do is Worship': Convert Muslim Lived Religion and Habitus

5.1 Introduction

To understand the lifeworld of my participants within and beyond education, I deployed a narrative ethnography. I spent periods of time with British convert Muslims in ethnographic observations that occurred over a period of 3-12 days, in places such as mosques, Islamic propagation events,[18] private homes, coffee shops and public libraries, as well as in digital contexts such as social media platforms, emails and phone and video calls (see Appendix 1). These sites, both physical and digital, represent my loci of interest (Creswell, 2013). Through these ethnographic observations I was able to contextualise the narrative and semi-structured interviews which, together with the ethnographic data, form the data corpus that I analysed in this chapter. By immersing myself (always overtly, with the full consent of all involved) as a researcher within these sites, in ways that differed from my usual interaction within the Muslim community, I endeavoured to adopt a social cognition that viewed converts from a perspective which Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as 'legitimate peripheral participation' (p. 29). Contrastingly, by immersing myself as a convert Muslim within these sites and reporting on that immersion from the perspective of an insider, through copious, detailed notes, I sought to provide something of a 'vicarious experience' (Stake, 1978: 5) to the non-convert, non-Muslim audience through my analysis; a point I have earlier alluded to (section 3.3.8 and 4.6).

This chapter, along with the two chapters to follow, presents a detailed discussion of a series of findings drawn from an interpretive, reflexive thematic analysis of the narrative and ethnographic data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). Within these chapters I develop arguments constructed around closely related themes which I have identified as recurring and/or of analytical significance within the participants' narratives, ethnographic data and my own autoethnographic reflections. As I have outlined previously (section 4.9), throughout this analysis, 'themes' will refer to consistencies and patterns within and

[18] Including Islamic propagation stalls in town centres and open invitation Islamic events in community halls and Islamic centres aimed at distributing information about Islam.

between data which appear relevant to the research questions that guide this study. Themes should not be understood as quantifiable measurements of a code or topic's prevalence across the data. However, the prevalence of a particular code or topic across the data will be noted as an indication of its significance and, on occasions, be discussed within my analysis (see section 6.6, for example). I reiterate, in my analysis, a direct equivalency of the prevalence of a code or topic cannot be made to its importance. For definitional clarity, drawing on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006), I have previously outlined how I will deploy terminology such as 'data corpus', 'data item', 'data set' and 'data extract' within this thesis (see section 4.9).

In what follows, selected data extracts will be presented. Where these are extracts of my participants' speech, I will, where possible, offer a verbatim account, including pauses and reflexive utterances only when this is relevant. As this analysis is thematic, as opposed to discoursal, for purposes of brevity and analytical focus, quotations have been refined of repetitions, filler words, interjections and hesitancy markers, if these have been deemed of no analytical significance. It is to be reiterated, however, that all interview transcripts have been member checked to ensure the accuracy of my understanding. I reiterate also that for purposes of protecting participant anonymity, social media posts have been paraphrased or redacted, when this has been deemed conducive to ensuring that none of my participants are identifiable from their social media posts and activities.

5.2 Religion as Lived

The analytical focus of this chapter will be upon Muslim converts' religiosity, spirituality and Islamic practice, which I have reified into a finding entitled *Convert Muslim Lived Religion and Habitus*. In some senses this finding can be characterised as exploring the spiritual and religious, rather than the sociological or psychological, elements of the data. However, such a characterisation would be an oversimplification for a number of reasons worthy of note. First, to suggest a clear separability between the 'religious' aspects of the data and the sociological or psychological aspects would be to skew the observable relationality between these phenomena and their manifestations within the data corpus. Secondly, such an understanding would risk perpetuating a dichotomy between these aspects, which this chapter will endeavour to interrogate rather than uphold. Thirdly, in describing the lived

Islamic practices of my participants in language which suggests a clear distinction between the spiritual and social would be to do an injustice to the perspectives expressed by many of the participants themselves. In this regard, Jameela states:

> For me, everything I do is worship. That's the difference… That's what *deen* [religious way of life] is… I mean, holding hands with your spouse and everything. Educating my kids; being close with my mum… It's all *ibada* [worship].
>
> Jameela: Semi-Structured Interview

Thus, to avoid this potential early departure from my methodological commitment to emphasise the perspectives of my participants who, as I will go on to demonstrate, seem to find no clear distinction between their religious life and social life, I will deploy the increasingly popular term 'lived religion' (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020). I have used the term primarily as a way of capturing elements of the Arabic terminology '*deen'* which all 15 of my participants used at least once, to refer to what is traditionally understood as religion in English speaking contexts. The lived religion approach does not envisage 'a fundamental rethinking of what religion is' however (Orsi, 1997: 7), but provides a way of theorizing about religion which distinguishes participants' real experiences of religion from 'institutional understandings' or other limited understandings of religion (Knibble and Kuari, 2020); a way which discusses religion as it is construed by my participants both within hermetic Islamic environments and circumstances such as madrasahs, mosques and prayer times, as well as in private, 'secular' and neutral spaces and circumstances, such as educational institutions. Therefore, a reading of religion as 'lived' makes articulable that thing which renders everyday activities, words, behaviours and interactions 'worship' in the mind of Jameela, and indeed others amongst my participants. Pragmatically, I am also using the term as a tool with which to signal that I am not a theologian who is retheorizing religion, I am a social scientist seeking to describe and analyse the everyday religious practices of a particular group of religious practitioners as I have interpreted it. With that in mind, this analysis can be understood as an extension of the methodological approach described in Chapter 3; it will privilege the perspectives and statements of participants who are not, in conventional terms, theological experts – in Islamic terms, not *ulama* (scholars).

They are 'doers' of religion. Since 'doing' religion involves the processing of religion through a subject, it is, necessarily, a report on their personal practice of religion. Therefore, any large-scale generalisations about the religion are impossible.

What I have, for discursive purposes, referred to as 'lived religion' appeared in the narratives of my participants in sometimes ineffable ways. Indeed, many of the narratives analysed demonstrated a view amongst my participants that English language theological terminology impoverished their expression of religiosity and their eschatological perspectives. It was common for the English-speaking participants to revert to Arabic terminology in our discussions and their narrative accounts of conversion in something akin to bilingual code switching. The most frequently occurring example of this was the use of the word *deen* (religion/way of life) as a way of translating their perspective on Islamic practice or distinguishing it from the discursive category of religion. My interpretation of this ineffability in pointing to their lived practices of religion as something at once deeply personal and numinous, but also worldly and social, led me to the conclusion that my analysis needed to carve out the space for this element of the data to emerge more tangibly to the reader. This has led to the construction of this first findings chapter and the themes discussed herein.

5.3 Presenting my Findings and Themes

In many ways the choice to present this finding first is indicative of my epistemological leanings and thus my interpretive interaction with the data; the reflexive process of analysis undertaken, my role in that analysis, and the construction and sequencing of the themes which border the theoretical arguments I make. It also signals to the reader that the topic of *Convert Muslim Lived Religion and Habitus* resided, in some form, across the data corpus and within each of the other themes to be discussed in chapters 6 and 7.

Undoubtedly, the themes discussed in this chapter, and the two to follow, did not simply emerge of their own agency, as though already resident within my corpus, waiting to be fashioned into something tangible for presentation in these chapters. Aside from potentially upholding positivistic conceptualisations of knowledge as a pre-existing, knowable thing awaiting detection by 'an impartial researcher', a description of the development of my

themes as having ‘emerged’ would belie the active, interpretive engagement I have had with the data, and the decision-making required in identifying, editing and constructing codes and themes (Taylor and Ussher, 2001). I have not, in the process of immersing myself in my data, sought to place my own theoretical sensibilities into a state of abeyance in pursuit of what I believe to be an impossible objectivity (see section 3.2.4). Indeed, my choice to present this chapter’s findings first is one of the clearest indications of my interpretive hand in the analytical process. The chapter’s placement in this thesis reaffirms my commitment to emphasising the theological cognition of millennial convert Muslims as a central problematic.

I am cognisant, however, that what I have described thus far of the active role my theoretical perspective has played in my thematic analysis risks leaving the impression that the analysis was purely deductive; that the themes under discussion are steeped, not in the data themselves, but in my own theoretical and analytical interests alone. This would be a mischaracterisation of my analytical process. For, while my findings are necessarily sensitive to the theoretical position undergirding this study, the ethnographic approach has allowed me to ‘foster a fruitful dynamic between deductive and inductive reasoning’ (Knibbe & Kupari, 2020: 169). My time in the observational field has alerted me to interesting new themes which clearly depart from my theoretical focus, allowing the data to ‘talk back’ to the theory’ (p. 169). I would describe my analysis, therefore, as balancing a theoretically driven and data driven approach, illustrated in the figure to follow:

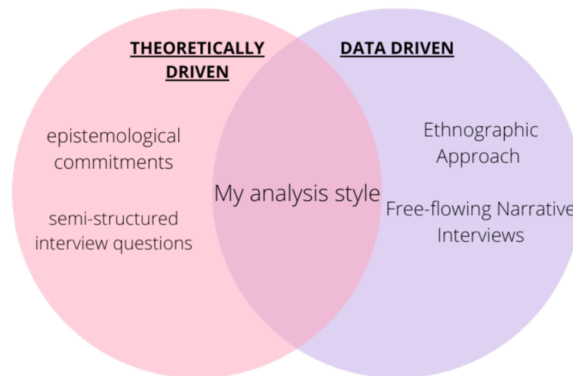


Figure 4 - Inductive vs Deductive Reasoning – Source [author]

Nonetheless, mindful of the ways in which my choice of language will shape the reading of this analysis, rather than using 'emerge' to describe the development of the themes under discussion in these chapters, I will opt for phrases such as 'identifying themes', 'constructing themes' and 'interpreting themes' to denote the active role I have played and avoid obscuration of my involvement in the analytical process (Ely et al., 1997: 205-6).

5.4 My Use of Habitus

Before I begin a more detailed reporting of the findings, I turn briefly to my use of the word 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990a) in the naming of this chapter. It is worthy of note that my application of the concept of habitus to converts is not the first. As discussed in chapter 2 (section 2.3.9), Oestergaard (2009) suggests that 'converts use the identity of practicing Muslim both as a tool to convince themselves and… to position themselves through their activities and appearance to other groups of Muslims' (p. 5). She argues that the Islamic rituals and bodily practices adopted by convert Muslims through this strategy constitute a habitus. While earlier I have critiqued her reductive reading of convert religiosity and the application of habitus to ritual, rule-based Islamic practices, I have found that the notion of habitus is useful as a way of thinking about the social commonalities evident in and between

converts. My deployment of habitus, however, differs starkly from Oestergaard's. Where Oestergaard has argued that converts' ritual acts of worship 'function as a strategy' (p. 6), essentially implying a theological disjuncture between converts and heritage Muslims' *niyyah* (intentions) – thereby dismissing the theological veracity of converts acts of worship – my deployment of the notion of habitus is sociological in nature. The sociological disjuncture, which I have emphasised throughout this study, and which I have used the concept of habitus to describe, is not to suggest a separate belief system, practice or intention that might be concretized into something like a separate Islamic denomination, sect or group apart from the broader diversities within and amongst Muslims. The disjuncture is to point towards social patterns of shared experience, practice and communicative habits that, I will argue, are quite unique to those Muslims who have undergone the particular type of religious development I have described as conversion. These patterns, in being shared, socially entrenched, acquired and reflective of a social structure that is reproduced by others, constitute a habitus (Bourdieu, 1996), I argue. Moosavi's (2012) use of 'Muslimness' as a habitus clarifies this further. He speaks of the deeply entrenched religious dispositions of 'lifelong Muslims'[19] (p. 103) and the difficulties faced by converts in their attempts of socialisation into a Muslimness that is developed in the formative years of heritage Muslims' lives. My data affirms this reality by pointing to the formation of a notably different 'Muslimness' which takes shape around the shared prior non-Muslim socialisations of the converts' past in combination with their Muslim socialisations of the present.

Nonetheless, the term habitus is used tentatively here, with awareness of the various shapes this complex and contested concept takes in educational literature (Nash, 1999) and the potential dangers in operationalising it to overlay my analysis, rather than employing a neologism of my own to capture the spiritual, corporeal and behavioural dispositions that my participants embody. However, I have found it useful to employ the term for a series of reasons. First, given the overarching goal of Bourdieu's theoretical framework as seeking to reveal social structures and the 'mechanisms' which uphold their reproduction (Bourdieu, 1996: 1), habitus appealed to me as providing a way with which to understand the logics of

[19] This is one of the various terms used to describe heritage Muslims.

the social actions I was seeing from my participants. In that sense, the convert habitus became an object of analytical investigation. Second, given my own positionality and what I will elaborate to be the shared embodiment of the 'convert habitus' myself, the concept has enriched my investigation of how convert lived religiosity is expressed and produced within the context of my study. An early autoethnographic reflection reads,

> I want to be careful not to impose my own understanding. But it is pretty clear that there is something shared about the way I have chosen to live my life and the way they do [referring to the participants of the four observations and five narrative interviews I had completed by this stage]. Its similar to practising… Also, similar family set-ups. Whatever it is, it helped me to attend the [redacted organisation name] event as just another attendee in a way. People treated me quite normal – like an insider. They recognised my experience as valid, like theirs.
>
> – Why?
>
> Autoethnographic Reflective Journal

The notion of habitus helped me to conceptualise this sense of a shared practice expressed in the extract above. In serving to allow me access as a 'valid' insider, habitus became a research tool. I have interpreted within Bourdieu's own framing of habitus a permissiveness in its application, expressed by his description of his theories as 'open concepts designed to guide empirical work' (Bourdieu, 1990b: 107). This flexibility is affirmed in the various – and sometimes competing – applications of the term in describing Muslim converts' embodied practices; some of which I have discussed previously (see section 2.3.9). Therefore, habitus became for me a theoretical instrument with which to participate in the lives of my subjects. By living with and within the habitus and using my research experience to convey that in this thesis, I have sought to affirm my commitment to the craft of narrative-ethnography as an inversion of participant observation (Tedlock, 1991); as an observation of my own participation.

To further tease out the attributes of habitus which suggest its suitable application to this analysis, I will elaborate upon my understanding of the concept. I have understood Bourdieu's habitus to express a predisposition towards particular ways of behaving, in both an embodied sense and in terms of perception and attitude (Reay et al., 2005; Youdell, 2006). Habitus, then, can be understood to be composed of 'standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking' in certain ways (Bourdieu, 1990a: 70). Bourdieu writes:

> *The habitus, as a system of dispositions to a certain practice, is an objective basis for regular modes of behaviour… the effect of the habitus is that agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances.* (1990b, p. 77).

This imbues Aleem's statement with added meaning:

> They [converts] are just obvious. You can usually see a lot of sunnahs [embodiments of prophetic tradition] on them: wearing thobes above the ankles… When you embrace Islam, you're trying to implement the obligatory things, the beard, hijab. But reverts got that English swagger (laugh), you know? None of the Asian stuff. The way they carry themselves. Its funny. You can spot them. Looking down [presumably speaking about the Islamic practice of ghad-al-basr (lowering the gaze to avoid seeing impermissible things)], saying salaams to everyone they meet, using miswak. That kind of thing.
>
> Aleem: Semi-Structured Interview

Aleem appears here to be describing a propensity for converts to adopt practices and wear clothing that are free of culture and which set converts apart, corporeally, as embracing of a particular type of Islam. When pressed, during our semi-structured interview, about what he meant by this form of 'culture-free' Islamic practice, he echoed a sentiment I had expressed within my own journal. Aleem noted:

> The Asian stuff is like the clothing, food, cultural stuff… I mean, I was going to a Pakistani masjid. They're more like culturalist people, so they more followed their

culture… Following the certain school which was taught in Pakistan. And you can see it in the way they dress and deal with people… It's hard to explain… Most reverts or people of the sunnah, practicing people, you see the difference… Not that there aren't loads of born-Muslims like that, like there are…

Aleem: Semi-Structured Interview

In my own journal, I had written about the parallels between my encounters with some of my participants and an experience I had had over a decade earlier, during my second major pilgrimage to Makkah:

> The [convert] brothers and sisters from the UK are similar. I couldn't easily tell where they are from [referring to their ethno-racial background], but I can always tell they are new Muslims. Reminds me of meeting Abdul-Rahman on hajj: Five million people, but two reverts spot each other and chat near the ka'ba. It is something about the way they dress and act.

Autoethnographic Reflective Journal

While the wording of our two statements is quite different, the sentiment is unmistakably similar: Converts, we suggest, possess a propensity towards certain embodied practices which are devoid of the cultural accretions that sometimes accompany the practices of heritage Muslims. This often makes them identifiable to other converts. This expression of religion as embodied is prevalent in McGuire's conceptualisation of lived religion (McGuire, 2007; 2008; 2016) and within the research of other scholars exploring convert identity (e.g. Winchester, 2008). Importantly, however, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus is not constructed of explicit rules which *dictate* behaviour in such a way as to make it determinable or entirely uniform and governed by rules. This is an area in which I have criticised Oestergaard's application of Islamic rule-based ritual to habitus. Bourdieu notes, 'Just as no two individual histories are identical so no two individual habituses are identical.' (Bourdieu, 1990c: 46). The implication of this is a reading of habitus as describing a social collectiveness that also recognises social agents as non-passive beings who actively

construct their social realities. It allows a recognition of the individuality and diversity among members of the social collective. This understanding is reminiscent of a reflective journal entry I made early on in my data collection process, during my first observational interaction with Melanie:

> Participant 7 is probably the only sister I have met so far that I wouldn't have guessed was a convert from seeing her. She doesn't wear hijab and didn't strike me as very practising straight away. But after speaking to her and seeing how she interacts with people, I noticed that she uses all the same speech and words that the others tend to. I could tell about an hour in to our first conversation… Practising. Still using Q&S [Qur'an and Sunnah] and relating everything back.
>
> Autoethnographic Reflective Journal

A further instance in which Bourdieu's notion of habitus maps well onto my convert participants is in its emphasis on the historical development of the individual. Bourdieu's habitus 'refers to something historical, it is linked to individual history' (Bourdieu, 1990c: 86). This is to suggest that habitus is a product of the accumulative, historical socialisations experienced by the individual, beyond merely their current circumstances. I interpret this to speak to the centrality of continuity – and not only change – in the lives of converts, as has been emphasised by Sealy in his work on convert Muslims (Sealy, 2021c). In this regard Charlene notes:

> **Charlene**: Yeah, my family's religion is Jewish, but they're not religious at all. Like my parents eat pork. We celebrated Christmas. They're basically like… they were born here. Their parents were born here. They're like, basically British… But like my parents are… my mum is probably atheist and my dad's agnostic and they definitely don't believe in the Jewish religion at all… They hated it, to be honest, so we didn't get sent to synagogue or anything like that… And the biggest thing that I'd always questioned in my life is why are we here? Like, I could just never, ever, ever believe that we were just, like my mum literally believes, that we're gonna die and go into… that's it. And to me, like, that's not acceptable. I'm not here, going through all the

things we've been through for nothing. Like, I just don't [inaudible]. There's too much beauty in this world. I just always knew there was – there's got to be more. So I would honestly say that the thing that attracted me the most was just knowing that we were created to worship our Lord and that there is a hereafter.

[Later]

Me: What else attracted you to the religion the most?

Charlene: I was a performer. A public speaker and I was around celebrities. I really noticed the more celebrities I was around, the more people were unhappy, even though they had fame, they had money. They had everything that you wanted. They were really unhappy. And I definitely feel like that made me go on an inner search.

[Later]

Me: Did you change as a person?

Charlene: Yeah, I would say that it was like night and day difference. Because I left school at 14, so I had really got into bad crowds and I had big dreams that I was chasing, but I was just putting myself in a lot of dangerous situations. Alhamdulillah, Islam just showed me why we're here. And it just grounded me. And so yeah, the change was very big, very, very, very big [laughs]. In everything, you know, mannerisms, in everything… People still have past traumas. People are still the same human beings. Just because they have faith, doesn't mean that all goes away. Everything I have been through is all me; it all led me to Islam.

Charlene: Semi-Structured Interview

These statements build a picture of a social agent constructed of the residues of previous socialisations and current socialisations. In summary then, I have interpreted habitus, as applied to the converts in this study, to be expressive of the complex matrix of behaviours

that demarcate converts as a sociologically and experientially distinct group. I have operationalised the word, in this chapter, as a way of moving analytically from the individual behaviours within the narratives to a discussion of behaviours that describe a collective. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to offer an in-depth overview of the philosophical contestations surrounding habitus in relation to such things as determinism and structuralism (see Alexander, 1995 and Jenkins, 1992). However, the 'the ontological mysteries of the habitus' (Jenkins, 1992: 130) and 'the conceptual looseness of habitus' (Reay, 1995: 357) inspire me to feel comfortable in applying the concept to the social commonalities I have noticed within the participants of this study and between converts more generally.

5.5 Conversion

Now that I have outlined my interpretation and deployment of the terms 'lived religion' and 'habitus' in the naming of this chapter, I move on to discuss the homogenising experience which connects each of my participants and I, and which appeared to lead to the adoption of the 'convert habitus', and, for many of the participants, represented the beginning of their narrative: conversion. What seemed observable to me, in spite of the educational/sociological focus of my research questions, is that the experience of conversion was principally a deeply personal, emotional and (lived) religious experience in the minds of my participants. Leanne exemplifies this when recounting the day she converted to Islam:

> I call it my calling. I didn't wake up wanting it. I didn't expect it. It just came like that [clicks her fingers]. I turned to [my friend] and said I need to take my *shahadah*… And when I took my *shahadah*, I started crying. I was uncontrollably crying, but I wasn't upset… People asked me all the time. What did it feel like? And I say I can't explain it. I was crying and I turned to [the imam] and say, I'm not sad. I'm not sad. I'm so happy but these tears, they wouldn't stop. They would not stop pouring out of my face and I've never cried like that. Like I can't even explain it. But I was uncontrollably crying. To the point where my friend was like, 'you're doing the right thing. You're doing the right thing'. I was like, I know I am. I know I'm doing the right thing. I feel good. But the feeling that I got was like, I knew I was brand new. I can't explain the feeling, but I

> felt like I got goosebumps all over my body. But I can never explain in words. I can never, ever explain it. It was like I knew that day that I was reborn. Like I knew.
>
> Leanne: Narrative Interview

Leanne's statements point towards an overwhelmingly emotional reaction to her experience of conversion and indicates, as I touched upon earlier, something ineffable in the deeply religious feelings of being 'reborn' through her embrace of Islam. Similar indications of the existential importance of conversion could be found in other participants' narratives:

> Like, I always believed in the creator; that we're created for a purpose. I didn't know what the purpose was. But I was actually, before, gonna get baptized, once upon time. And then I watched this TV programme… about atheism – that we've evolved and about evolution etcetera. I took it, I took it wholeheartedly and I believed every single thing that was in the BBC documentary, whatever channel it was, I just took it and believed it completely and I became an atheist then. But knowing Islam, knowing about Allah, it led to a complete lifestyle change… Complete overhaul of my life in terms of what I believe, what my life goals are and who I am, and my identity, and what I stand for, and what I need to strive for on a daily basis. It's completely changed. I've actually got purpose now. Before I was just busy living aimlessly, living like day by day or whatever. But now my life's goal is to please Allah. Make it my life to go spread the word and call people to Islam.
>
> Derrick: Narrative Interview

As well as emphasising the centrality of change in the conversion experience – something that resonates closely with Leanne's notion of being 'reborn' – Derrick's account of conversion explains that his identity and life purpose is closely connected to his newfound religion. While this may be expected in the life of a religious convert, as I will go on to present and discuss in chapters 7 and 8 respectively, this reality had profound implications for his educational choices and experiences. Siobhan's narrative provides a further glimpse at the significance of conversion in the lives of the convert participants.

> There is this verse in Qur'an that says: Verily, my salah [prayer] and my sacrifice and my living and my dying are for Allah, Lord of the worlds. That sums up what it did - that's what I-me becoming Muslim did for me, really. It was about, like, life after death… but also about life. Sort of, everything… It was the most important day of my life.
>
> Siobhan: Narrative Interview

This statement, in further pointing to the existential significance of conversion, also highlights once more, the participants' conception of lived religion as both worldly and otherworldly – expressed here as 'life' and 'life after death'. As stated earlier, it also highlights the life-altering importance of the process and role the newfound religion plays in my participants' lives. Along these lines, Melanie states:

> **Melanie**: I got into contact with the mosque and then we just scheduled an appointment there. And yeah, two of the girls were my witnesses. Then my sister was there as a guest. Yeah. And it was like, really emotional [she giggles and her eyes well with tears].
>
> **Me**: Oh okay. Like, emotional because of the way you felt or because of who was around you, or?
>
> **Melanie**: Yeah, a little. Like the Shahadah itself. It was so emotional. I can't really explain. It was like another state of being somehow… And it was really intense and like this wieght kind of was lifted off me and I felt like this is, like, where I belong. And that was like, the most important day in my life. Alhamdulillah, yeh. I was in such a weird emotional place, and I was so excited and relieved. [visibly tearful when recounting the story]
>
> Melanie: Narrative Interview

The visible emotion that Melanie displays when recounting her narrative and the presence of emotion expressed in the data extract above (and within my observational data) are instructive of the affectional content of conversion and, I surmise, offer reasons to consider the role of emotion more fully in the study of conversion. The presence of emotion during and after the conversion process was common within the data. One such emotion, which appeared on a more latent level within the corpus, but appeared quite explicitly in the narrative of Owen, was a feeling I coded as 'spiritual compulsion':

> I was going out for a haircut at like 8:00 o'clock at night and I'm coming back, what, about 4:00 O'clock in the morning sometimes. And you know, the conversations were just very interesting… You know, it was that everything just sounded… correct to me. And you know, it was only until maybe the sort of third haircut that there was a point where I knew I HAD [emphasis in voice] to accept this… And this is the part where he picked up his *mushaf* [Quranic scripture] and handed it to me and then he says, there's your answers. That's it. You know, obviously there was more to it but you know I started studying and questioning the Qur'an… and this is the point where I thought yeah this is, you know, I HAVE [emphasis in voice] to embrace Islam… Like I said, at this point in time, I was very sold on Islam anyway… And then after that I think it was the same day, after, I said I'm going to accept this - accept Islam now, and that was it… So yeah, Alhamdulillah… I think it's more a personal thing when like you delve into it yourself and you go out to understand for your own self, on your own accord. It's a beautiful journey and alhamdulillah, where I am right now.
>
> Owen: Narrative Interview

Embedded in this conversion narrative is what I have interpreted to be an expression of an internally felt imperative to accept Islam, induced by personal contemplations, heightened by debate and dialogue with religious adherents, but ultimately driven by the participant's existential questions being answered by the Qur'an and Islam. The use of the words 'had to accept this' and 'have to embrace Islam' are reminiscent of Leanne's words, mentioned earlier in this chapter:

I said, I need to take my shahadah. I need to go take my shahadah. So they rang up a mosque and they said: 'Oh, tell her to come tomorrow'… I didn't want to wait.

Leanne: Narrative Interview

In both extracts, participants describe their desire to convert in language evocative of urgency and internal compulsion. To gain a clearer understanding of their statements and the thoughts and feelings behind what they were describing, I decided to explore the statements further in the first portion of my semi-structured interviews with them:

Me: Can you explain a little more about what you felt when you wanted to take your shahadah?

Leanne: People say to me explain that to me, and I say: It was like before, I used to think about it with my head. This time it was in my heart and it was like a matter of urgency. Like I had to go and do it. I couldn't wait. It was like… like you've got a chocolate cake in front of you and you're like, I have this temptation in front of me and, you're like 'I don't wanna eat. I don't eat.'… It was like this urgency. I had to do it. There was no, no... I said, I need to go now or wanna go now. I wanna go now. I need to go and do it now. It was in my heart, like I yearned for it, and I'd never felt that before, when I thought about it, if that makes sense. Love of Allah. Fear of Allah. I used to have it in my head, thinking. This time it was uncontrollable. I had no control over that night. I couldn't sleep. Allah guided me to it.

Leanne: Semi-Structured Interview

Me: Why did you feel the need to take shahadah? I mean, you sort of said… I felt like I had to do it… Can you explain.

Owen: That, you know, if Allah hadn't guided me. You know, if I'm in a state of arrogance, like. I thought, Alhamdulillah, Allah guided me to Islam. So, I had to be humble and I had to do the right thing. What if I had this intention [to convert] but I

> died before. I was certain I had to accept Islam. I say that was maybe a sort of thing for me to come into Islam as well. You know, just understanding what my sole purpose was in life.
>
> Owen: Semi-Structured Interview

These participant-led explications of what I have interpreted to be feelings of spiritual, internal compulsion during conversion bring to mind Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) conceptualisation of the coercive motif, which they describe as a 'motif that takes place only in extremely rare and special circumstances' (p. 381) and which 'entails an extremely high degree of external pressure… during which there is intense arousal of fear' (p. 383). While their conceptualisation relates, on the main, to forms of coercive persuasion designed to ensure systematic ideological conformity through physical and psychological fear, their research acknowledges the fact that what may legitimately constitute coercion might be far more complicated (p. 384). Relatedly, within the data sets of Leanne and Owen, outlined above, rather than external physical or psychological fear and control leading to ideological conformity, the converts describe fears resulting from doctrinal religious concern, internal fear of Allah and punishment after death. To some degree, this feeling of fear of Allah, a central precept in Islam (Qur'an, 2:197), appeared in every data set – though not always in relation to the conversion process. However, Leanne and Owen's extracts demonstrate that theological scrupulosity may conceivably function as an internal coercive force, comparable to the physical coercion theorized by Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) coercive motif.

5.6 Operationalising Conversion Motifs

The presence of previously theorised conversion patterns and motifs was identifiable in all of the narratives of my participants. Contained within the theme 'conversion motifs', I coded a number conversion types across the corpus. This is demonstrated in the codebook in Appendix 9. However, as I had expected, these motifs did not apply to the data in uncomplicated ways. Much like my discussion of the coercive motif above, attempts to operationalise conversion 'types' in my analysis often involved applying inversions of motifs and their descriptive elements, or complex applications of many motifs to one narrative, or

the addition of new descriptive elements to the previously theorised conversion motifs. Therefore, while the data pointed to similarities in the existential, religious significance participants placed on conversion, this was not indicative of similarities in the circumstances and patterns of conversion, which were invariably individualised. For example, while Aleem and Siobhan described conversion as a moment:

> SubhanAllah, this was the best moment of my life.
>
> Aleem: Narrative Interview

> The moment, I would say, I left kufr [disbelief] was when I said my shahadah.
>
> Siobhan: Narrative Interview

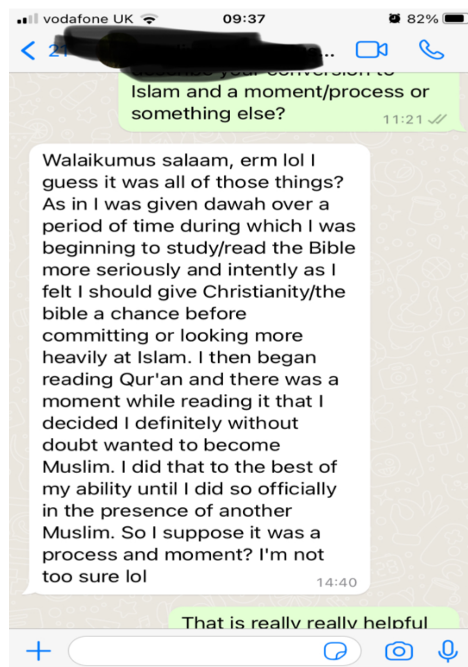
Charlene, and Melanie clearly described it as a process, stating:

> **Charlene**: For me, I didn’t want to give up my old life. It was a process. I was fighting it. I was fighting it.
>
> **Me**: So you were fighting it in the sense that you didn't want to sort of make that big change?
>
> **Charlene**: Yeah, because I knew it would be leaving everything behind, even everything about it, even like the hijab, even when I decided I want to become Muslim, I was like, well, I'm gonna become Muslim, but I’ll NEVER wear hijab, you know, but obviously now I wear niqab. It's just, it's a process one hundred percent.
>
> Charlene: Narrative Interview

I think it was a process for me, for sure, because thinking back and reflecting, there have been so many like moments, also way back in my life, that I think contributed to me potentially converting.

Melanie: Narrative Interview

Furthermore, some of the participants describe conversion in more complex ways. Uthman, Isa and Owen, for example, described it thus:



Screenshot of WhatsApp Message – Source [Uthman]

Uthman: Ethnographic Data

Me: Do you consider your conversion to be a process a moment or both, or something else?

Isa: It's gonna be both, isn't it? But it's certainly a long process that maybe never ends. And perhaps it will. I don't know. When you feel it's complete. And it's a moment because you always remember when you took Shahadah, and then who helped you to do it.

Isa: Narrative Interview

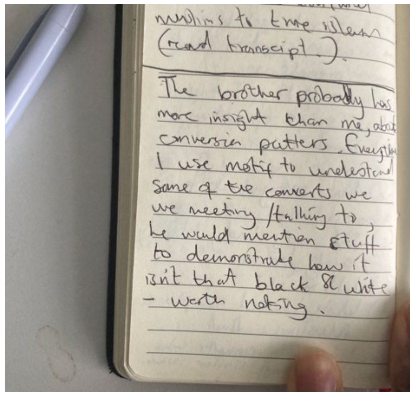
Owen: I mean, it's a mixture of both. Because at the same time it's… not like it's a process, the day you say it [the declaration of faith]. We, you know, we understand, obviously, a lot by that point, for us to come to Islam anyway. So, I'd say it was a moment in time that you know. It just… it just happened to me. So it's not like it would have happened any other way… [extended pause]… I have maybe gone off in terms of that question if that's not the answer you're looking for…

Me: No, I mean, what do you think?

Owen: Now it was – I'd say... Obviously looking back at it, was more of a yeah, it's a process. There's a process to it, but it's like there's no one way about going about it. That's your way of going about it, but to say there's a textbook way of doing it. No one's story is the same, you know? So, some people it could just be like, take some time, for example. You know, because this is the sort of thing I work in [referring to his work in Islamic propagation].

Owen: Narrative Interview

It is particularly telling that Owen provided this more nuanced picture of conversion and had reflected on the individualised nature of conversion prior to the study. During my ethnographic observation of Owen, it became clear that he had spent extended periods of time dealing with convert Muslims as part of his job. As part of my observational notes, written after spending a number of hours, across two days, embedded with Owen as he went about his Islamic organisational work, I observed:



The brother [Participant 2] probably has more insight than me, about conversion patterns. [illegible] I use motifs to understand some of the converts we are meeting/talking to, he would mention stuff to demonstrate how it isn't that black and white – worth noting.

Figure 5 - Journal Entry Picture – Source [author]

My thematic analysis seemed to triangulate with Owen's insights, revealing that, on a latent level, each of the participants described processual dimensions to their conversion as well as a moment of overarching change, whether or not the data contained this on a semantic level. As I dived deeper into each data set, the data began to talk back to the theoretical dichotomy which had been established within the literature and which had initially inspired me to include the question 'Would you describe conversion as a moment or a process?'. It became clear that elements of conversion as a moment and as a process were present within all of the narratives of my participants, depending on how conversion was conceived. The semi-structured portion of my data collection gave me the opportunity to go into further detail about this with Emma who had initially described conversion in terms of a moment, but who, upon reflection, recalls:

> And often it's a process of learning more about Islam over a long period of time and then making a decision to take Shahadah. So, in my case, it wasn't like some big change to be honest. And so I'm not really sure how to sort of describe my journey to Islam. It was mainly just through conversations with friends on the Internet, I suppose.
>
> Emma: Semi-Structured Interview

This statement appears to conceive of the shahadah as the moment of 'conversion-proper', in alignment with the Islamic doctrinal ruling of conversion (Hadith 1356, n.d). Yet, Emma's statement also describes the process of learning and the conversations and research leading

up to conversion as part of the conversion 'journey'. Indeed, Isa, as we saw earlier, suggests that the process of conversion continues after the declaration of faith and may never truly end for the convert:

> it's certainly a long process that maybe never ends. And perhaps it will. I don't know. When you feel it's complete.
>
> Isa: Narrative Interview

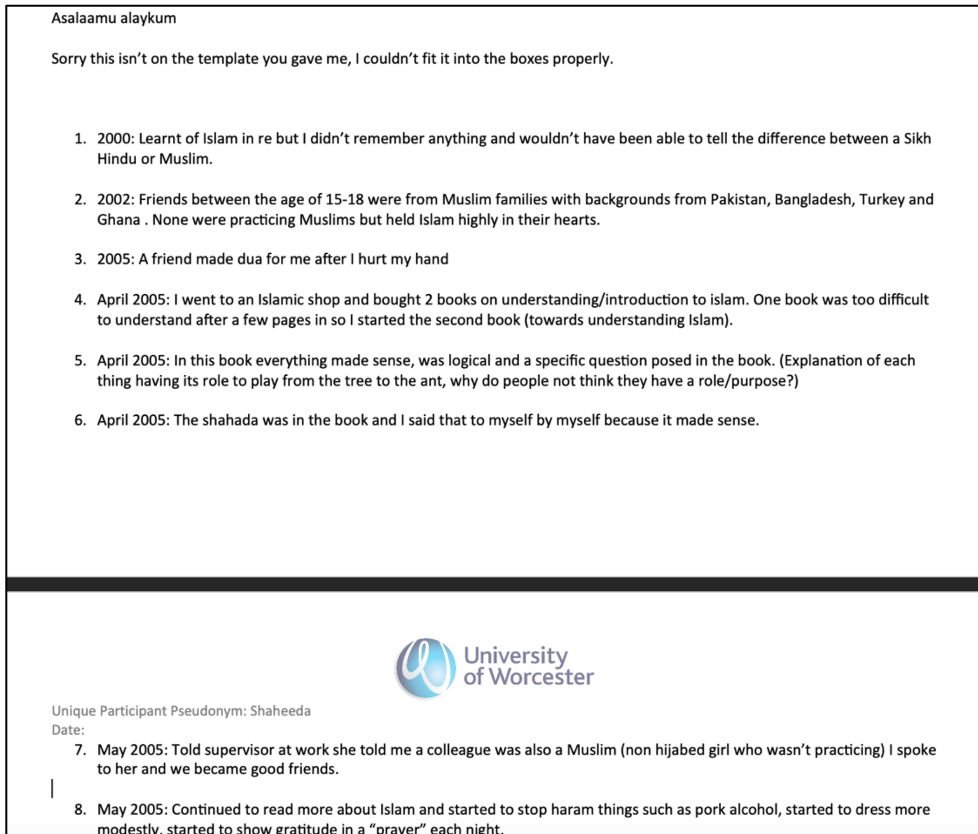
Derrick's description of conversion spoke of all of these stages in a notably structured manner:

> **Derrick**: A process and a moment and something else altogether, all three of them [laughs]
>
> **Me**: OK. Could you expand on that a little bit?
>
> **Derrick**: So it's a process because the things that happened that build up to that point is a process. And even after became Muslim it was still a process of me basically understanding what Islam is and what – and how – to be a Muslim. And a moment, at that time, I made a split decision at a time. It wasn't something that I had been thinking about. Even though things were in motion, obviously, in motion that I didn't know about, obviously that brought me to that point. But in terms of thinking, there was a moment, I just.. it was a split decision to take my shahadah. It was also something else as well because it was something that I embraced and I took on wholeheartedly. And it's something that I decided to stick to even though I didn't fully even know what it was. I stuck to it and Alhamdulillah. It turned out to be the right decision. Obviously, the more I became educated; the more I learned about it, I realized that this is the truth. So that's why I say something else as well.
>
> Derrick: Narrative Interview

In pointing to these three dimensions of conversion, Derrick further emphasises that the declaration of the shahadah held religious significance and the impetus for adopting the self-identity of a Muslim. On a semantic level, this statement suggests that Islamic conversion takes place at the moment of the Islamic proclamation of faith. However, as the data above intimates, the change begins far sooner for most participants and, in my own observations, extends beyond the proclamation of faith, according to individual subjective experience. Along those same lines, I note in my reflective journal:

> Hard to really see the patterns and types in conversion as starting and ending. Brings into question the notion of conversion as an Islamically accepted phenomenon – ask [Islamic] scholar.
>
> Autoethnographic Reflection

There is little doubt that the pre-interview task I set participants aided my analysis of the data and provided me with a clearer understanding of their perspectives on the meaning of conversion. It alerted me to their views of when their conversions 'began', and at which point they felt it necessary to start their conversion narratives. For each participant who completed the task, the moment of professing their Islam (alone or with a witness present) represented a critical incident (see example in figure 6 to follow). Thirteen of my fifteen participants were able to provide a single 'year of conversion' (see examples to follow):



Asalaamu alaykum

Sorry this isn't on the template you gave me, I couldn't fit it into the boxes properly.

1. 2000: Learnt of Islam in re but I didn't remember anything and wouldn't have been able to tell the difference between a Sikh Hindu or Muslim.
2. 2002: Friends between the age of 15-18 were from Muslim families with backgrounds from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey and Ghana . None were practicing Muslims but held Islam highly in their hearts.
3. 2005: A friend made dua for me after I hurt my hand
4. April 2005: I went to an Islamic shop and bought 2 books on understanding/introduction to islam. One book was too difficult to understand after a few pages in so I started the second book (towards understanding Islam).
5. April 2005: In this book everything made sense, was logical and a specific question posed in the book. (Explanation of each thing having its role to play from the tree to the ant, why do people not think they have a role/purpose?)
6. April 2005: The shahada was in the book and I said that to myself by myself because it made sense.

University of Worcester

Unique Participant Pseudonym: Shaheeda
Date:

7. May 2005: Told supervisor at work she told me a colleague was also a Muslim (non hijabed girl who wasn't practicing) I spoke to her and we became good friends.
8. May 2005: Continued to read more about Islam and started to stop haram things such as pork alcohol, started to dress more modestly, started to show gratitude in a "prayer" each night.

Figure 6 - Example Pre-Interview Task (Shaheeda) – Source [author]

Shaheeda: Pre-Interview Task (timeline)

Please use the table below to provide profile information, where applicable. Please incluc

Age Now	34
Age of conversion	19
Year of conversion	2005
Level of education when converted	Completed secondary, finished vocational course at college
Level of education now	Same
Previous religious affiliation/spiritual beliefs or otherwise	No set religion, nobody practicing in the household. More distant family of Christian/catholic. Always knew there was a higher being. But became Agnostic
Islamic school/branch or otherwise (e.g. sunni/sufi/salafi, etc)	Sunni
Gender	Male

Figure 7 - Example Pre-Interview Task (Owen) – Source [author]

Owen: Pre-Interview Task (profile)

While the subsequent interviews complicated the nature of the critical incidents and, as I have indicated above, brought into question the accuracy of considering the declaration of faith 'the' conversion-proper, the critical incidents did serve to indicate key elements of my participants' experiences which could be mapped onto the conversion patterns and motifs present in the literature. Melanie, for example, in describing her initial steps into Islam and the start of her conversion, states:

> But the main point where I got really interested in Islam was, yeah, I entered a relationship with a Muslim man. And then, like, my attitude was, well, how is this going to work if I don't know much about Islam? So I was at this point where I thought it was like an interreligious relationship. But I was never really attached to Christianity, so there was so many things I questioned in Christianity or that I never really understood and I also didn't think were true. So basically, I don't know if I was Christian at all, thinking back, because like the Trinity as a concept or like the whole narrative of forgiving sins through humans… It was really odd to me. Ramadan was like, the biggest turning point, I think, because I made this commitment to learn about Islam by myself. And yeah, I dove heavily into literature and… I went to some lectures of imams close by. And yeah, I couldn't let go of the knowledge that I learned. And then it became like a matter of the heart very soon.
>
> Melanie: Narrative Interview

This element of the narrative described a conversion journey that closely resembled the affectional motif which can be understood as a conversion in which a 'positive affectional bond' (p. 379) is the central defining inspiration leading to the conversion, in much the same way as intellectual[20] research is central in the 'intellectual motif', or as mystical encounter is

[20] A critical problematisation of the word 'intellectual', which is used in the literature to describe literary exploration, is required. The positivistic connotations of the word imply that conversions involving less empirical motivations are in some ways less intellectual or unintellectual. Not only did the type of conversion which the intellectual motif describes appear in the narratives of participants who considered their research as determined and controlled by otherworldly means (for example, Uthman described his literary discovery of Islam as 'the Qadr [predestiny] of Allah'), the motif often did not appear in isolation from what might be considered mystical experiences. This again highlights the lived religion of my participants as deeply spiritual at the same time as being deeply worldly.

central within the ‘mystical motif’. Yet, despite the participant’s comment that the affectional connection was ‘the main point’ at which she became interested in Islam, I have interpreted her narrative as not simplistically affectional. It is complicated by the centrality of doubt in her previous faith and subsequent theological research – pointing towards an ‘intellectual motif’ or what Rambo (1993) might call the ‘Quest stage’. She also attended Islamic lectures and (I later discovered) started to practice other elements of Islam prior to conversion – pointing towards an ‘experimental motif’. In a message to me, she discussed her practices before ‘formally’ embracing Islam:

- spring I started washing myself Islamically, Ghusl and Wudhu
- Learned more about Salah specifically, but I remember I already learned the Al Fatiha in Summer by heart also with the intention that this is a required step for me to be able to start praying

Melanie: Ethnographic Encounter

Yusuf’s conversion, which he described as developing ‘while I was in pen [prison]’, and which initially functioned as a way of receiving recreational privileges and avoiding drug addicts within the prison environment, resembled closely the classical notion of ‘crisis’ in the literature (Galanter et al, 1979; James, 1902). However, here too, the conversion was layered with elements of the experimental motif and the presence of a commitment phase (Rambo, 1993) which took place outside of the prison environment, making the conversion process a combination of motifs and stages. To illustrate this point, below are two figures. The first is a screenshot that displays each of Lofland and Skonovd’s (1981) conversion motifs that I have coded as present within the data corpus. The second is a table displaying those conversion motifs which I have coded as present, at least in part, within each of the participants’ data sets:

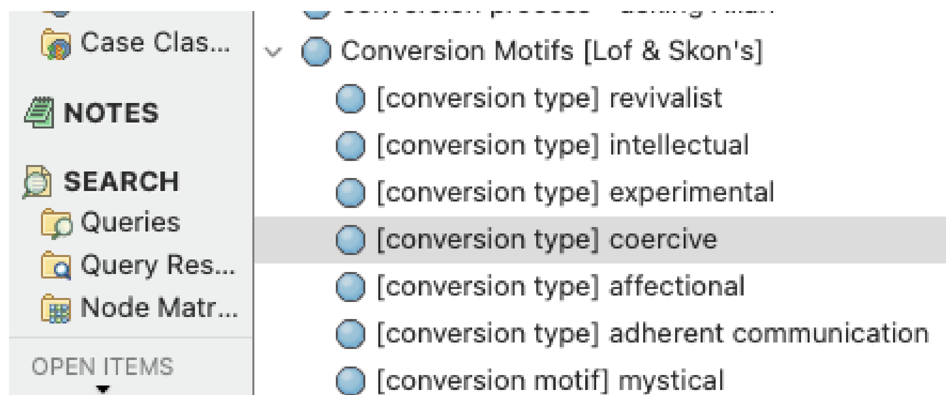


Figure 8 – [Source] Nvivo 12 Screenshot of Coded Conversion Motifs

Table 1 - Participant Conversion Motifs

Participant	Motif/s Present in Conversion
Aleem	Intellectual, mystical
Owen	Coercive, intellectual, affectional
Abdullah	Intellectual, experimental
Charlene	Mystical, intellectual,
Isa	Affectional, intellectual,
Yusuf	Experimental, coercive, intellectual (later), affectional
Melanie	Affectional, intellectual, mystical, experimental
Leanne	Revivalist (elements), Coercive, mystical, intellectual, experimental
Derrick	Revivalist (small elements), intellectual, experimental, affectional
Uthman	Intellectual, affectional, experimental
Umm Musa	Experimental, affectional, intellectual
Shaheeda	Intellectual, experimental,
Emma	Affectional, intellectual,
Siobhan	Experimental, affectional, intellectual
Jameela	Intellectual, coercive, mystical.

[Source: author]

It is worthy of note that later, during my member checking exercise with Melanie, she explained that she did not often mention 'the relationship' element of her conversion when recounting her story. She explained that she usually felt uncomfortable sharing those details and that she mentioned the details with me because I could 'understand', presumably

because I was a convert myself. She informed me that when she usually recounted her story, she chose to emphasise other key elements of the conversion for two reasons. Firstly, due to a tendency for people to reduce her conversion to a 'conversion for love'. This tendency will be discussed in further detail in chapters 6 and 8. Secondly, to avoid the social opprobrium that accompanied an impermissible, non-marital relationship within the Muslim community. This again points towards the added capacity for an insider researcher to glean this information (see section 4.10.2).

5.7 Conversion on a Spectrum and Along a Continuum

Returning to the Table 1 and the broader discussion of conversion patterns, my analysis demonstrates the complex interconnectivity of conversion motifs and the indeterminable nature of the temporal stages of conversion. Regarding the extent to which my participants' narratives evidenced a conversion moment or a conversion process and the degree to which they reflected one conversion motif or another, my analysis indicates something of a spectrum within their conversions. Some conversion narratives indicate more of a sudden change, followed by a less intense series of gradual adoptions of Islamic practices:

> I didn't waste time. I was praying, fasting, wearing hijab. Stopped drinking, parties everything the same day. Honestly. [laugh]. I know its hard to believe, but that the thing, once I believed. I believed… Yeh, I learnt more and became more into worship over time. Alhamdulillah. But that was stuff I didn't know. Da'wah [proselytising], sadaqah [giving charity].
>
> Siobhan: Semi-Structured Interview

Other narratives indicated a more gradual change with lesser elements of a sudden adoption of Islamic practices:

> I tried at the very beginning, but I just didn't have the knowledge or the fear or eman[to practice Islam], sort of thing. Over time I started wearing hijab and jumped to niqab pretty quickly. Abaya and everything properly. This was – I can't remember –

> well over a year after my Islam. It's like when I had the proper knowledge and eman (faith), I accepted it fully. I feel like I really embraced it.
>
> Umm Musa: Narrative Interview

An understanding of conversion along a spectrum appears appropriate then, with some experiences being more momentary and others more gradual. This makes relevant again James's (1902/2015) description of conversion as a 'process, gradual or sudden' (p. 127). Similarly, with the presence of a combination of conversion motifs being evident within each participant's data set, alongside various driving influences, conversion appeared highly individualised and perhaps better understood as occurring along a continuum of adjacent descriptive elements that lead to religious change. Rather than understanding conversion motifs as denoting a limited number of broadly distinct conversion patterns, my findings bring into question the utility of the analytical supposition that conversions can be categorised in any meaningful way, especially when studied through the more intimate data that narrative-ethnography has provided. Conversion motifs may be indeterminably more individualised, numerous and operative along a temporal spectrum and within a causal continuum. Thus, a corrective to current understandings of conversion motifs seems in order; something I will address in chapters 8 and 9.

5.8 Manifestations of the Convert Habitus

In spite of the variations and complex individualised nature of conversion itself, my analysis continued to uncover behavioural and experiential patterns amongst my participants which suggested a high degree of commonality in their outlooks and post-conversion identity configurations. Having outlined my deployment of the word habitus in the naming of this chapter, I operationalise the concept now as an analytical tool with which to describe these commonalities and their manifestations in the data. In this section I present examples of what I have interpreted to be features and expressions of the 'convert habitus' that appeared within the data.

5.8.1 Fish in and out of Water

The first feature of the habitus relates to participants' feelings and expressions of comfort and discomfort within particular settings, which I had initially coded as 'comfortable settings' and 'uncomfortable settings'. As the analysis developed and the presence of this feature became more uniform across data sets, the instances of the code became a subtheme, contained within the broader theme of 'convert habitus'. The initial codes denoted instances of my participants feeling either comfortable or uncomfortable within particular social environments. Yusuf, for instance, notes:

> When I came out [of prison] I didn't have anything in common with my old mandem [slang for a group of friends]. I used to be jahil [pre-islamic ignorance] and I couldn't be around that anymore, subhanAllah. I wasn't like that. I was so used to the brothers in pen [prison], like, they [old friends] didn't understand… I wanted to get clean. Get educated. I wanted to get married and do better, bro, with my life….
>
> Yusuf: Narrative Interview

He goes on to describe being uncomfortable in cultural Muslim settings:

> I knew Muslims, but I never knew that Islam could be a black man's religion. The Muslims I met back then didn't really, you know, show me Islam. It was that I never knew then, proper Muslims. Even now, I don't really chill with those types; the cultural Muslims or non-practising Muslims, or anything. I don't have much in common with them, subhanAllah, unless its deen.
>
> Yusuf: Semi-Structured Interview

This is a sentiment shared by Uthman who relates,

I can't really think of that many Ikhwan [Muslim brothers] I can talk to about it. I don't really hang around with the brothers that aren't at the masjid or in salah or at durus [Islamic lectures]. It just isn't my circle… I don't feel comfortable...

Uthman: Semi-Structured Interview

Contrastingly, the data reveals a state of comfortability on the part of many of the converts in environments that are overtly Islamic. For Siobhan this was most pronounced in social environments. She states:

The way I dress, I think its natural, do you know what I mean, to not feel like, the same around non-Muslims. It's little looks you get and when you're spoken to like a child. I have started hating trains. But I love being around the sisters. You can joke about it – about wearing abaya or niqab or whatever, without it being a thing.

Siobhan: Semi-Structured Interview

For Derrick, this was present in familial environments and relationships also. He contrasted his relationship with his non-Muslim family members to that of his Muslim family members:

Me: Can you describe your relationship with your family, both Muslim and non-Muslim?

Derrick: Now?

Me: I mean, then and now, yeh.

Derrick: Now, erm, my mum is Muslim, my sister is Muslim, Alhamdulillah, we're close and I speak to my sister. She is – we have a very loving relationship between me and my sister. We care for each other. We ask about each other, and we discuss things. We talk about things. Sometimes we even talk about our non-Muslim siblings.

> We don't hold back sometimes. But I feel like, Alhamdulillah, with my sister, she is my sister. I feel like she's through and through my sister. My other-other siblings, my brother. I don't feel like he's my brother. I just feel like he's somebody that was the same blood as me, just almost, almost akin to my half-brother that I've never met. Very limited, only because – just for the sake of… for the sake of my mother, or just because it's like I'm obliged to stay in touch with him… But it's very difficult to stay in touch with him. So that's my relationship with him. It's very strained. Can't talk to him about anything, really, unless it's just-it's just all fake. When I speak to my brother and my little sister as well, the same thing.
>
> Derrick: Semi-Structured Interview

This sense of being uncomfortable was evident in relation to educational environments too. During my ethnographic observations, Uthman and Jameela both related stories[21] about their time at university and the inability to be themselves; unable to, as Jameela put it, 'be real'. These educational experiences shall be discussed further in the following two chapters, but here they indicate the prevalence of feelings of discomfort in environments that they perceived as unconducive to their religious development. This feeling drove Uthman to seek ways of avoiding some environments altogether and inevitably led to him finding people, environments and situations in which he felt, to put it in Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) terms, like a 'fish in water' (p. 127). He recalls his decision to move from one town to a nearby town in Lancashire:

> Most people think I moved because I got married. Honestly, I moved as soon as I could to get away… To get close to Muslims. I wanted to be learning and increasing my eman [faith]. [name of town] is just hard. There are Muslims, but its just… more cultural than Islamic. I stuck out... I think, I needed to leave for my eman.
>
> Uthman: Semi-Structured Interview

[21] As with all my ethnographic observations, I did not audio record this interaction and thus do not have the exact wording of the conversation. I wrote significant statements during observations, including Jameela's statement: '*I know what it means to be fake and I know what it means to be real*'. It is from this verbatim statement that the quotation is taken.

During this interaction I wrote in my own autoethnographic notations:

> Similar to my close friends' situation and a few other reverts I know, [Participant 10] decided to move to be around a different type of community.
>
> Autoethnographic Reflective Journal

The notion of a 'fish in water'; that one would feel comfortable in 'their own' environment, may seem obvious. As the journal entry above shows, I had noted it as something I had encountered in my personal life, amongst other convert friends. Yet, it appeared, most often, at a latent rather than semantic level within my data. Often, the participants had not reflected on this common feature within the narratives. After reading her transcript and my early analysis of it, Emma pointed out:

> I hadn't really thought about it that much, how much of… how many problems I had with always being in those situations… uncomfortable situations. I wasn't where I wanted to be and I didn't get that then. Its only after you go and think about it.
>
> Emma: Verbatim Ethnographic note

This statement combines with several other observations which made me realise that the concept of habitus sometimes operated at a subconscious level until participants encountered questions which called upon them to reflect on their experiences. While I had, myself, reflected upon some of the commonalities in the experiences of converts and brought them out of the subconscious, I had struggled, before data collection, to articulate and conceptualise these commonalities. An early entry in my reflective journal, written before I had encountered the notion of habitus, reflects this:

> I can't quite put my finger on it, but there is a difference in how converts think and what we go through. Need to explore in lit review. Maybe ask some questions about it in interviews – relate to identity reading.

The concept of habitus enabled me to capture the sometimes messy relationality and patterns which appeared shared between the converts in this study; something I had been unable to name or 'quite put my finger on'. Reay (2004) notes, 'Habitus, then, is a means of viewing structure as occurring within small-scale interactions and activity within large-scale settings. Habitus' duality as both collective and individualized offers theoretical potential' (p. 439).

The concept of habitus is not deployed here as a complete answer to the questions I have raised regarding the identity of converts (see RQ 2). It is instead a structural way of thinking about those behaviours which my subjects seem to share within the social world. The construction of this finding, '*Convert Muslim Lived Religion and Habitus*' is, in some senses, a report on what happened during my ethnographic fieldwork, when I delved into and reflected upon the corporeal and cognitive dispositions shared between myself and the subjects of this study. In doing this, I have done as suggested by my methodology: immersed myself, participatorily, in the world of the subjects of my study (see section 3.3.2). In coming out of that immersion to report my findings, I emerge with an interpretation of the clear commonalities and shared behavioural practices as indicating a unique habitus. Their identities and lived religiosity manifested in many other ways. For example, the ubiquitous presence of social media and virtual spaces in the lives of millennial-born converts made their digital socialisations equally important in theorising about their identity.

5.8.2 The Converts' Space in the Digital World

The ways in which digital mediums, such as social media, influence the everyday practices of my participants, particularly the role it has played in their conversion, has implications for the ways in which I have generated knowledge and interpreted the digital interactions in this analysis. Rather than considering online conversations, pictures, media and digital production as simply textual data independent of the lived or embodied practices of my participants, I have interpreted the digital spaces to be an extension of their lived world; their lived religion. In my mind, the instances of sitting with my participants in cafes and

physical spaces is very much the same as sitting with them in front of my computer or other digital device. Here then, it is useful to define my digital ethnographic approach as prosaic: relating to the ways digital media reflects and shapes other social practices, including 'religious worship', and is integrated into the everyday culture of a particular group (Coleman 2010: 488-494).

My own experience with social media and my interaction with digital environments had given me an acute awareness of the importance of digital modes of communication in the development of convert sociality. As I related earlier (section 4.8), I met my wife through an online network of converts who, though geographically disparate, supported each other in various ways, including in finding marriage. For me, this crossover between the digital world and physical world was lived and real. I wrote about this in an early autoethnographic journal entry:

> Need to find a research method which can include the online convert networks in my study. Important part of lit review – speak to supervisors.
>
> Autoethnographic Reflective Journal

My data suggested that the role of digital sociality was just as real for the majority of my participants. This was demonstrated in the types of content accessed by those of my participants who belonged to well-known online convert networks. Figure 9 below offers an example of the types of services available to convert Muslims within these networks:

Figure 9 - Instagram Screenshot - Source [*Shaheeda*]

Shaheeda: Ethnographic Interaction

Events like the one above, Shaheeda explained, often lead to introductions and meetings between people who go on to marry and expand the network of converts. For Isa in particular, online interaction and research led to his conversion and continues to be effectively his only involvement within the Muslim community:

> For me it was all online. Everything I learnt. The only Muslims I knew. I didn't have any – have any friends as it was. Didn't tell the only friend I did have [about conversion]. And again, because of his strong views on religion, so I didn't want to, you know… To be honest, I don't have any friends now and so I would say it's been catastrophic for me in that respect. Friends etcetera. And in terms of family, I guess some of them don't know because I never told them, I mean, I only really meet up with them every now and then as it is, it's just not the sort of thing that would come up in conversation. It's partly my fault, because I did the conversion online, but it was just the issue for me was that because I've never had any, anyone that I knew in real life helping me, there was no one to support.

Isa: Semi-Structured Interview

The statement above was Isa's response to an inquiry about why he had mentioned, during his narrative interview, that he thought understanding the digital interactions of converts would be an important part of my research. After his narrative interview, and as my interactions with this participant developed, my own understanding of the role of digital media and online communities began to evolve. Isa painted a picture of a thriving convert Muslim community that included converts, like himself, who experienced a rather disembodied form of interaction within the Muslim community. Although, due to my own experiences, I had set out to explore the more interactive digital socialisations involved in the conversion and identity formation of Muslim converts, I now began to recognise that social media, for some, remained to a large extent impersonal and disembodied, rather than interactive. Rather than involving affectional relationships with proselytisers or Muslim community members and fellow converts, some of my participants described the role of the internet in their conversion as a tool with which they conducted an independent, methodical, private and/or *sans* social investigation of Islam. This realisation caused me to return to my analysis with fresh eyes. In doing that, I noticed further instances within the data of the type of disembodied interaction which Isa described and exemplified. It is to be noted that although this was not a prevalent theme within the data, I did construct the sub-theme of 'sans-sociality' around these instances, considering it to be of analytical interest in understanding the identity formation and social experiences of my participants. Abdullah explains:

> The more I explored on the internet and read, the more it kept me sort of captivated and I couldn't put the [online] books down. It was… it was so interesting. And at that point, it was fun. It's like I just wanted to stay inside. Because I just wanted to be reading and reading and reading and reading. I find it so interesting, so enlightening, and so refreshing that some of the things I found problematic with Christianity, not necessarily by my own reading, but because of my own beliefs… things like the Trinity. Things like Jesus as a god…
>
> Abdullah: Narrative Interview

While this participant's initial investigation was initially wholly without social interction, the conflict between a potential new way of life and his old way of life led him to invite social interaction as a source of intellectual challenge:

> Now, because I was still… there was still a lot of Christians around me. I would ask them, the other Christians, these questions, see if they could answer. They would. They would go to church on a Sunday. They would ask their priests and I never, ever, ever, to this day and I still ask questions if I ever get to dialogue with them. There is no answer to be honest. And I could never, ever get an answer. So it wasn't very long before I realised okay. I now have these two huge religions. Two Abrahamic religions. My initial thought was, you know, that I would never look into another religion because I felt like I would be turning my back on Jesus. It would… it felt very strange. And so it should in a way, if you've been, you know, affiliated with something your whole life, because what they're essentially telling you is what your mom taught you is-was incorrect. Yeah. And that's a hard pill to swallow sometimes. But for me, the truth, it overrode all of that.
>
> Abdullah: Narrative Interview

Isa, Emma and Jameela all describe similar experiences with exploring Islam initially in a *sans*-social manner online:

> It's partly my fault, because I did the conversion online, but I was just the issue for me was that because I've never had any, anyone that I knew in real life helping me, there was no one to support.
>
> Isa: Semi-Structured Interview

> At the time I didn't want to do anything else. Honestly, I was obsessed, hardly left the house. I wanted to know everything about this new thing, sort of thing. I didn't think I would actually become Muslim. But the more lectures I listened to, the more questions I asked on [redacted website] the more I knew I wanted to take shahadah.

Emma: Narrative Interview

> Before I even did it officially [laughs] if that's what you call it. I had spoken to a sister literally once. And, yeh, social media, YouTube and stuff. It was both. But I learnt everything online, on my own.

Jameela: Narrative Interview

However, my ethnographic interactions with these three participants, who were, variously, involved in their Muslim communities, regulars at their local mosques and/or active in online convert networks, point to the fact that for the majority of my sample, digital sociality was an auxiliary to their physical interactions and sociality within the Muslim community. Indeed, the data further revealed that, for some, their digital interactions were an important extension of their in-person socialisation.

5.8.3 'Convert Twitter' and 'Convert Insta'

During my online observations of Melanie, she explained that her use of what she called 'Convert twitter' and 'Convert insta' had started long before she had converted. She described an immersion into a world of Islamic content and Muslim interaction that were not overtly religious, but that were related to her interests in fashion, poetry, health and productivity. She explained to me that the existence of what seemed to be an utterly Muslim 'version' of these topics in the digital spaces she was exploring alerted her to the ways in which Muslims had, to use her words, 'normal lives' outside of the hermetic Islamic spaces she imagined. As I probed what she described as 'Convert insta' and 'Convert Twitter', she began to send me images to demonstrate what she meant (see Figure 10):

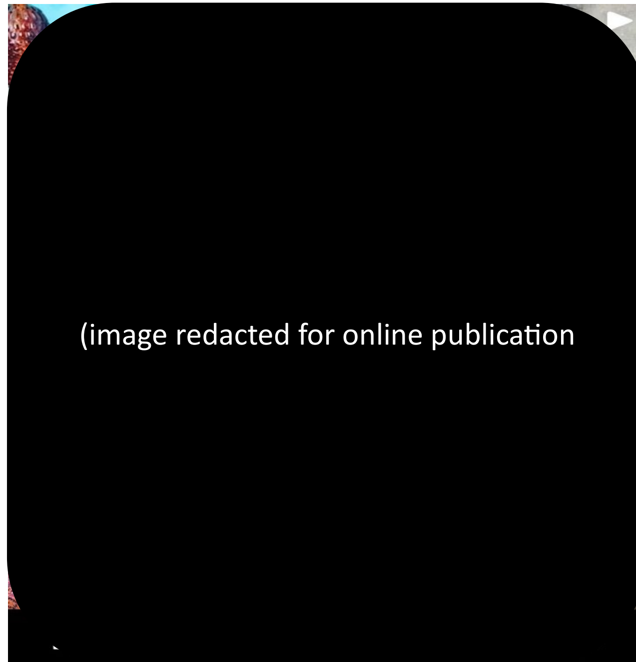


Figure 10 - Melanie's Instagram Screenshot – Source [Instagram]

Melanie: Ethnographic Interaction

Melanie was quick to point out that the videos, images and topics under discussion in the 'convert Insta' were quite 'worldly' and related to non-religious topics that she had an interest in prior to Islam. Her narrative indicated that this was an important element in her conversion process and a reason for the ease with which she adopted her Islamic identity:

> I didn't really change much since I converted, because I think dressing modestly was a value that I had before, but it was not like connected so much to faith. The fashion I liked, the socials I used. My old life and new life fit together. It's kind of awesome for me now because some things that I always valued are very easy for me. I also quit, like, alcohol before, but not because of religion.

Melanie: Semi-Structured Interview

In some senses Melanie is describing a prior involvement with areas of Islamic life and practice that is reminiscent of Lofland and Skonovd's experimental conversion motif (1981). In other ways she seems to be describing the development of her identity. She suggested

during our online interactions that, where before conversion her activist interests in topics such as domestic violence would be general, she now, post-conversion, sought out the Islamic perspectives on these topics in order to align her perspective with Islamic principles. She presented me with examples (see Figure 11):

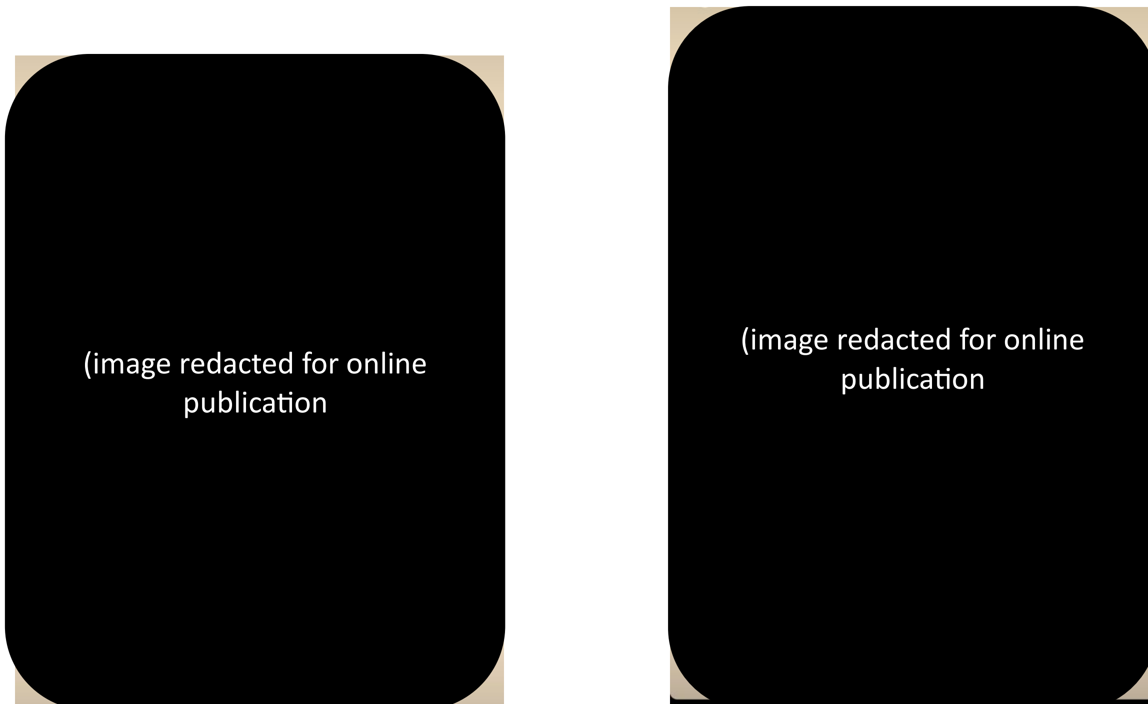
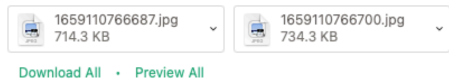


Figure 11 - Melanie's Social Media Interests – Source [Instagram]

This resonates with Schachter's (2004) notion of identity configuration as an individual's attempt to 'construct coherent identities from conflicting identifications' (p. 168). As our interactions became more relaxed, after our narrative interview, our online conversations began to reveal more (see Figure 12):



Salam alaikum
Dear Jeremy, I am sending you some more social media content.

Two screenshits if a story. I find it appalling that there is only male speakers on a issue that does predominantly not concern them from the experience point of view. Because mostly men are the perpetrators. Even in regular events with no abuse topics or gendered topics I find it very problematic that many communities don't put the effort in to invite female scholars. And I do think this is totally opposed to following the Sunnah.
I wish for a way more inclusive and diverse Muslim community.

https:// (image redacted for online publication)

Second slide really got me thinking. It just isn't sufficient to focus on good deeds we need to focus on minimizing the harm we engage in. Especially thinking I'll about others, judging,speaking bad about others and acting bad

https://www ... M2Y=
I really want to engage more in detailled qualitative study of Qur'an. This reminded me of my intention to learn more about tafsir and revelation contexts

https://www ... M2Y=

I really appreciate posts like these I find them encouraging and it helps to get back to the roots.
I did not know that a believer is never unclean I want to try to use different vocabulary when I don't have wudhu or ghusl. Like I am not ritually Clean or something similar because dirty is not really working

Figure 12 - Email Interaction with Melanie – Source [author]

These emails showed that beyond her activist interests and personal interests in lifestyle and productivity, she was using social media to learn more about Islamic jurisprudence and explore other 'religious' content. We discussed this during her semi-structured interview:

> Yeh, like whenever they [social media Islamic groups] like published or they have like a talk, I would chime in and see what they're talking about on certain platforms. Like [name of organisation redacted] or like [name of organisation redacted]… erm yeah. And I mean community based. I think that's like a little bit less reliable but… I don't want to like talk bad about the people, but sometimes I have the feeling that certain communities that are like, for example, like a formal education. It's like very... I can't say basic… Yeah… I mean, it's not like they made a commitment, for example, like, the teachers at [name of organisation redacted]. I mean, they really make their life about teaching and making a space for converts. And I think that's very different than when you hop in communities and you give, like, a speech there and a seminar there. So, I think I enjoy the spaces that are explicitly for learning, but community based.
>
> Melanie: Semi-Structured Interview

In the context of our interview, I have interpreted Melanie's statement above as attempting to explain what she considers to be a difference between the types of digital Islamic

interaction she is involved in and the types non-converts were often involved in. She makes a distinction between 'community based' Islamic education, which offers a socialisation aspect and a 'space for converts', and the 'formal Islamic education' which is seemingly more institutional and which she does not tend to favour. This distinction encouraged me to think more carefully about the notion of lived religion, as including, for many converts, spaces for exploring their new identity configurations within a community. This use of digital space as a way of traversing the intersection between religious, social and personal interests was prominent in other data sets, especially during my ethnographic observations. It was clear from the physical and online environments I was being invited to, that converts often interacted in spaces that were centred around religion and/or convert communities, reaffirming my findings, discussed earlier, that the convert habitus included feelings of comfort in particular religiously oriented settings. This tendency for converts to associate with one another in this way and interact in both physical and digital environments had other interesting implications, my analysis indicates. For example, their unique ways of communicating.

5.8.4 Convert Vernacular

The uniqueness of conversion, which my data suggests was highly subjective and individualised, coupled with the networks of digital and physical environments that converts belonged to and which, my data implies, they felt most comfortable within, led to unique linguistic nuances. Converts communicated and articulated their lived religiosity in ways that I interpreted as representing a type of convert vernacular. I have already indicated that my participants' occasional inability to express their experiences in English led to a type of code switching wherein they used Arabic terminology to better articulate their thoughts and feelings (see section 5.2). Further analysis revealed that the language converts used included the language of Islamic jurisprudence, resistance, counterculture and, in some cases, womanism (Mubashshir, 2022). In my first phase of coding, occurrences of this type of language were coded as unconnected codes such as 'Fiqh & similar words', 'Assertive Language', 'Feminism/Womanism Talk', 'Counterculture Language'. However, in the second phase of coding in which I began to search for themes, these uses of language evolved into a subtheme I have entitled 'Convert Vernacular'. I have interpreted the 'convert vernacular' to

be one component of the broader theme 'Convert Habitus', and illustrative of one of the ways in which participants' identities and commonalities manifested. The subject of identity will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. It is worth noting, here, that the convert vernacular does not refer to language which is exclusive to converts. For example, the use of Islamic jurisprudence terminology cannot be said to be exclusive to converts. However, the reoccurrence of the vernacular, its prevalence within the data and the esoteric nature of the terms, pointed to something analytically interesting about the converts' perspectives. Below I provide a few examples of the commonly used vernacular and what I was able to glean of their meanings according to my participants, from conversations, narratives, interviews and member checking activities:

5.8.4.1 Eman

The commonly used term *eman* refers to the faith of an individual. In some instances it was used to talk about the state of being a Muslim, with the implication being that the absence of *eman* was the state of disbelief – or not being a Muslim. At other times it was used to refer to the degree of certainly and the acts of worship performed in the heart, by the tongue and by the limbs. In this sense, *eman* could increase and decrease according to one's state of conviction during their Islamic life. An example of the use of this term in these ways is as follows:

> … I would rather lose my friends and family than my *eman*.
>
> Jameela: Narrative Interview

> Whenever I went out without it. [the hijab], I felt it was like draining my *eman* sort of.
>
> Shaheeda: Narrative Interview

5.8.4.2 Practicing

The word practicing often related, in the speech of my participants, to Muslims displaying visible signs of Islam: In the case of men, the presence of a beard, Islamic clothing, or engagement with outward signs of Islamic practice such as prayer; in the case of women, the adherence to the hijab and other outward signs of Islamic practice such as prayer. Leanne described her interaction with some Muslims before conversion:

> … but the people around me wasn't what I'd call practicing Muslims. And they were Muslim by name, by birth. Do you know, they wasn't practicing Islam. Nothing like that. I'd never seen people like praying five times a day and doing this and doing that, seeing people fast or nothing. Nobody spoke, like, about Islam.
>
> Leanne: Narrative Interview

5.8.4.3 Deen

Deen referred to religion, as understood conventionally, but also extended to all aspects of life. This is best summarised by Derrick, who notes:

> I read books about the *deen* which tell me what to do in terms of prayer and cleaning myself…
>
> Derrick: Narrative Interview

5.8.4.4 Fiqh

The word *fiqh*, though coded less frequently across the corpus, referred to Islamic perspectives, rationales and rulings as it related to actions. Shaeedah, for example, used the term when contrasting her trips with her mother before and after conversion:

> It became a problem, yeh. We would go [to the cinema] nearly every Wednesday, when Orange had their deal on. Now, I was like checking the *fiqh* for everything. Was this halal, was that halal. I can understand. She wouldn't like it.
>
> Shaheeda: Semi-Structured Interview

5.8.4.5 Qadr

Qadr is an Arabic word which can be translated as 'destiny/predestination'. The word was used frequently as a way of expressing acceptance of the challenges, losses and difficulties converts faced as a result of their conversion and asserting of Islamic practices. Although, in my experience, it is a commonly used Arabic word amongst Muslims, including British and Western Muslims, its use and prevalence across my data revealed something about the religious cognition of my participants. In this regard, Uthman said:

> It was a private, all-boys school [I had attended for secondary school]. Just the prospect of starting college in, like, a mixed environment. It was a no. I could have finished everything [my education] a lot sooner. But *Qadr*. I didn't want to compromise my *deen*.
>
> Uthman: Semi-Structured Interview

5.8.4.6 Free-mixing

The phrase free-mixing related exclusively to the Islamic principle of gender separation. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to outline the jurisprudential details of this Islamic precept, but in relation to my data, participants assumed my understanding and most often used the term to talk about mixed-gender environments in which they felt uncomfortable or felt were unconducive to their lifestyle choices. As the extracts below exemplify, both male and female participants used the term in similar ways:

> So, as a Muslim, I think it's possible to coexist. However, there is a red line and there are there are instances where we have to… or have to say – for example – to distance ourselves in certain situations. Why? Because the lifestyle of the average, non-Muslim, most of the time, the situation that you will be in is not congruous with Islamic principles, whether that's free-mixing, whether that's going to a place that's not permitted for Muslim, etc, etc. So, there are times like, for example, I've been at work, have been invited to Christmas parties. And, you know, this is a situation where I say sorry, I can't free-mix.
>
> Abdullah: Semi-Structured Interview

> …which I quit due to free-mixing. I'm not bothered about that now… I worked hard. She didn't like me. But I stuck to my principles. I avoided fitnah and, Alhamdulillah, I always wanted to run my own business.
>
> Shaheeda: Semi-Structured Interview

> And I mean if you look into our society and how like for example, especially like zina [adultery] of the eyes, how it's like normalized. And like, which Muslim doesn't watch Netflix or free-mix. I really want to, like, talk to some because this is just an example and, I mean, all those shows are like full of, like, explicit scenes. And I mean, you can seek out to not watch certain levels of explicit content beforehand but yeah, I mean, we're exposed to that and we're all kind of like engaging in zina in different ways. I mean that's my impression of society.
>
> Melanie: Semi-Structured Interview

The examples of the convert vernacular given above are far from an exhaustive list of terms and phrases which converts commonly used. However, the vernacular presented above will be important in the following chapter when I consider, more fully, the identities of converts which took shape around their experiences in the social world and their lived religiosity.

5.9 Summary

What this chapter has described is the lived-religious cognition of my participants and the patterns of conversion which acted as the catalyst for this developing. In pointing to the highly individualised patterns of conversion experienced by my participants, my findings indicate complexities in understanding the motivations and contexts within which converts develop. However, the existential importance of conversion in the minds of all my participants is evident. In the data I have presented, there is also evidence of behavioural and experiential commonalities amongst my participants that I have interpreted as indicative of a habitus. As I have acknowledged, my use of the sociological concept is far from unique in this type of research and its application may be contentious (Davey, 2009); something I will reflection upon within the thesis. However, an understanding of converts as possessing a unique habitus led me to further observations around the existence of a particular vernacular which represented a manifestation of that habitus and a way with which converts articulated religion as lived, real, at once worldly and deeply faith-based. I have concluded this chapter by presenting findings which exemplify this vernacular and offer clues about the perspectives and identities of my participants. This chapter's focus on religious conversion as the experiential context within which my participants are set apart from heritage Muslims is important for two reasons. As well as carving out the analytical space to foreground the personal, lived-religious, existential shift in the lives of the converts, it begins to develop an understanding of my participants' identities as something closely tied to their religious cognition. The next chapter will further this discussion, presenting my findings in relation to the identity formation and social experiences of my participants.

Chapter 6: Convert Muslims’ Sociality, Marginality and Identity Configurations

6.1 Introduction

As the concept of ‘identity configuration’ is to feature prominently within this chapter, before continuing my discussion I will restate my understanding of the concept: In referring to identity configuration, I am describing the natural psychological endeavour to configure multiple, often conflicting or contradictory selves, into a coherent singular identity. Erikson (1968) suggests that this type of identity formation results from both a societal requirement and individual psychological need for ‘sameness and historical continuity’ (p. 18). Other identity theorists continue to use the term to describe the ‘the management, negotiation, or structure of various domains of identity’ (Parmenter et al., 2022: 373) (e.g. Galliher, et al., 2017; Gyberg, et al., 2019; Meca, et al., 2023; Parmenter, et al., 2022; Schachter, 2004).

In this chapter I shift my analytical gaze to the identity configurations and social experiences of my participants. I retain the concept of lived religion as a lens through which to view these experiences and the perspectives presented through the data. The majority of the data presented in this chapter relates to converts’ social experiences during the period of their conversion and schooling. However, a few of the participants made explicit reference to their current views and perspectives. This brought into relief the fact that their past experiences are relevant in understanding their present perspectives – and vice versa. This is one indication of the appropriateness of the narrative methodology in this project. For in demonstrating the ways in which narratives are constructed of memories, reflections and both past and present perspectives, this chapter highlights the element of temporality. Freeman (2013) suggests that ‘narrative identity emerges in and through the interplay of past, present, and future in the form of remembering, acting, and imagining” (p. 223). For me this meant that meaning about my participants’ identities was constructed by asking them to engage in the exercises of reflection and remembering (semi-structured interviews/narrative interviews) and acting (observation).

6.2 The Social World as Lived Religion

The findings under discussion in this chapter point to the ways in which lived religion manifested in the daily social contexts converts found themselves in. As 'conventional academic definitions of religion' tend to delimit what 'counts' as valid religion (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020: 159), the previous chapter's framing of lived religion as encompassing all spheres of life should help to place my characterisation of this chapter's themes into context. Much in the same way as the previous chapter's analytical focus could be characterised as relating to the religiosity, spirituality and Islamic conversion practices of Muslim converts, this chapter's themes can be characterised as relating closely to the social and psychological experiences of the participants. I have thus entitled the chapter's findings *Convert Muslims' Sociality, Marginality and Identity Configurations*. However, as I have emphasised previously (see section 5.2) this delineation between the religious or spiritual and the socio-psychological is, in practice and in the minds of my participants, blurred, or possibly non-existent. I have found it useful, however, for discursive reasons, to delineate between these two elements of the data in separate chapters for two reasons: First, as I have said previously, as a way of providing the analytical space for the oft-neglected theological perspectives of my participants to emerge. Secondly, as a way of exhibiting the relationality between these elements in the data and, in so doing, avoid delimiting religion as a locus in the lives of my participants.

As indicated in chapters 2 and 3 (2.4.3 and 3.1.3), the tendency to delimit religion can immure religion as a discrete marker of identity or elide it with cultural and ethno-racial considerations. The findings I present in this chapter demonstrate that the type of lived religiosity that converts expressed and practiced often overtly sought to avoid ethno-racial and ethno-cultural accretion, sometimes leading to marginality in their social contexts. Aleem, for examples, relates:

> The first problem I met [after conversion] is the culture… I was going to the Pakistani *masjid*. They're more like more culturalist people, so they more followed their culture rather than religion. And following the certain school which was taught in Pakistan… And they made statements from their school, *fatawa*, and they teach

> basically the culture… And when I started to learn Islam, that was another challenge. I fell out with some of them. When I rejected some stuff they were teaching me.
>
> Aleem: Semi-Structured Interview

This extract shows that it was Aleem's rejection of ethno-racial accretion in pursuit of a purer practice of Islam that led to a 'falling out' – a form of marginality within the Muslim community.

6.3 Some Notes on the Chapter

Considering the findings from the previous chapter, I will retain the concept of the convert habitus as a heuristic device with which to understand the commonality in the behavioural dispositions of converts. What this chapter begins to unravel then is what implications the convert habitus and the lived religious cognition of the converts had on the identity formation and social experiences of the participants. To address this, my findings draw heavily from the latent data extracted from my ethnographic observations and interactions. This is, in part, due to the limited semantic data that addressed identity in an explicit manner during the recorded interviews. It is also partly due to my eventual realisation that my ethnographic interactions with participants revealed significant things about their identities. As my ethnographic approach, in both the physical and digital worlds of my participants, was aimed at looking at and beyond the words of my participants, the analysis of the data required interpretations and theorisations about the explicit and implicit meanings shaping that data.

6.4 Conversion as Controversial, Negativised and Pathologised

A clear example of what I have described above of the important role latent data played in the development of this chapter, can be seen in the construction of this first theme; Conversion as Controversial, Negativised and Pathologised. Jameela and I had the following exchange:

> **Me**: Have you experienced anything positive or negative, expected or unexpected within the education system?... Why did you laugh at that question before; why did you think that was funny?
>
> **Jameela**: I don't know, it's just that Islam is controversial isn't it? Like, obviously.
>
> **Me**: What do you mean, like what is controversial about Islam...?
>
> **Jameela**: Like everything, *subhanAllah*... Homosexuality, all the gender stuff, terrorism, women's rights, mixing [confirmed, during member-checking, to mean free-mixing between men and women].
>
> Jameela: Semi-Structured Interview

This exchange occurred during a semi-structured interview with Jameela that followed a period of observation. During the observation period the participant asked me for an example of the types of questions I would ask in the semi-structured interview stage of data collection. At that time, as I was most interested in learning more about this participant's educational experiences, I provided, as an example, a paraphrased version of the interview prompt question, 'Have you experienced anything positive or negative, expected or unexpected within the education system?'. She responded, initially, with a pre-reflexive laugh and a telling series of nods which I interpreted to be expressive of the fact that the answer was relatable, or obvious. To confirm my interpretations, I followed up with the abovementioned interaction during her semi-structured interview.

Following the exchange above, the participant went on to explain that her educational experiences were broadly negative; something I will discuss further in the following chapter. What is of note here, however, is the fact that the semantic data captured did not do analytical justice without the latent data captured in her pre-reflexive reaction, and the prior ethnographic encounter. In full context, I was alerted to the participant's expectation of negativity as a result of conversion. While this interpretation was later confirmed by this participant on a semantic level, others of my participants also articulated, in implicit ways,

an expectation that their choice to convert was controversial, unaccepted or, in some way, negatively received. I noticed this theme as existing throughout the corpus and as I began to make connections between occurrences of this theme, it became clear that the expectation of negativity came from varying sources. For some, the source of the negativity was the media:

> Do you know what? Now that we live in like the YouTube culture, I think, in that sense, it's good because we're given a voice. Like, I've been interviewed on quite a few platforms and it's great to see. But obviously, in the media, they portray you're either just naive, and you're going to be a terrorist, or you're abused. But yeah, it's not, it's not true, is it? And I think there is more representation, not enough, but it is getting there especially with, like I said, the rise of YouTube and stuff.
>
> Charlene: Semi-Structured Interview

> When I reverted, it wasn't a very good time, frankly, because there was a lot of stuff going on in the media. I didn't really care about any of that… I think the main reason I cared was about the difficulties I had adapting to university and this sort of university culture. The media definitely didn't help there.
>
> Isa: Semi-Structured Interview

To some extent, all of my participants made reference to the negative construction of converts in the media, with most indicating this in response to my question, 'How do you feel about the way Muslim converts are portrayed in the media?'. For example, Siobhan commented about how the media had created a negative, racialised impression of white converts who wore hijab:

> You couldn't turn on the TV without seeing something about a convert doing something wrong. Remember white widow? At the time I knew people in college thought of me like that, with the hijab and all that. Like, I would say most of it [media coverage] was bad, if not all of it.

Siobhan: Semi-Structured Interview

Yet, my interactions with Aleem and Charlene revealed that the source of expectations of negativity also arose from past encounters with their families:

> My Grandma [who was from Siberia] told me, when there was the Soviet Union, that she saw the Muslims as very harsh, like bandits and you know, with knife crime and guns. And she was traumatised by it. So basically, she didn't tell me the full story, but as far as I know, this is how she told me she described the Muslims.

Aleem: Semi-Structured Interview

> So, my family's religion is Jewish. Yeah, definitely like the older generations of the family. My family's not that close anyway. But like great aunts and stuff, they were just like, if you want to see us, you have to take off that thing on your head. So that was where we just completely cut off.

Charlene: Semi-Structured Interview

Abdullah, Melanie, Derrick, Uthman, Siobhan and Jameela also reported experiencing negative reactions to their conversions from family members. While their families' negative reactions were varied and had impacts upon the participants in different ways, a commonality in these experiences was visible. The negative reactions tended to relate to a pre-conceived fear of extremism, a perception that the participant had been converted through brainwashing or emotional bribery, or an expectation that the conversion would lead to something undesirable. This type of pathologising of conversion occurred to some extent in each participant's narrative. As I have mentioned, this did not always come from family members or from media sources.

For Emma her practice of religion was negativised outside of the family, amongst friendship groups and previous social circles. She describes what happened to her when she started to wear the hijab:

> **Emma**: It was like in Lord of the Rings, when Frodo puts on the ring. It was literally like that, like a different world.
>
> **Me**: Different how?
>
> **Emma**: Everyone acted different, it was crazy… same places I used to go, same people. Just everyone had an issue with me or just didn't want to know. *Alhamdulillah*. That's it isn't it. *Fa toobo lil ghurubaa* (so glad tidings to the strangers) … some of them, definitely not a good reaction.
>
> Emma: Semi-Structured Interview

Emma's description of previously familiar social environments transforming into something so unfamiliar as to become akin to a 'different world' is particularly vivid. This resonates closely with my own early experiences as a convert. As described in chapter 1, after conversion I noticed previously unproblematic issues such as my dietary habits, sartorial choices and socio-political opinions taking on a new significance (see section 1.1). Her analogy articulates the sense of transformative social displacement conversion can cause. Notably, not all social reactions to conversion were overtly negative, however. Jameela describes the reaction of her former neighbour:

> She would always say how I look sad now and all that, since wearing it [the hijab]. 'I just want to make sure you're okay', kind of thing.
>
> Jameela: Semi-Structured Interview

The above exchange appears to be an example of somebody intending to be helpful to the participant. Nonetheless, the participant's interpretation of the exchange suggests that the

neighbour’s concern may have been motivated by a similar pathologising of conversion to the examples previously discussed:

> No, I wasn’t sad at all. I think she was trying to help. She is so sweet. She probably thought a man was forcing me to wear it.
>
> Jameela: Semi-Structured Interview

While I am cautious to recognise the participant’s interpretation as an assumption, I am also cognisant of the heightened awareness my female participants had with regard to gendered essentialisations. My analysis revealed that each of the female participants and one male participant experienced sometimes quite overt essentialisation. This led to the construction of the subtheme to be discussed next.

6.4.1 Damsel in Distress

> My mum acted like I was some sort of damsel in distress. She was cool with me clubbing and that [laugh], but not becoming Muslim... She just thought, like, I can’t think for myself, if you get what I mean.
>
> Shaheeda: Narrative Interview

What this participant points to of her mother’s instinct to gender her conversion and reduce her agency to what she describes as a ‘damsel in distress’ speaks to a broader tendency to reduce the agency of convert women to passive recipients of Islam (see Moosavi, 2011: 263-4; Said, 1985: 97). For my analysis, it made me alive to the experiences of some of my participants in relation to the intersection between religion and gender and how this played out in their lives.

6.5 Intersectionality: Gender

While gender did not feature in an explicit way in the questions posed to participants during the semi-structured interviews, it became clear during the narrative interviews that gender played a significant role in understanding the development of participants' identities, particularly female participants. Taking account of Selod's (2018) view that social inquiry into the racialisation of Muslims must take account of gender, I was alive to the fact that religion, race and gender did not operate in silos. It was noticeable that the experiences of discrimination faced by convert men and women contained elements of gendering, pointing towards intersectionality as a dimension of the unique genus of convert-specific discrimination faced by convert Muslims, which I have touched upon in other sections (e.g. 2.3.3, 2.3.62.3.8, 2.3.9). While male participants' perceived their motives for conversion to be frequently questioned, secularised, pathologised and feared, women perceived their motives for conversion to be most often divested of agency, religious content and rationality. Charlene spoke of her agency in choosing to wear the niqab. During one conversation she describes explaining to an old college friend that she had selected to wear the niqab:

> I actually told her, 'there is no compulsion in religion'. That is literally what the Qur'an says.
>
> Charlene: Semi-Structured Interview

This reference to a Quranic verse (Qur'an 2:256) revealed a discord between Charlene's Islamically rooted understanding of her own agency and the ascribed lack of agency she felt society had imposed upon her. Melanie mentioned that her immediate family had reacted to her conversion by blaming her future fiancé. Despite being in a relationship with a Muslim man prior to her conversion, Melanie had initially hidden her conversion for fear of her family reducing the religious content of the conversion and amplifying the affectional content of it. She was, however, careful to point out to me that her relationship with her Muslim partner and the respect and intrigue she felt for his religion was indeed a major motivation for her conversion. Therefore, at the same time as critiquing the gendered assumptions of a purely affectional motive, which she had expected from her family,

Melanie acknowledged the presence of affectional motives in her religious conversion. Given the findings presented in the previous chapter, regarding the interplay between various conversion motifs and the complex interplay of more than a single motif in many conversions, I have adopted a more nuanced reading of Melanie's conversion motives. In the context of her complete narrative, I interpret the affectional relationship to represent a component within a broader process of conversion for Melanie, rather than a stand-alone model of conversion such as the one theorised by Lofland and Skonovd as the 'affectional motif' (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981: 379).

6.5.1 Two Framings of Visibly Muslim Women

The intersection between gender and religion proved to be fruitful analytical ground to cultivate, as essentialised constructions of Muslim women played out in the narratives of my participants in various ways. The data showed that the dominant framing of visibly[22] Muslim women took two shapes: the damsel in distress or the dangerous radical. In the public settings of educational institutions and workplaces, the converts were often framed as – to put it in Shaheeda's earlier stated words – 'damsels in distress'; victims of the oppressive dictums of Islam which had imposed a style of life so antithetical to Western Culture. Umm Musa recalls:

> When I left [schooling, by not applying for college] my parents just thought Islam had ruined my life, kind of. This thing about women – Muslim women – not getting educated. They were like, 'Islam has ruined your life'. They thought someone was forcing me to leave. They didn't look at my reasons.

Umm Musa: Narrative Interview

Siobhan related a similar story in which a nurse at the hospital where she gave birth asked her husband to leave the room before questioning her about domestic abuse and coercion. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the ethical limitations of my questioning, I was unable

[22] Referring, rather crudely, to embodied practices of Islam such as wearing the sartorial indications of the religion (e.g. hijab, niqab or abaya). Elsewhere this has been referred to as 'Muslim(-Looking)' (Shaker et al., 2022).

to ascertain the reasons for the nurse's concern in this instance. What is of analytic significance is the participant's own perception of the situation. She described feeling that the nurse was well-meaning but presumptuous, due to Siobhan's relatively young age, her sartorial choices (a full-body *abaya* and *niqab*) and status as a student. This description of the nurse as considering herself to be an emancipatory force, seemingly unaware of her role in reproducing an essentialised notion of the 'oppressed Muslim women', resonates with Shaheeda's 'damsel in distress' comment.

In private, familial and personal settings, the converts were sometimes framed as dangerous and possessing of radical views. Shaheeda recounts a woman's comments to her in Primark after she had confronted the woman about surreptitiously filming her:

> [she said] 'I'm being careful. I don't know what you're going to do with that thing on [referring to her niqaab]… This is England'... It was so annoying, honestly.
>
> Shaheeda: Semi-Structured Interview

The notion of converts being a threat was far more prevalent within the narratives of male converts. However, as this example demonstrates, it was not absent from the narratives of female participants. Leanne told me about her father's reaction to her conversion, explaining that he had threatened to go to the mosque to express his disapproval and 'save her' from being groomed and radicalised.

In both the case of the nurse and the father, the social actors presented themselves as emancipatory forces against a seemingly oppressive religious observance. The tendency to present Western culture as emancipatory in contrast to Islamic practices has been problematised in the literature (Cady and Fessenden, 2013). The woman from Primark's comments seem indicative of a common disdainful attitude towards the niqab or, potentially, towards other publicly articulated displays of Islam (Shaker et al., 2022). In a sense, she positions herself as a cultural defender, stating 'this is England'. In both types of social encounters – 'the presumptuous emancipators' and 'cultural defender' – the female participants were essentialised. These types of essentialisations were explicitly

problematised by some of the female participants themselves. Leanne said, during our semi-structured interview:

> That's one of the first things you notice, really. The hijab stops you having to think about society sexualising you, or fitting into the sort of Kardashian beauty parade nowadays. I don't want to be looked at like that. *Alhamdulillah*, Islam – the hijab and that – to me that's freedom. It gives you that…
>
> Leanne: Semi-Structured Interview

Shaheeda stated something similar, noting:

> To some women, wearing a bikini or wearing a short skirt to clubs is freedom. I think its what men want them to do, what men love them wearing… Cool, but my freedom is freedom to obey God. Like, that's my choice. But when you say that, it'll be like people will only think British women are free… It's weird.
>
> Shaheeda: Semi-Structured Interview

These comments offer a fascinating challenge to the notion of a universal model of female emancipation. Shaheeda's notion of emancipation through Islamic clothing has been increasingly emphasised in scholarly literature written by and about Muslim women (Brenner 1996; Tarlo, 2007; van Nieuwkerk 2008; Werbner, 2012; Zebiri, 2008). As well as indicating further the language of resistance and womanism[23] that featured prominently in my conversations with the converts, this challenge points towards the Islamic identity configuration of my convert participants and the tensions that may exist between that identity and Western cultural norms. Rather than constructing 'an Islamic reworking of

[23] The word womanism is used here to distinguish the perspective of my participants from feminism. There was evidence from some of my participants to indicate a disdain/rejection of mainstream feminist theory. Additionally, womanism, while arguably as diverse as feminist theory, is a movement that considers modern manifestations of feminism to be in service of White women's social, political and economic goals, while being ambivalent to the needs of Black women (Barlow and Venkataraman, 2022; Medwinter and Rozario, 2021). Given the racial diversity of my participants and the relationality of womanism to intersectionality (racial intersectionality will be discussed in subsequent pages), I considered this a more appropriate description of my participant's language.

Western feminism', as Suleiman's (2013: 95) study suggests of convert women, my participants spoke of an entirely Islamic notion of female freedom; 'freedom to obey God'.

Interestingly, at times, similar tensions appeared to exist between the converts' and heritage Muslim cultural norms. This required Charlene to defend her Islamic identity and sartorial choices amongst Muslims also:

> Cultural sisters will ask 'why don't you wear makeup out; why do you do this, etcetera'. I literally give them the *daleel* (evidences). Allah *subhanahu wa tala'ala* [glorified and exalted is He] said, tell the believing women to lower their gaze and protect their private parts and don't show off their adornment except… I can't remember the full verse, but, except to their husbands. In *surah Noor* [the Quranic Chapter entitled The Light]. They end up thinking of you like an extremist, *subhanAllah*.
>
> Charlene: Semi-Structured Interview

Others of my participants experienced a similar questioning of their sartorial choices from within the Muslim community. For Leanne this became a source of social anxiety:

> They would look at me when I wasn't wearing hijab and judge me, like I wasn't a proper Muslim. As soon as I start wearing it properly, it was questions and back and forward, like I was too extreme now. It's like I didn't want to do the school run anymore [where she would meet many of the Muslim women]. I was like confused by it. But they did really celebrate me at first, giving me prayer mats… But you can't win. If you turned up like your old self, they would think you're a spy or just a fake Muslim. When you follow the sunnah, they think you're going to be like hardcore and give them a bad name. You have to only care about Allah.
>
> Leanne: Semi-Structured Interview

What this participant describes relates closely to the idea of converts' motives being questioned and divested of religious content. This experience is an example of that happening from within the Muslim community. It adds a further dimension to converts' marginality; the potential for converts be seen as spies or outsiders within what they perceive to be their own community. Broadly, what the findings presented above point to in relation to the experiences of convert women is an intersectionality between religion and gender in creating experiences of marginality. The data indicates that they were able to respond to and resist this marginality by upholding Islamic principles and providing evidence from the Qur'an for their actions and beliefs. As I have intimated, this was not the only form of intersectionality which was relevant in the social experiences of my participants.

6.6 Intersectionality: Race

The intersection between religion and race (see footnote 4) appeared to be of analytical interest also. My awareness of the pervasive presence of racialisation in the lived experiences of my participants was gradual and occurred primarily during the familiarisation stage of my analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As I read and re-read the transcripts of my participants, what stood out to me was the frequency in which racialised words such as 'white', 'black', 'Asian' and 'race' appeared in the narratives and semi-structured interviews. Referring to my discussion on inductive vs deductive analysis (section 5.3), it can therefore be said that this theme evolved inductively (Patton, 1990). As I began to cluster instances of these racialised words into the subtheme 'race' and eventually the broader theme 'intersectionality', the visibility of this intersection between race and religion caused a change in my autoethnographic reflections also. I began to apperceive racialisation as more important to my own experience. In my early reflective journal entries, I had noted:

> Literature is focused on race. This doesn't fit with my own conversion. 9/11 vs race in converts life - interesting to look at.

Autoethnographic Reflective Journal

This journal entry is alluding to what I considered to be the importance of 9/11 in contrast to the limited importance of race in the identity configurations of converts. This view is, in some ways, a reflection of what I described in the introduction to this thesis as limited personal experience of overt racism (see 1.1). However, in contrast, a later fieldnote, written during the later stages of analysis of my ethnographic data, reads:

> Racial profiles of ppl [my participants] very varied. But all have experiences with racism. Lots of race stuff in Muslim and Non-Muslim community… Self-perception vs community perception.
>
> Autoethnographic Reflective Journal

At times, the issue of race appeared in the data in the silences and implicit understandings that passed between my participants and I. For example, Emma, in describing her reasons for being unable to assert her desire for gender segregated spaces in university (this will be covered in greater depth in the following chapter), states:

> … On top of that… I'm a white revert and it's just not that easy to get heard when you're talking about Islam and Muslims and stuff, if you're not Asian. Do you know what I mean?
>
> Emma: Semi-Structured Interview

She explained that, given her atypical racial profile, she would not be viewed as representing a valid Islamic voice that could make demands of the university to accommodate her religious needs. Embedded within her statement is the presumption that I would understand this (e.g. do you know what I mean?). While her full statement does appear to arise from her own presumption (though it may have experiential credence), I did indeed know what she meant, having myself experienced a tendency to perceive Islamic religious concerns as valid only when conceived of through an ethno-racial lens. I had experienced situations in which my practice had been viewed as incongruous with heritage Muslims and, therefore, extreme and indicative of religious illiteracy. In the following chapter, I will draw out some examples

of this from the experiences of my other participants. These examples will indicate the harmful effects such reductive constructions of Islamic identity can have in the lives of converts.

For Uthman, a white convert, subtle experiences of racial discrimination occurred during his interactions within the Muslim community. He described the tendency of his Asian friends to ask about the complexion of his mixed-race children and speak approvingly about children born with lighter skin and eyes.

At other times, the subtheme of race appeared in more explicit ways. For example, in the observation days I spent with Umm Musa and Uthman it became clear that they were treated quite differently within their respective communities. While Uthman, who was White[24], was held up as a model convert and frequently presented as an example to other converts within his community, in other ways he was viewed as a newcomer, an outsider and lacking in religious literacy, despite having been Muslim for over fifteen years. I noted this on Uthman's observation schedule:

> Seen as a brother but described like an outsider (pronouns of I and them noticed). Advised to attend beginner classes… [Uthman] seemed well versed in Islam.
>
> Uthman: Ethnographic Data

This is in stark contrast to Umm Musa, who described herself as going unnoticed and unrecognised as a convert due to her race. This discrepancy in the ways in which these converts were treated sensitised me to an ethno-racial divide that some participants had indicated during our interviews. Isa had said:

[24] The capitalisation of 'White' in this instance in the thesis is in accordance with Appiah's (2020) recommendation to capitalise the word in order to draw attention to the socio-historical origins of the word 'White' as a social, rather than a natural or biological, identity classification. She notes that 'The point of the capital letter, then, isn't to elevate; it's to situate' (Appiah, 2020).

> And there is still – there is this racism in the *jamaa'ah* [congregation]. I hear about Turkish people being racist towards Arabs or Arabs being racist to Indians and things like that. But in England, its worse maybe, between the different races…
>
> Isa: Semi-Structured Interview

Jameela had also revealed experiences with racialised terminology within the community, during the early days of her conversion:

> Asians will kind of call all white people non-Muslims sometimes. I have been sat there when they say *gora* (white person) for non-Muslim, instead of *kafir*, basically interchangeably… But they still treat them better than black converts.
>
> Jameela: Semi-Structured Interview

During an online interaction I had with Yusuf, he described being told by one Asian Muslim friend that black cultural hairstyles such as cornrows were impermissible. Meeting him on a separate occasion at an Islamic *dawah* table, he explained that he felt compelled to explain to prospective new Muslims that they were likely to experience racism and that he advised them to read about the Islamic position on racism. I understood him to mean that this was a means of preparing converts for the differences between Islamic doctrine and Muslim practice.

Having been alerted to these racialised encounters within the everyday lives of the converts, this theme made its way, more explicitly, into my ethnographic interactions and fieldnotes. Four of the six participants who identified themselves as 'white' described instances of being treated with tokenism (Dickens et al, 2019; Robinson, 2013) within the community and/or with limited religious literacy. For Emma this was such a problem, she had posted on social media:

> The advertising materials and online content of Islamic centres needs to be more diverse. It needs to catch up with the way the world is. Not just show smiling white people on the front. #inclusivity

Emma: Ethnographic Data (paraphrased. See section 4.10.6)

My digital ethnographic data also revealed an online conversation between a participant and a commenter on a social media post about 'a white revert'. The post depicted a white woman in a hijab crying, with one comment quipping:

> What white people be like when they realise Ramadan is 30 days.

Derrick: Ethnographic Data (paraphrased)

This prompted Derrick to respond to the comment scathingly, with a request not to bring the convert's race into conversation on the post. Many other comments further condemned the racial undertones of the quip.

Each of these data extracts revealed something about the ways in which racialisation is experienced by converts. Key to understanding this is the incongruence between the doctrinal precepts of racial egalitarianism within Islam (Hadith 22978, n.d.) and the cultural reality within the Muslim communities. Participants described an expectation of an absence of racism within the community. This expectation was sometimes a presumption on the part of the converts themselves:

> Maybe it was the way I converted and the beautiful people I met, but you don't expect there to be any racism. I wasn't brought up racist, so I don't get it.

Owen: Semi-Structured Interview

However, sometimes the presumption was on the part of the wider community:

> Trust me *akhi*, you'll get told, 'no no brother, there is no racism in the Muslims. No brother'… I'm not saying there is massive issues. But we [Muslims] are human.
>
> Uthman: Semi-Structured Interview

What this translated to, in practice, was a mistaken understanding that colour racism, in being prohibited within the egalitarian ideals of the religion, was not operative within the community. In my own experiences within the Muslim community, this assumption led to sometimes uncritical examinations of racism within the community, or a notable ignorance of the historical, social and cultural norms present within some Muslim community practices in relation to race. In some cases, this had led to a susceptibility to racialise converts. I note within my reflective journal:

> Like Derrick, I used to get the impression that some Muslims didn't know or didn't want to know that racism existed. Whole Muslim centres were divided along racial lines but it's hard to point out. I have tended to avoid racially homogonous Islamic centres and it seems my participants have too. Yusuf – YBM [young black male] described being judged by 'uncles'.
>
> Autoethnographic Reflective Journal

Abdullah appears to have reached the same conclusion, putting it thus:

> In terms of specifically, you mentioned the tattoos, yes, I get a lot of comments. And dare I say it, probably because I'm a black Muslim. And I don't want to, you know, cast aspersions upon a particular group. It's predominantly coming from one group of Muslims. Because when you look at other groups of Muslims, they really do integrate. Yeah. But this group, you have to ask yourself the question, they rarely call people to *deen*. Their mosques are very divided. You get a Pakistani mosque, Bangladeshi mosque, you know, when there's only need for one mosque there, they have to, because they don't want to mix with each other. They're not very welcoming

> to outsiders. So, this is something embedded, entrenched in their culture… Being black, you feel it, they look at you differently.
>
> Abdullah: Semi-Structured Interview

Aleem assessed the tendency to racialise as operating within a hierarchical structure:

> There is a sort of invisible hierarchy in terms of converts that nobody speaks about. Like black ones aren't really seen as the same. They look Muslim and don't really get all the invitations and held up like [a hand gesture to denote high status]. The white brothers, we are all sort of up there in terms of celebration, but when it comes to marriage and stuff, no. I think Asian converts probably get it the easiest there. I don't know.
>
> Aleem: Semi-Structured Interview

Arguably, the obscuration of racism served to uphold, in subtle ways, the racial hierarchies that exist within and without some Muslim communities and, in turn, served to mask the converts' lived struggles with racialisation. This manifested, most often, in negative ways. For Owen, Uthman and Aleem it meant that they had struggled to find marriage and, as Aleem put it, 'complete half of…[his]… *deen*.'. While Owen and Uthman are both now married, all three of these participants described being considered unsuitable for marriage by the families of heritage Muslims upon conversion. For Jameela, her experiences of othering had resulted in an increased consciousness of her race, inspiring her to seek out those who shared this type of othering. This was particularly evident in the types of online content she accessed and pointed me towards in our discussions about racism in the Muslim community (see Figures 10-13 below).

Figure 13 - Screenshot 1 – Source [*BlackMuslimForum.wordpress.com*]

Figure 14 - Screenshot 2 – Source [*BlackMuslimForum.wordpress.com*]

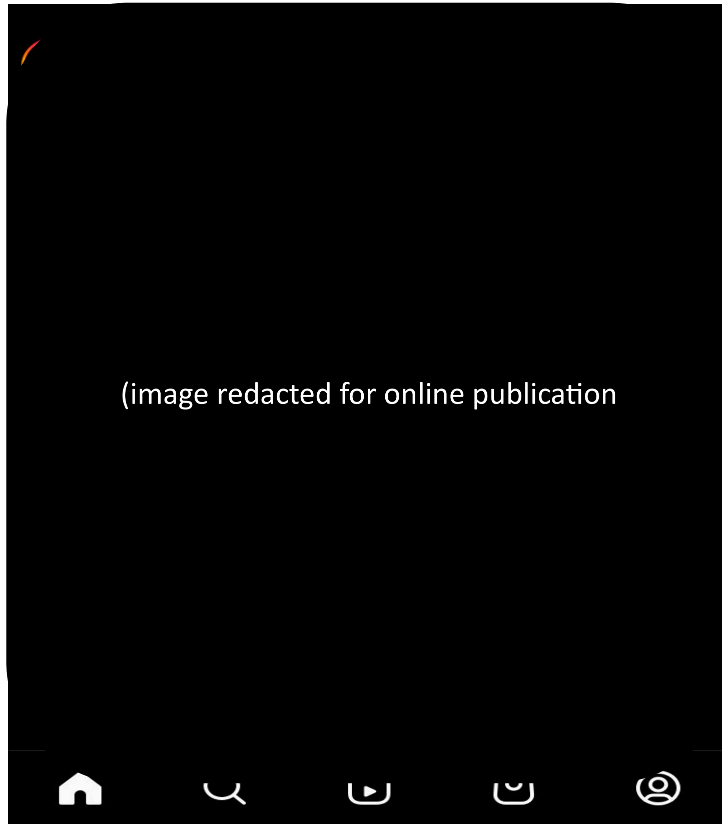


Figure 15 - Instagram Post Screenshot – Source [Jameela]

Figure 16 - Link Anti-Racism Report Screenshot – Source [muslimcensus.co.uk]

The material presented above, as well as other digital media material accessed by my participants, employed the language and iconography of black resistance, infused with Islamic principles.

6.7 Islamic Identity as Resistance: 'Holding on to Hot Coals'

As with my observations and analysis relating to my participants' experiences with gendering, the converts in this study confronted their experiences of racialisation by asserting Islamic principles and identity; in this case, asserting the egalitarianism of Islam and critiquing the racialisation that they perceived to result from cultural accretion. In this sense, the converts appeared to adopt a mechanism similar to that which Scourfield et al. (2013: 132) suggest of Muslim children raised in Britain, in which they construct and internalise an Islamic identity as resistance against attacks on their beliefs and practices. While the focus of Scourfield et al.'s work was on heritage Muslims' resistance to anti-Islamic attacks, the mechanism can be extended to describe convert Muslims' resistance to this distinct form of marginality. In the context of our interview, Yusuf's statement below conveyed the struggles associated with this type of resistance:

> Holding on to the *sunnah* (prophetic way) can be harder with the *Ikhwan* (brothers in Islam)… Like holding on to hot coals [referencing a hadith].
>
> Yusuf: Semi-Structured Interview

More directly, Abdullah states, during a semi-structured interview, in response to the question, 'Do you consider yourself as having an identity? (What is it/why)':

> My identity is 100%, I'm Muslim. First of all, I'm not really nationalistic at all. I'm not really over proud of my country or my ethnicity. And I see that as just a default of where, you know, my mum and dad settled essentially. And that is pretty much my ethnicity, the predestination of, of God, I have no choice in it. So, I have nothing to be proud of. So, the only thing I can be proud of, is my Islam. Because number one, I'm proud that I'm sticking to something that I've been guided to…

Abdullah: Semi-Structured Interview

In varied ways, all fifteen participants spoke explicitly of Islam being their identity and the way in which they processed the experiences they faced both inside and outside of the Muslim community. It is to be noted that only Charlene added ‘woman’ to her expression of identity in response to the aforementioned interview question:

Charlene: Yes, my identity is a Muslim.

Pause

Charlene: Woman [intonation of emphasis], a Muslim woman.

Me: You added the woman bit. Why did you hesitate? Why did you add that?

Charlene: Umm, I don't know. I guess it's it's…My identity. There’re many differences in women and men, so yeah. I’m a Muslim businesswoman. Today you have this notion of us [genders] being the same. But men can’t just become women and women can’t just be men. We are different. Definitely in the Qur’an, I mean, there's just an answer. I think the Qur’an and the sunnah combined, there is an answer for everything like that. Part of being a Muslim is having different roles for men and women.

Charlene: Semi-Structured Interview

This comment reveals a dimension of ideological traditionalism in relation to the discourse on gender roles (Anjum, 2021). The subsequent member checking exercises with participants confirmed this. However, Charlene’s comments also point towards an Islamically-oriented identity configuration. Through the course of my analysis, I began to code other identity features which appeared common between my participants. I interpreted these common identity features to be components of the broader Islamic

identity the convert participants appeared to configure. While I did notice a host of interesting identity features present within individual and groups of data sets – some of which I have briefly touched upon (e.g. womanism, post-ethnic thinking, black empowerment), the cross-corpus consistency of three particular features led me to identify them as subthemes worthy of more elucidatory presentation in this chapter.

6.8 Islamic Identity as Talking Back to Secular(ist) Thought

In referring to this sub-theme as 'talking back to secularism', it is important to define my use of the word secularism in this discussion. Borrowing from Habermas' (2008) distinction between 'secular', as referring to the ideologically agnostic stance towards the validity of another's theological claims, and 'secularist' as referring to the polemical stance against religious doctrine and publicly articulated religion, my discussion centres on participants' attitudes and interactions with 'secularist' thought.

As indicated by their sometimes-overt expressions of lived religion, including the adoption of the 'convert vernacular', their sartorial choices and their Islamically-rooted resistance to attacks on their practices and beliefs, my participants seemed highly critical of the privatisation of religion within society. They considered Islam to be an all-encompassing social project, which extends beyond the confines of private ritualism and individual practice. While I am not suggesting that this view is in any way unique to convert Muslims, I am suggesting that the frequency and commonality in my convert participants' interrogation of secularist ideas was indicative of its significance as a feature of their identity configurations. Uthman, for instance, complained about his experience in private school in Essex:

> My RE teacher had this thing about me praying… She would tell me to pray at home. She 100% wasn't allowed to [prevent me from praying in a space the school had designated for me to pray]. I can't forget that… She had an issue with this posh little private schoolboy being openly Muslim.
>
> Uthman: Semi-Structured Interview

As I will present in the next chapter, experiences such as this one often had significant impacts on the educational directions of participants. Derrick identified secularist ideas as being the cause of the breakdown in his relationship with his brother:

> Even before I was Muslim, he was in to [Richard] Dawkins. His [my brother's] main argument was 'religion is the cause of all wars'… We basically don't have any contact.
>
> Derrick: Narrative Interview

A number of my participants also consumed online media content critical of secularist thought. These videos and their content appeared to influence and reflect their views on secularism's role in British society. Content of videos such as the one's in Figures 17, 18 and 17 were discussed by participants in online discussion forums, on WhatsApp messages between me and participants and, in one case, concepts within the videos were used by a participant in public debate on an Islamic propagation (*dawah*) stall. Below are some examples of videos accessed by some of my participants:

Figure 17 – Video: 'Is Secularism Compatible with Islam' – Source [YouTube]

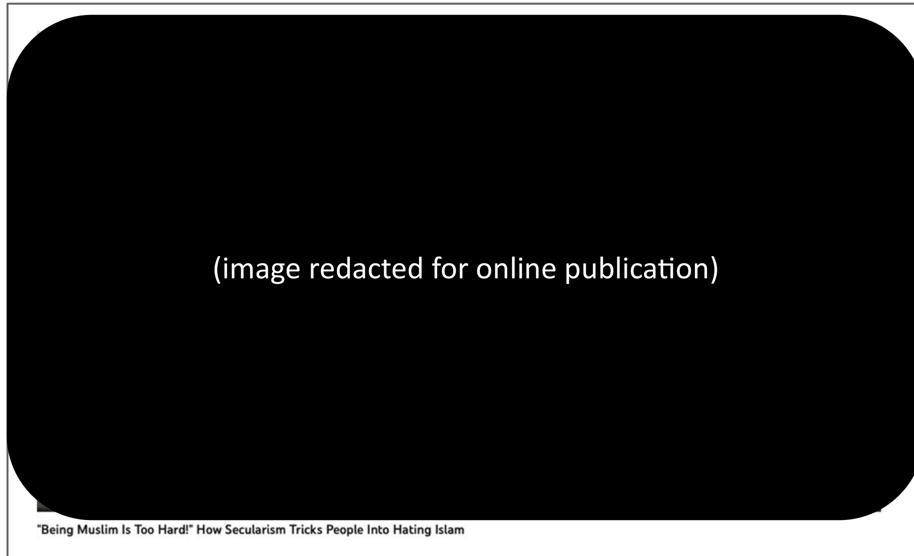


Figure 18 – Video: ''Being Muslim Is Too Hard!' How Secularism Tricks People Into Hating Islam' – Source [YouTube]

Figure 19 – Video: 'While Writing Anti-Islam Book He Became Muslim! – The Story of Joram Van Klaveren' – Source [YouTube]

It was notable that during my conversations with some participants, when they referred to negative experiences and encounters with religious discrimination, they would often use terms such as 'secular society', 'secular' and 'secularism' to describe British society. Contrastingly, they would use terms such as 'Western', 'non-Muslim' or 'British culture' to describe society and social interactions at other times. I interpreted this to be instructive of

a distinctly negative association with the concept of secularism. On Aleem's observation schedule, I noted:

> He seems to associate nearly all non-Muslim… attacks on Islam as 'secular society' – may indicate a lack of awareness on heterogeneity of Brit.Soc.
>
> Aleem: Observation Schedule

At the same time as reflecting on an apparent misconception Aleem had in regard to the heterogeneity of secular stances, this reflection signals the perceived negativity some converts associated with secularism. Derrick's response to the interview question, 'How do you negotiate your identity/ies within a secular society?', is illustrative of this stance:

> **Derrick**: What do you mean by secular?
>
> **Me**: I just mean like the type of society that Britain is. Sort of church separate from state…
>
> **Derrick**: To be honest, I don't really find it a problem. I don't accept anything in life being separate from religion. Like, for me, I'll pray and do what I do proudly, openly. It doesn't matter what secular society thinks. I don't care… My *deen* doesn't change if I'm here or in Morocco [a place the participant frequented]. Secular society or whatever can't stop me.
>
> Derrick: Semi-Structured Interview

This data extract is further illustrative of a tendency for the discretely religious identity of convert Muslims to reject and challenge the hardened ideological stance of what might be called 'militant secularism' (Chambers, 2010: 17).

6.9 Islamic Identity as Literalism

The aforementioned rejection of the secularist stance is unsurprising when considered alongside the second common feature of my participants' identity: Literalism. The propensity for convert Muslims to align with what is often construed as Salafist understandings of Islam has been well documented within the literature (Özyürek, 2015; Piela and Krotofil, 2022; Roald, 2012; Sealy, 2022; Wilkinson et al., 2021), with part of the reasoning being Salafism's appeal as representative of an anti-culturalist Islamic stance (Jouili, 2019). However, none of my participants, whilst also displaying a tendency to align with an anti-culturalist stance, openly identified themselves with the terms 'salafi', 'Salafism' or 'Salafist'. Indeed, most did not openly align with any particular discursive tradition in exclusivity. Interestingly, the Arabic term *salaf* was used frequently to describe the jurisprudential position of the early Muslim scholars, with converts such as Abdullah, for example, indicating that he often sought out the salaf's positions on particular issues:

> When I used to go to *jummah* or the occasional other prayer, they told me things that actually had no basis in Islam, or were not substantiated by any proofs. And so I would be reading this book. Now it's telling me that's totally wrong. And here's the evidence. Now I follow a very different approach… Here's the evidence. Here's what the *salaf* would do, how the *salaf* understood *fiqh*.

Abdullah: Semi-Structured Interview

In interpreting this extract, it is tempting to conclude that this is a manifestation of Salafism. However, my own knowledge of the Arabic language and my limited knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence cautions me to distinguish between the principle of seeking out the positions of early Islamic scholarship (which is common to many discursive traditions of Islamic practice) and the jurisprudential branch known as Salafism. My caution here is also instructive of my intent to steer away from theological discussion. Based on my data, it seems more appropriate to construe converts' understanding and practice of Islam as an inclination towards literalism and, as I have touched upon before, anti-culturalism. In this regard, Shaheeda states:

> And this is why, I mean, this is why when you look at that population, of reverts, it's clear that so many of them gravitate towards this form or version of Islam. Because it's so simple in its approach, and it offers the more authentic version of Islam that is closer to how the Prophet *salalahu alayhi wa selem* and his companions sort of understood it… They steer clear of culture.
>
> Shaheeda: Semi-Structured Interview

Leanne's statement relates closely to this when she states:

> In the beginning I got in so many conflicts where people were like, no, you have got to do it like this. I said listen that's your culture. That's not even Islamic, with certain things. And for any new Muslim that hasn't been surrounded by, you know, you've not read about certain things. I always advise them, even if there's a scholar telling you something in the mosque or whatever. You check it. Check it out first – is it what the Qur'an and Sunnah says?
>
> Leanne: Narrative Interview

Similarly, Aleem notes:

> Islam means following everything you can. Enter into Islam *kaaffah* (entirely) [referring to the Qur'an 2:208]… basically accepting everything, not using our own views on what it should mean.
>
> Aleem: Semi-Structured Interview

These statements, in conjunction with various other related statements and observations have led me to construct the subtheme of scriptural literalism as expressing a further common feature of the identity of my participants.

6.10 Islamic Identity as (c)onservatism/Traditionalism

Alongside the shared features of resistance to cultural accretion within Islamic practice, rejection of secularist ideology and an adoption of scriptural literalism, the converts in this study displayed an ideological conservatism that, rather than relating to the theological traditionalism some scholars have interpreted as Salafism, was more akin to a social, moral traditionalism or conservatism (Felson and Palmore, 2021; Górska and Tausch, 2023; Jost, 2017). It was evident, particularly during our conversations about modernity, liberal thought, contemporary educational practices and student culture, that the converts in this study had in common a desire to return to more traditional social and moral norms:

> Back in the day, sixty, seventy years ago, people would have seen the things [that can be seen nowadays] on insta[gram] as disgusting. Now the most famous woman alive is naked in every picture. And Boris [Johnson] calls *me* [emphasis in speech] a letter box

Siobhan: Semi-Structured Interview

Regarding, for example, her decision not to allow her children access to social media, Shaheeda says:

> It's gone so far on what a family is, what a woman is. I can't even say what a woman is, like, seriously. It's either telling the kids what religion says is backwards and they have to fit in with all the stuff going on today, or its telling kids they have to accept stuff that's against their religion. And it's not just Muslims. Like Christians too. I have spoken to Christians who feel exactly the same… Check out Matt Walsh [referring to an earlier conversation about a YouTube personality]...

Shaheeda: Semi-Structured Interview

More explicitly, in response to my question, 'To what degree do you regard it as desirable and/or possible to integrate your life as a Muslim with wider British society?', Emma states:

> My honest belief is that Islam isn't compatible with liberal society. Even normal people are seen as extremists now.

Emma: Semi-Structured Interview

During a WhatsApp conversation with the same participant, a former Christian, she states:

> I was brought up Christian. So even before Islam I believed in the bible, in Genesis 2:24 is[sic] says a man leaves his parent and marries a woman and becomes one flesh. This used to be normal to say that you believe in that, or you don't agree with same-sex marriage. But you can't even say it now.

Emma: Ethnographic Interaction

These comments about her social/political views touch upon a positionality that I noticed in a number of participants' data sets; a disdain for what they perceived to be an increasingly censorious and contradictory culture:

> British society doesn't mind you drawing prophets and cussing Islam, but then it cancels anything that goes against the grain. My kid would be expelled if he went to school and said that he thinks changing your gender is sinful. How is that freedom of speech. Such a contradiction. So fake.

Uthman: Semi-Structured Interview

Umm Musa presented the author J.K Rowling's well-publicised battles with transgender activists as representative of a culture of censorship against transgressive viewpoints. During the process of member-checking, along with a news article discussing J. K. Rowling (Paul, 2023), Umm Musa sent me a message on a social messaging application, stating:

> THIS IS THE KIND OF THING I MEAN [sic] I respect what the Harry Potter writer said about women being women. The fact that even she can't say that anymore is mad! It shows cancel culture is real. Especially when you have certain views lol.
>
> Umm Musa: Ethnographic Data

This is not to say that participants displayed hatred towards others' lifestyles. Discussing her relationship with her sister, who is a lesbian, Leanne noted:

> My sister wouldn't speak to me, [she would say] 'just like Islam doesn't allow you to talk to us'. She just turned so bitter against me. She hated me. She just presumed I would hate her when I started practicing properly… I think pork is haram and alcohol, but nobody calls me pork-phobic [laughs]. I don't try to harm everyone who eats pork. But because the Qur'an tells us homosexuality is a sin, I hate them or something? … Alhamdulillah me and my sister are alright now but… It's just what everyone thinks though.
>
> Leanne: Semi-Structured Interview

Leanne's sister's belief that her faith meant that she could no longer 'talk to' a lesbian illustrates one of the potential tensions that literalist Muslims face; a characterisation of their traditionalist beliefs as fear, phobia or hatred. In some cases, participants' perceptions that their views were too socially transgressive related closely to their experiences with the pathologising of Islamic belief and the reduction of literalist Islamic identity to fundamentalism:

> I honestly don't bother defending myself anymore. I'm okay with being called an extremist. If I don't free-mix and that's extreme, sure. If I teach my kids what the Qur'an says and that don't fit in with what they're teaching in school these days, that's fine. I know it sounds bad, but I'm okay with being an extremist or whatever if Allah accepts what I am doing is good.

Emma: Semi-Structured Interview

Melanie, who had been a Muslim for the shortest period of time amongst my participants, had completed a master's degree in political science and described herself as 'quite liberal', also expressed frustration with contemporary liberal thinking:

> **Me**: Did your attitude to society or culture change after you came to Islam?
>
> **Melanie**: Yeh, it did… over time I have definitely become like less liberal, in terms of the way I think… Like drinking culture and things like that… I changed quite a bit. I'm also getting sick of the whole woke thinking a bit.

Melanie: Semi-Structured Interview

This statement is extracted from a much longer response which includes a discussion of her educational experiences. I have chosen to limit the data extract to what is presented above in order to highlight the participants' use of the word 'liberal' and 'woke'. However, a more complete extract will be discussed in the next chapter.

What the data in this section reveals are the ways in which the converts' Islamic identity exhibited an ideological conservatism that, given many of the converts' perception of British secular society as decidedly liberal, constituted a transgressive identity. There were indications within the data that the participants considered other traditionalist and socially transgressive thinkers as sharing in some of their marginality in that regard (see Shaheeda, Siobhan and Umm Musa's statements above about Matt Walsh and J. K. Rowling).

6.11 Summary

This chapter has presented data which demonstrates the ways in which converts' religious cognition interacts with their social experiences to result in the configuration of a superordinate Islamic identity. In analysing the ways in which experiences of marginality based on race, gender and lived religious practice created a culture of resistance amongst

my participants, I have highlighted what I interpret to be some commonalities within and between the individual identities of my participants. These include an inclination towards resistance, a rejection of secularist thinking, a literalist approach to Islamic doctrine and a social and moral traditionalism which translated as socially transgressive.

Bringing this chapter's findings into conversation with the previous chapter's findings, a clearer picture of my participants' specific form of lived religiosity takes shape. In finding themselves experientially distinct from heritage Muslims due to their conversions, sometimes at odds with their own families and pre-conversion lives as a result of the behavioural nuances that I have defined as the convert habitus; in finding their new identities and literalist stances at odds with the cultural norms of their communities, the subjects of this study bring into relief a unique form of marginality. This marginality, I contend, is distinct from the types of marginalities described within the far more numerous studies into the experiences of heritage Muslims. This fact will come under more sustained discussion in chapter 8.

Returning specifically to the educational focus of this study, in the following chapter I will start to present findings related more exclusively to the educational experiences of my participants. Having now provided an exploration of the identity configurations and wider social experiences of my convert Muslim participants, the final findings chapter will act as a springboard for a detailed consideration of RQ 1: 'What are the experiences of millennial Muslim converts above the age of 14 within education settings in the UK after 9/11?'. As I have previously stated (section 1.4), a more sustained discussion of the relationship between my data, the literature and my RQs will be reserved for chapter 8.

Chapter 7: Education as a Site of Struggle and Survival

7.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters have established the picture of a group of millennial convert Muslims whose superordinate Islamic identities and lived religious practices often resulted in a degree of marginality within some social contexts. Their rejection of secular thinking commonly led to private conflicts and an open rejection of what they perceived to be secular society's impositions. This frequently extended to online discussions and interactions. Interestingly, even within the Muslim community, amongst heritage Muslims, the converts' scriptural literalism, which contained lineaments of anti-culturalism and post-ethnic thinking, led to a deeper layer of marginality; one which serves to further highlight the disjuncture that can sometimes occur between convert Muslims and heritage Muslims. The data also pointed towards a culture of resistance amongst my participants, not as a straightforwardly reactionary resistance to the 'existential vacuum' left by the secularisation of Western civilisation (Frankl, 2006: 106), as has been suggested by Köse (1999), but a resistance to all forms of culture that distorted the religious content of their beliefs and practices. This is exemplified in Abdullah and Leanne's statements:

> I mean, this is why when you look at that population of reverts, it's clear that so many of them gravitate towards this… authentic version of Islam that is closer to how the Prophet *salalahu alayhi wa selem* and his companions sort of understood it… They steer clear of culture.

Abdullah: Semi-Structured Interview

> In the beginning I got in so many conflicts where people were like, no, you have got to do it like this. I said, listen, that's your culture. That's not even Islamic... And for any new Muslim… I always advise them, even if there's a scholar telling you something in the mosque or whatever. You check it. Check it out first. Is it what the Qur'an and Sunnah says?
>
> Leanne: Narrative Interview

With some notable exceptions that will be elucidated in this chapter, the findings discussed so far have related to a range of experiences and settings that might be characterised as either personal or private, although in some cases socially located. These include the participants' individualised patterns of conversion and the internal, personal and spiritual nuances of those patterns (see section 5.7); the development of behavioural and experiential commonalities as a result of conversion (see section 5.8); the private and social ways in which participants articulated their lived religion (see sections 6.2-6.6); the ways converts' religious cognition interacted with their social environments to result in the configuration of self-defined Islamic identities, and the marginalities experienced within both Muslim and non-Muslim communities (see sections 6.76.10).

This third and final findings chapter, however, will present data that is more easily characterised as relating to the public realm of education. This chapter will bring together chapter 5's focus on religiosity and chapter 6's focus on identity and marginality in social settings to describe how these converts interacted with the public settings of their educational institutions. The apparent tensions that my data indicated as existing between religious converts and their educational settings has led me to entitle this chapter *Education as a site of Struggle and Survival*. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that all of my participants perceived their entire post-conversion educational experiences to be negative. Nonetheless, all participants had in common the feeling of tension that will be expounded upon in this chapter.

7.2 A Note on Developing my Findings

As I have outlined throughout this thesis, starting with my introduction in which I outlined the reasons for the generational focus of this study (see section 1.1), I had expected the socio-political fallout and resultant educational policy milieu of 9/11 and the War on Terror to be a significant area of focus for my participants. Given my extensive reading around the topics of education policy in the post-9/11 era, it was my expectation that the policies of Prevent and Fundamental British Values would have had an explicit impact on my participants' lives in a way similar to my own experiences. It was my endeavour, nonetheless, not to impose that expectation on my participants and to allow their own experiences to come to the fore from within the narratives, and my interpretation thereof. To avoid imposing my expectations, I made no unprompted mention of the policies in my interviews and during my ethnographic interactions. This approach resulted in two phenomena of analytical interest. First, in avoiding explicit questioning along the lines of Prevent and FBV, my participants did not explicitly mention the policies by name. However, our broader discussions around the post-9/11 securitisation environment in education did validate my initial interest in the policies. Second, in avoiding a focus on these policies, the converts brought to the fore a number of other educational challenges and issues which were relevant to wider contemporary social and educational discourses, such as censorship, free speech, liberalism, the discursive role of religion in the public sphere and mental health. Indeed, my analysis of the data leads me to suggest that many of the tensions described by my participants were located within the broader discourse on the recognition and accommodation of religion in the public sphere. This has some resonances with the complex relationship between religion and state in contemporary Western, ostensibly secular societies and the discourse surrounding postsecularism (Berg-Sørensen, 2013).

Another of my own experiences which influenced my expectations and thus the design of my project was the timing of my conversion. As I have already outlined, my conversion to Islam occurred in the interlude between two major educational stages; in the summer holidays, between finishing sixth form in Lincolnshire as a non-Muslim and three weeks before beginning university in the South of England as a Muslim. This 'clean break' between my pre and post conversion social circles, familiarities and educational environments meant that I did not experience the same type of sharp unsettlement as those participants who converted during one educational stage. The significance of this difference became clear

during the first narrative interview I conducted with Aleem. Having converted at the age of seventeen, he had described one of his critical incidents as 'coming out as Muslim and losing all my friends in college'. His use of the word 'coming out' is evocative of the concept relating to LGBT persons outwardly disclosing their sexuality. It is beyond the scope of my analysis to explore the social and behavioural implications of this use of language in any true depth, but I inferred from this phraseology the notion of previously hiding conversion due to an awareness or expectation of some social opprobrium. This was confirmed during our narrative interview. Further to this confirmation, Aleem shared with me his struggles with his social life in college after his conversion. This story and several others of the converts' experiences have led to the construction of the first theme under discussion below.

7.3 Disclosing Conversion in Education

> … that was surprising as well. You are in the UK and definitely, I think, you know, you want to feel safe to practise… But my mates were calling me Jesus[25] and a traitor and… that was a surprise because, as I said, they were friends… They were all white too… it actually changes your attitude, everything you know.
>
> Aleem: Narrative Interview

Aleem's extract highlights not only the potential difficulties associated with converting during an educational stage – as opposed to between stages – but also the subtle nuances in the form of Islamoprejudice converts face thereafter. In this instance, Aleem experienced the cultural or racial traitor trope (Alyedreessy, 2016; McDonald 2005, 142; Özyürek, 2009; van Nieuwkerk 2006c, 1). As a white male, with mainly white male friends, Aleem's conversion was racialised by his former friends and viewed as a racial and cultural betrayal. This seemingly led to mistreatment and the loss of what Moosavi (2015b) describes as 'access to whiteness and therefore to white privilege' (p. 1919). Aleem's extract also resonates with Emma's previously discussed description of 'when Frodo puts on the ring' (section 6.4),

[25] I confirmed that he did not intend to say Judas, as might be expected in the context. He was referred to as Jesus because of his supposed resemblance to some depictions of Jesus. Aleem was white, with a long blonde beard and frequently wore a *thobe*.

referring to her perception that previously familiar environments are transformed by a sudden change in social status, and the perception of the convert. As with some other converts, Aleem's abrupt loss of a friend group and change in social status did not, at first, deter him from his studies. However, through a combination of family problems, a desire to learn Arabic abroad and a decreased interest in secular education, Aleem eventually decided to leave college and study Arabic in Egypt, before eventually returning to FE and HE, where he was studying during the timeline of this research project. What is clear from interactions with Aleem is that the timing of his conversion added a new dimension to his educational experience and appears to have influenced his path through the education system. This is evident also in Umm Musa's story. Having converted at the age of fifteen, she took a different approach to Aleem, choosing to hide her conversion from her friends during her secondary schooling:

> My friends didn't know in the beginning… it was my last maybe two years of secondary school… so friends and things like that didn't know… maybe except a few close friends. So, I wouldn't cover or wear hijab or anything really. And becoming a Muslim, just not feeling confident enough to come out as a Muslim to my friends… I didn't feel strong enough to come out as a Muslim. So just having to be around food in Ramadan in the early days at school I think was difficult and only a few friends knew that I was fasting. So, I mean, I suppose that was a massive challenge. It really effected my *eman* [faith].
>
> Umm Musa: Semi-Structured Interview

Using the same phraseology of 'coming out', Umm Musa described the internal frictions that hiding her conversion caused and the effects of this on her faith. Later, she explains that these feelings heightened conflicts at home and led to a desire to leave home, start a family and live amongst Muslims.

> I was always down and hormonal and just hated living at home… I wanted to move to East London or somewhere there were Muslims… act like a proper Muslim… I feel like my Islamic life kicked off after I got married. So, when I got married then I was

> involved in the Muslim community and the Muslim community were very helpful and welcoming.
>
> Umm Musa: Narrative Interview

For Derrick who had a number of Muslim friends before converting to Islam at the age of fourteen and went to a heavily Muslim populated school, the disclosure of his conversion led to very different types of social dynamics. He recalls being mocked and disbelieved. He recounted a number of stories which illustrated that his beliefs and practices were dismissed as a way of being accepted within the school. Interestingly, Derrick admitted to me that he first became interested in Islam and studied the religion in order to fit in to his environment. Raised as a Jehovah's Witness, he had taken religion seriously as a youth and taken an interest in Islam to make friends. When he decided to convert and practise the religion, in what he acknowledges was quite a zealous manner, he found little support from his Muslim peers. His rejection of cultural practices which he perceived as contradicting the Islamic textual evidence that he was reading led to tensions and, as Derrick explains in the following extract, a reproduction of some of the 'Convert as fundamentalist' ideas:

> What is funny is that most of the 'oh you're an extremist, you're a terrorist' stuff wasn't coming from the *kufar* [non-Muslims] at first… there were brothers who were like [Derrick's] a terrorist now… and because it was coming from the Muslims, you would have teachers believe it. They would pay more attention to… what I did or what I said, like watching me.
>
> Derrick: Semi-Structured Interview

In Derrick's case, the experiences of tension that arose from disclosing his conversion were caused by an assumption, on the part of his Muslim friends, that his zealotry was a sign of being 'a terrorist'. Moreover, Derrick noticed that this assumption was believed by teachers due to it coming from heritage Muslims – ostensible 'insiders', resulting in Derrick feeling as though he was being monitored. One of the clearest corollaries of that was Derrick's hesitancy in advocating for his religious needs in school:

> You can't ask to miss a lesson for ten minutes [for prayer] or ask for a proper [prayer] room or anything like that if they already think that [you are an extremist] … especially if it's Muslims saying it… like they can't be racist or Islamophobic.
>
> Derrick: Semi-Structured Interview

For Derrick, the fact that fellow Muslims were calling him an extremist meant that his religious demands for prayer time and an improved prayer space could be easily dismissed as unreasonable. Even with what some may consider the advantage of being in a heavily Muslim populated educational environment, the disclosure of conversion came with tensions. One of those tensions was the difficulty in demanding 'a proper prayer' space. Given the centrality of prayer, my data revealed that several participants sought out prayer spaces when they converted. The prevalence of this led to the construction of the next theme under discussion.

7.4 'Sacred' Physical Space in Educational Contexts

> So again, one of, I think, maybe… the benefits of private school, I was given a prayer room… Pretty early on, I remember my French teacher, she came up to me I think maybe a few weeks after she heard I became Muslim and she gave me a prayer mat and she said 'this is from one of my friends', and then one of the other teachers gave me a prayer room to pray… I think in sixth form it really wasn't a prayer room. I remember walking in and there was like a guy and a girl in there together… the Muslims in sixth form, they didn't take Islam very seriously… and this is coming from born Muslims. So you can see… I'm coming in as a new Muslim asking the sixth form for a proper space. It just was – just impossible.
>
> Uthman: Semi-Structured Interview

Uthman's statement exemplifies a theme which was common within my participants' descriptions of their educational life, post-conversion: 'sacred space' (Parker, 2009) as a site

of struggle and contestation. During the defining and naming themes-phase of my analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), this theme was eventually entitled 'Sacred Physical Space in Educational Contexts'. For Uthman, who had also converted at the age of fourteen and was faced with navigating his Islamic practice within a public secondary school setting as well as a state sixth form, contestations about sacred space first surfaced in relation to an inability to gain support for a prayer space in sixth form. During an ethnographic interaction in which Uthman took me to see the location of his old secondary school, he revealed that there were a few other Muslim students in his year at school and that he was unsure if they had ever publicly requested a space to pray, making it extremely difficult for him to demand a space, once he had converted. However, as the previous extract indicates, he eventually found a supportive environment in secondary school. This contrasted with his experience of sixth form. During our semi-structured interview, we discussed this further, with Uthman revealing:

> They did nothing to help make the prayer room actually okay for *salah*… Or stop people [teenagers he had seen kissing] going in there… They would give Eid [holidays] off and things like that and act like that was diversity… but prayer is more important.
>
> Uthman: Semi-Structured Interview

Uthman's assessment of the sixth form's attitude chimes with the 'Bristol School of Multiculturalism's' critique of contemporary forms of multiculturalism (Uberoi and Modood, 2019) which scholars such as Modood and Sealy assess as having a problem in accommodating religion in a discretely religious sense (Modood, 2013: 77; Sealy, 2021a), despite being willing to accommodate those things which fall within the ethno-racial diversity and inclusion discourse. In this context, Uthman believed that his religious demand was being treated as unreasonable and problematic due to its variance from the heritage Muslim pupils' demands. This feeling of being treated comparatively with heritage Muslims was not unique. Yusuf discussed his experiences of leaving prison and enrolling on a vocation training course.

> When I was there [on a vocational training course], if I didn't shake the assessor's hand, I was seen as a problem, especially because other [Muslim] brothers would… they see it like 'you don't understand your religion'… like I had been radicalised. So most of the times, even if it was a woman, I would just shake their hand.
>
> Yusuf: Semi-Structured Interview

Though not directly related to the theme under discussion, Yusuf's extract further illustrates how some converts feel compelled to compromise their religious practise in order to assimilate with the behaviour of some heritage Muslims. In Yusuf's case, this meant compromising his religious commitment of not shaking hands with women. Perhaps the most striking example of my participants' perceiving their status as converts to be a hindrance to religious accommodation came from Emma, who had decided to discontinue her degree as a result of such experiences in university:

> I'm all for education, but I dropped out of uni myself. I'm basically a pretty religious Muslim chick in a *niqab*. I don't shake hands with men, and I don't really free-mix. I don't drink. I don't smoke and I'm pretty sure most of my views about gender and stuff don't fit in to uni life [chuckle]. It [university] just ain't the place for me… On top of that… I'm a white revert and it's just not that easy to get heard when you're talking about, erm, Islam and Muslims and stuff, if you're not Asian. Do you know what I mean?
>
> Emma: Semi-Structured Interview

In the previous chapter I briefly touched upon this extract in relation to the intersection between race and religion in the lives of my participants (section 6.6). Here, however, I wish to highlight the profound impact of this convert's perception that her race and status as a convert precluded her voice from being heard in this educational setting. Her decision to leave university came as a result of what she confirmed to be a series of incidents which made her feel that her religious needs were too unreasonable for public educational settings. As well as demonstrating how a lack of religious accommodation may lead to the

discontinuation of education, Emma's comment about free-mixing also exposes how the issue of gender segregated spaces is an important consideration in thinking about 'sacred' physical space in educational contexts. The desire for gender segregated spaces amongst my participants was closely connected to their scriptural literalism and arose frequently in my discussions about physical spaces. Melanie, who was perhaps the most vocal on the issue of gender segregated spaces, stated:

> I doubt it is official, but we do have separate seating for brothers and sisters… and that's our choice. Like, Islamically, we have the choice… I hate this idea of … Muslim women forced to be at the back of the room… That kind of goes back to something you asked before about confidence. Confidence is about asserting your Islamic identity. As a Muslim woman, we want the option to have separate seating.
>
> Melanie: Semi-Structured Interview

While the statement above occurred during a discussion about segregated spaces used for Islamic events, and related to Muslims voluntarily segregating based on gender, other participants were worried about the removal of gender segregated spaces in more widely used public settings, and the effects that would have on sacred spaces like prayer rooms, Friday prayers and Islamic events. In a series of WhatsApp exchanges as part of my ethnographic interactions with Aleem, he sent me images of gender-neutral spaces (Figure 20):

Figure 20 - Gender Neutral Toilet on Campus – Photo – Source [Aleem]

During these interactions, Aleem revealed that his educational institution was working towards making all public spaces gender neutral, leading to his frustration and concern about what might happen to worship spaces and the campus prayer room. It is worth noting that Aleem's statements related to his current educational experiences and, he clarified during the member checking process, he had only recently become concerned with these aspects of his educational experience. This again brings to relevance Freeman's (2013) suggestion that 'narrative identity emerges in and through the interplay of past, present, and future in the form of remembering, acting, and imagining' (p. 223). During our conversations Aleem, like others, described gender segregation as an Islamic requirement, quoting hadith and Quranic verses in that regard.

The data relating to the theme of 'sacred physical spaces' exemplifies the ways in which the micro-political and micro-geographical contestations around the physical spaces available within educational institutions mirror those contestations that take place on a macro level, within wider society (Parker, 2009). However, far from being a matter purely related to physical space, the issue of gender and segregation related to intellectual space also. This leads me to the third theme under discussion in this chapter.

7.5 Intellectual Space in Educational Contexts

7.5.1 Extremism

In spite of the varied modes, levels, locations and outcomes of my participants' educational experiences, each of the fifteen participants described instances of prohibitive intellectual spaces within education. For some, this related to their religious and/or political emotions being perceived as extreme and in violation of the securitisation agenda. During an online exchange, Yusuf and I discussed a picture (Figure 21) that he had previously discussed with friends in an online forum, and that he explained had once been displayed in his former educational institution:

Figure 21 - Prevent Poster Displayed in a College – Photo – Source [Yusuf]

> Bro, this is it... Dnt all reverts change behaviour & dress!?... You dnt know wht some1 else views as extreme too [sic].
>
> Yusuf: Ethnographic Interaction

This interaction further demonstrates why Yusuf felt compelled to assimilate and compromise some of his religious practices in order to avoid suspicion (see Yusuf's

comments in section 7.4). The literalist approach to Islam that had made him averse to shaking hands with women may conceivably have been considered by some as an extremist religious or social view. Additionally, the changes in behaviour, dress and social circles that converts might be expected to undertake, according to this Prevent literature, may provide reasons to 'report [an individual] to a member of staff'. Participants' fears that their views would be construed as extreme extended to their political opinion and sartorial choices also:

> Probably nobody I know had a clue what I thought. I just pretended… as though Islam and politics are completely separate, and I had no political opinion… even what I wore was like not what I wanted to wear or what I wear now... Looking back it was so people didn't think I was extreme… But subhanAllah, it isn't worth it, for what people think. Your *eman* [faith] is more important.
>
> Leanne: Semi-Structured Interview

Leanne's habit of being performative of an apolitical stance during her FE studies continued after finishing her studies. During my observation period with this participant, she revealed that she now sometimes found it too difficult to publicly speak about her religion, fearing that she would appear too fundamentalist. This performative stance was adopted by Derrick also, later in his educational journey:

> I remember going to anarchist and communist [university] society meetings to help organise protests for *Filasteen* [Palastine] and Iraq… I didn't look like a Muslim so, I could kind of go a bit under the radar… if you were coming at it from a non-religious, anti-war angle, it was cool… But I knew brothers from the ISoc [Islamic society]… harassed by anti-terror for getting involved in stuff like that.
>
> Derrick: Semi-Structured Interview

The data above evidences a heightened awareness, on the part of both Derrick and Leanne, of the potential to be perceived as extremists. Leanne felt the need to self-silence, avoid student activism and be performative of an apolitical stance during their studies. Derrick's

performativity took the form of not appearing to others as a Muslim whilst engaging in activism and broadly political activities. While they did not talk in detail about the lasting effects of this heightened awareness and their adoption of a performative stance, there was a sense that some participants sacrificed a fuller and more enriching student experience to avoid the gaze of securitisation policies in education settings. This is evidence of a lack of intellectual space within education for these converts; what Spivak (1988) might refer to as 'epistemic violence' – a term to mark the silencing of a marginalised population in society. It is noteworthy that while each of the participants described prohibitive intellectual spaces during their post-conversion education, those participants who attended institutions with larger Muslim populations tended to find commonality and solace in others who shared this sense of marginality. A future, more purposive analysis of the size, demographics and location of educational institutions may offer further insights into experiential differences in that regard. However, it may be extrapolated that marginality is reduced by the diversity of institutions and the ability of converts to find commonality with others in their experiences.

7.5.2 Free Speech

For other participants, their lack of intellectual space resulted from conservative, transgressive or religious views which they perceived as pushing against the limits of free speech:

> I am pretty adamant on the pronoun thing. I don't want to be known as like a bleeding person or a chest feeder or a uterus carrier [laughter]… I mean, I am a woman… and that's controversial now isn't it? I'm a Muslim woman. Say that in school and it's like… [gesture to indicate that it's forbidden].
>
> Shaheeda: Semi-Structured Interview

> They say you can talk about things, but you can't really. There was literally nowhere to even debate the topic of… foreign policy or anything. If you're Muslim… it's put up or shut up, when it comes to that stuff. Like I said, my own family saw me as weird

> because of what I thought about what was happening in Palestine. Trust me, in school or whatever, in education, it was a no-go area.
>
> Abdullah: Semi-Structured Interview

> I think I remember an incident where there was one person who used to go to my secondary school, ended up going to college, and he started sending me letters and stuff depicting the Prophet Mohammed [Peace be upon him] like hanging, can't remember. I think something like that… That to me was too far… and so there were some altercations… I started having a lot more kind of like physical and verbal altercations and that kind of made me realise that, you know, this route isn't for me if I want to stick to my *deen*.
>
> Uthman: Semi-Structured Interview

For Shaheeda and Abdullah, the educational environment was perceived as too censorious for their political and 'gender-critical'[26] views, which, according to them, were expressions of their religious beliefs. Contrastingly, for Uthman, the limits of free speech had been too capacious, resulting in altercations within his educational environment. I have interpreted these two contrasting perspectives on freedom of speech to illustrate the complex and sometimes contradictory demands for freedom of speech, intellectual space and 'safe spaces' in educational environments (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019). This again illustrates what Parker (2009) has described as 'micro-political issues… mirror[ing] wider cultural ones.' (p. 32).

7.6 Student Culture

In each of the data extracts presented in the chapter so far, there has been an undertone within the converts' experiences that the culture of British education was not suited to their expression of lived religion. Nestled within discussions about the culture of British

[26] 'gender critical' views broadly refers to the belief that sex is biologically determined, binary and immutable' (Cowan and Morris, 2022).

education, participants spoke of 'the student culture'. Isa, who converted during his last year of university, explicitly contrasts student culture with Islamic culture, citing it as one of the main reasons for which he became interested in Islam:

> … that university period, the way it is all about a sort of drinking, partying culture and all of that kind of wild living… And it [Islam] offered an alternative way of life. Yeah, but I don't want to make it too simplistic. I think at the same time I was attracted to it [student culture]. So there's lots of things, not just one thing, but that was the main factor for me that pushed me towards Islam.
>
> Isa: Semi-Structured Interview

The theme of student culture was most obviously discernible within the narratives and interviews of the nine participants who had attended university after conversion (including those who completed short courses, distance learning or later discontinued their studies). With the exception of Siobhan, each of them, either during our ethnographic interactions or in interviews, described campus cultures containing either excessive drinking, partying, sexual promiscuity and/or religious intolerance; with each explaining ways in which that enhanced their feelings of alterity. To better illustrate this, I have extracted from the corpus those nine participants' descriptions and perspectives on university culture and campus life, and the effects of that on the respective participant. This is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 - Participant Perceptions of Student Culture – Source [author]

Participant	Description of Student Culture	Effects on Participant
Aleem	Secular, frustrating, limited for Muslims	Feared losing segregated spaces.
Owen	Non-Muslim environment. Singular student culture. Requiring compromises	Felt he had to compromise areas of Islamic practise. Felt the accommodation of religious needs was limited.

Isa	Wild. Debaucherous. Singular student culture. Lacking representation and outreach.	Felt isolated and marginalised during his studies. Became less social and less confident.
Melanie	Overly liberal and fixed. Drinking culture. Necessary.	Became less liberal. Sought out stronger sense of community.
Derrick	In service to the government. Secular. Criminalising of Muslim's thought and activism.	Advocates alternative modes of study (online). Avoids activism and some religious expression.
Uthman	Stressful	Enrolled on a distance learning course.
Emma	Prohibitively secular. Singular student culture which was incompatible with her faith.	Discontinued university education. Advocated home-schooling. Loneliness during university studies.
Siobhan	Diverse. Welcoming.	Made friends for life. Inspired to engage in more Muslim community work.
Jameela	Mentally exhausting. Superficial. Stifling	Unable to be herself.

While it did not appear that the participants were making intentional reference to student culture as singular and static, the language used to describe campus life and student culture, and their presumption that I would understand their descriptions, demonstrated that the participants generally considered the culture of British universities – at least during the time in which they attended – to be relatively fixed and homogeneous. While I did not conduct a detailed analysis of the size, demographics and locations of the participants' individual institutions – in part due to the varied types of educational institutions participants attended – based on my pre-existing knowledge and cursory research of those who attended university institutions, this perception of campus culture applied to those who

attended more diverse universities which were located in larger cities, as well as those who attended less diverse universities. As previously mentioned (see section 7.5.1), purposive research into the experiences of students according to the size, demographics and location of their institutions may reveal more.

7.7 Surviving the Journey

The culture of higher education, perceived by participants as liberal, secular, debaucherous and overly hedonistic, frequently led to feelings of alterity and disconnection from university life. As we saw earlier, through Emma's statement (section 7.4), this could lead to the decision to discontinue education. Even for those who chose to complete their educational journey, they struggled with the frictions that existed between their faith and campus life. For university, FE and secondary students alike, their struggles to secure physical and intellectual space had an impact on their educational lives and, at times, their lives beyond education. I have understood the aforementioned struggles to represent a battle to endure the educational journey. This is illustrated in the extracts that follow:

> It isn't worth it.. Your *eman* [faith] is more important.
>
> Leanne: Semi-Structured Interview

Here Leanne describes the compromises she made as not 'worth it'. A sentiment shared by Owen who described his university as a 'non-Muslim environment':

> I don't know if I would say the whole experience [of getting a degree] was worth it in the end… for getting a job and stuff. But yes, it was a thoroughly non-Muslim environment.
>
> Owen: Semi-Structured Interview

Relatedly, as mentioned in chapter 5 (section 5.8.1), Uthman and Jameela both suggested that they were unable to be their authentic selves in educational institutions after their

conversions. Uthman, whose early experiences of conflict in education had resulted in him enrolling in a distance learning degree later in life, described how distance from university campus allowed him to feel he could benefit from a degree without all of the 'stress' of campus life. Jameela spoke of the mental exhaustion she felt in stifling her practise of Islam and in feeling unable to 'be real' in order to seem more socially acceptable during her degree.

Jameela's act of stifling her lived religious practice points to a strategy that many participants adopted in order to survive their educational experiences, as I have alluded to in this chapter (e.g. Performing as apolitical, forgoing activism, self-silencing, avoiding suspicion). However, her description of this act as 'exhausting' reveals the potential psychological toll of such acts. While most participants did not explicitly mention the effects of their experiences in psychological terms, implicit within their statements and educational choices is a latent description of mental health and wellbeing struggles, as they have been defined within the UK educational context (Norwich et al, 2022). This interpretation is supported by their uses of words like 'stress', 'altercation' and 'exhaustion'. Melanie, who converted during the final stages of her first degree, described a fear of Islamophobic attack:

> I remind my parents, when my dad talks about like extremism, that that's actually not really an acute danger to me. But the danger to me as a person is more so Islamophobia. So if I was, like, covering my hair because I went to the mosque… then…yeah… the biggest risk is actually people being violent towards me and not me meeting any extremist. Like I haven't, honestly.

Melanie: Semi-Structured Interview

While my interview questioning did not focus on the need for psychological support (see Appendix 3 for links to mental health support which was provided to participants), I had included questions which related to chaplaincy support within educational institutions. The data in this regard proved to be fruitful analytical ground and resulted in the construction of the next theme under discussion.

7.8 Chaplaincy

Emma, Siobhan and Jameela made use of chaplaincy services in their respective institutions, primarily for information. In relation to that, Siobhan states:

> I wasn't on campus that much… the chaplaincy… let me know where jummah (Friday prayer) was in the area.
>
> Siobhan: Semi-Structured Interview

Aleem was aware of a Muslim chaplaincy within his university but chose to engage with his local mosque for his religious needs and activities. Abdullah indicated that he was not on the college campus enough to know about or use the Muslim chaplaincy services at his college. Prior to our semi-structured interview, during a video call with Leanne, she clarified that there were no female members of a chaplaincy service in her college and that it would have been useful to speak to a woman about any issues she had, especially during the early days of her conversion. Most of my participants described a lack of chaplaincy support within their various educational institutions during their schooling. For example, in response to the question 'Have you sought after or utilised any chaplaincy facilities during your secondary/post-secondary education?', participants gave a variety of answers which suggested that they did not know about, have access to, understand the function of or feel secure in utilising chaplaincy support:

> Not really... No, no, the chaplaincy area. They're not in a university I don't think. Or like the ISoc? Other than that, no.
>
> Owen: Semi-Structured Interview

> Yes, I had one of the people who was a chaplain in university, who was a classmate... but in terms of school, no. They use them nowadays as basically spies.
>
> Derrick: Semi-Structured Interview

So, is there any? That I used to know? No.

Melanie: Semi-Structured Interview

Charlene: Like what do you mean?

Me: Chaplaincy facilities. So, things like… if you go to college or something and can speak to an *imam* or ask a Muslim for advice… like that. It might be via an e-mail.

Charlene: Nope.

Charlene: Semi-Structured Interview

No, I didn't know about their existence… I did look up where the masjid was… and when I first went… I signed up to the Methodist Society but didn't do anything with it. And then when I became Muslim, I didn't have the wherewithal at that time to. It was the last year of university and doing exams… so I never accessed the services. The sort of – the problem with these sort of mental health and chaplaincy services is they're kind of there if you need them. For those people who've got the wherewithal to actually seek help. But most people, they struggle alone and it's a real issue for those services that, you know, I mean… they're not psychic. They don't know when someone's struggling, but then they kind of have to be out there… and visible. So that if you did need them you could go there. But I never really saw any of that… and I don't always think people associate chaplaincy with all faiths. Anyway, I think they kind of associate it just with Christianity…

Isa: Semi-Structured Interview

No. I was just given a prayer room.

Uthman: Semi-Structured Interview

Umm Musa: So chaplaincy in terms of Muslim chaplaincy? No.

Me: Okay. So have you ever heard of them? Have they been presented to you, you know, by institutions, that there is an imam you can go to or someone who can look after your affairs or your needs, religiously?

Umm Musa: No, no. I've never heard of that during secondary school or after really.

Umm Musa: Semi-Structured Interview

Yusuf: The only chaplaincy service I have used… the first one was when I was in prison, so he became quite a good friend of mine, the Imam, he helped me a lot actually… got books. He was the one who helped me to read Arabic, etc. And I have contact with my local imam.

Me: From your college?

Yusuf: No, not at all. Apart from that, that's it actually, to be honest. I'm a regular here [at the mosque we were talking in].

Yusuf: Semi-Structured Interview

The extracts above suggest that participants either did not know about Muslim chaplaincy services or these services were not present in their educational institutions. There is also an intimation that converts did not seek out the services. In the case of Derrick, he considered them to be part of the securitisation agenda. While the participants' apparent lack of knowledge about, or trust in, Muslim chaplaincy may denote a lack of usefulness or need, it may also indicate a need for further research into the visibility, availability and function of Muslim chaplaincy services within educational institutions. Isa's observation that people

‘associate it just with Christianity’ is particularly instructive of the requirement for further research in this area. This topic will receive sustained discussion in the following chapter.

7.9 The Effects of the Struggle

Even amongst some of those participants who ‘endured’ their educational experience and completed their desired courses, there was a sense that the religious compromises they had made, the spiritual toll that had taken and the limitations in experiencing a fully enriched educational journey had represented a type of pyrrhic victory. In that regard, I point, once more, to Leanne and Owen’s statements:

> it isn’t worth it.. Your *eman* [faith] is more important.
>
> Leanne: Semi-Structured Interview

> I don’t know if I would say the whole experience [of getting a degree] is worth it in the end… for getting a job and stuff. But yes, it is a thoroughly non-Muslim environment.
>
> Owen: Semi-Structured Interview

For those participants who were unable or unwilling to make compromises regarding their faith, they delayed, changed and discontinued their education. This sometimes affected their attainment and reoriented their career aspirations. Overall, however, the participants who changed their trajectory as a result of their struggles spoke positively about the outcome. Umm Musa explained that doing online A-Levels enabled her to balance her faith and education.

> It took me a long time to find the interest [in education] again. My parents wanted it, and I did a bit… So eventually I did online A-Levels… You’re left to it, on your own really... But it allowed me to get married, have kids and just practise the *deen* [religion] how I wanted to.

Umm Musa: Semi-Structured Interview

Uthman explained that his choice to discontinue sixth form (though he eventually resumed his education and completed a Master's degree) helped him in later life, and that he was happy with his choice. Emma, who chose to discontinue her university studies and complete part-time accountancy training courses, opted to home-school her children and felt that this aligned with what she wanted for her family. For Shaheeda, her decision to drop out of a beauty therapy course changed her intended career path and inspired her to start a successful business, alongside a family. She explained that it would have been impermissible and incompatible with her faith to complete some elements of the beauty therapy course:

> At the end of the day, *Alhamdulillah*, I couldn't have done it [beauty therapy] anyway… We would have to wax each other, like students… or invite family and friends and wax our *awrahs* [private parts] and stuff, so… I wouldn't have done it.

Shaheeda: Semi-Structured Interview

The extracts above describe the personal impact of what some participants perceived to be an educational environment that was inhospitable or incompatible with their faith. For many of the participants, what were initially negative experiences or changes in their educational trajectory, turned out to be positive. There was also evidence to suggest some of those experiences indirectly effected participants' choices for their children. Strikingly, during my study, I noted that six of my participants had a child or children who had been partially or fully home-schooled. While the reasons given for home-schooling were not always explicitly linked to the participants' own educational experiences, a desire for Islamic nurturing (*tarbiyyah*) was usually cited as a motivating factor. Emma, for example, explicitly mentioned opting to home-school her children to avoid the impositions of relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) policy in schools; something which has undergone significant change in recent years and historically generated controversy (Mason and Woolley, 2019). A detailed examination of the converts' educational choices for their children falls beyond the scope of this study. For a more detailed discussion of Islamic nurturing in home-based instruction, see Scourfield et al. (2013).

7.10 Participants' Recommendations

As part of my methodological endeavour to benefit the participants of this study and the wider Muslim community (see section 4.10.6), I included a question to elicit recommendations for dealing with the types of challenges the converts had faced. The converts' responses to the interview question, 'What recommendations do you suggest to help deal with the educational challenges faced by convert Muslims?', provided a rich source of data in understanding many of the issues that converts viewed as important during their post-conversion schooling. Presented below are selected answers which illustrate those viewpoints:

> They could try wherever possible to study online, if they have to.
>
> Derrick: Semi-Structured Interview

> I have said that they need to have mentors… like there needs to be mentors for like starting Islam. Do you know what I mean?
>
> Leanne: Semi-Structured Interview

> Honestly, I think like with my experience… I think it helps if you find other Muslims and… to talk it through with them. What you could do to enhance your situation and then go forward with the next steps… and also be very mindful of their power structures and institutions. I've heard that there were like several universities that are not as liberal as they claim.
>
> Melanie: Semi-Structured Interview

> Yeah, you have to speak up. You know, my sister [also a convert] had extreme racial and Islamophobic problems with a teacher in her school and you can't just allow that to happen. It's not acceptable. And we just have to speak… make ourselves vocal,

because I think people think when you're Muslim you're not going to stand up for yourself.

Charlene: Semi-Structured Interview

So the ISoc needs to be opened to everyone… Our [local] masjid does do a lot. We invite the police during Ramadan, invited the police, they invited Jewish people and share in the breaking of the fast… and invite Christian leaders… If the doors are closed it makes the problem actually worse.

Isa: Semi-Structured Interview

There's only so much they can do, I suppose, because it's not just on the schools… Your experience isn't defined just by the school itself and the rules and regulations of that school. You know, living in England, you know, naturally people could be very racist or whatever. It is for Muslims to support each other.

Uthman: Semi-Structured Interview

I would suggest that they look at other means of education, like online. Yeah, you know, because I feel that some people feel the need to just remain in these environments where they don't actually feel comfortable and don't really want to be, but feel that there's no other choice. So I suppose that, you know, you can do distance learning online and still get qualifications wherever it be, GCSE, A-levels and things like that.

Umm Musa: Semi-Structured Interview

It's difficult for me to see through my own experience, but I mean, the only thing I can point out is a point I made earlier and that's just to be very clear with your beliefs, transparent with them, and not to compromise and… always remember that when you're Muslim, or in fact, when you're in another community that, many times,

> you represent that community... So actually a lot rides on our shoulders in terms of how you conduct yourself, and what you say. In Islam, what you say matters. Words matter in Islam… and educate people.
>
> Abdullah: Semi-Structured Interview

Many of the participants' recommendations were connected to their own individual experiences and came in the form of general advice to converts in similar situations to their own. The visceral responses to the question elicited answers ranging from recommendations for converts to find other modes of study, such as distance learning, to broader recommendations about seeking support within the community. For most of the participants, their recommendations placed the initiative on Muslim individuals and the Muslim community to develop support systems by asserting their identity, making their voices heard, reaching out beyond their faith group, becoming vocal supporters of social justice causes and choosing to better represent Islam to others. The recommendations were congruent with the converts' tendency to assert their Islamic identity as a form of resistance against the struggles and marginality they faced. What these recommendations pointed to also was a sense that the emotional work (Hochschild, 1979) and the impetus for change was upon the converts, as opposed to their educational institutions. Coupled with the themes I have previously mentioned in this chapter – a need for sacred spaces, both intellectually and physically, the aspiration for more freedom of religious expression and a desire for a less monolithic student culture – the converts recommendations may be indicative of a desire for influence and agency within what they perceive to be a fixed cultural reality in education. The mechanisms of that influence, and the intellectual environment in which such influence can occur, is perhaps the subject of a much broader discussion. However, the participants' experiences of self-silencing, performativity, stifling of their religious sentiment and enduring struggles to survive within their educational settings indicate that the space for expressing their political and religious subjectivity may lie beyond the theoretical frontiers of the current secular, liberal culture of educational institutions; a culture that some have argued is inhospitable to non-'normative' students, defined by Andersson et al. (2012) as 'white, middle class secular students' (p. 512).

7.11 Summary

I have presented data in this chapter which demonstrates that education was the site of a struggle to survive for some British millennial-born Muslim converts. In analysing their narratives, ethnographic data and responses to my questions surrounding education and more, I have constructed themes which illustrate that, for my participants, their education within the post-9/11 context and within the perceived cultural impositions of secular liberal values and practices presented a deep spiritual, political and social tension. While in most cases participants were able to navigate those tensions in order to 'survive' their education, this sometimes meant delaying or changing their educational plans, being performative in their religious practices, stifling their political views and enduring inhospitable educational environments. For a minority, this resulted in struggles that continued beyond their formal education. For a majority, it inspired the decision to embark on alternative locations or modes of study, different career paths or, later in life, to home-school their own children.

The vignettes presented offer a rich insight into the experiences of converts within the edifice of secular liberal British education. On the whole, the participants perceive their religious subjectivity to be highly scrutinised, their needs unduly dismissed and/or their identities enclosed within the ethno-cultural considerations of the wider Muslim community. My interactions with these participants revealed that almost all of them possessed a rudimentary appreciation of what Modood (2013) might refer to as the 'hegemonic power of secularism in British political culture' (p. 77) and the manifestations of that culture within the realm of education.

The data in this chapter and the two preceding chapters has been organised in such a way as to take the reader along the participants' journey from religious conversion (chapter 5) and identity formation (chapter 6) into a discussion of their subsequent educational experiences (chapter 7). The reader of this thesis is provided with the sense of spiritual and social development, displacement and struggle inherent within the experience of conversion to Islam in contemporary Britain. My decision to save a much deeper engagement with the academic literature for the following 'discussion' chapter (chapter 8), was an attempt at achieving what Stake (1978) refers to as 'naturalistic generalization' (p. 6); thick descriptions

of my participants cases and perspectives which may allow the reader to gain 'understandings mostly through… vicarious experience' (p. 6). While I recognise that this is an ambitious proposal, the methodological approach I have taken lends itself to this. As a convert and thus an 'insider' myself, and in adopting an Islamic epistemological stance, I have taken seriously, identified with, and attempted to faithfully articulate, the reasonings the participants have expressed throughout this research. This, I contend, leaves me well-placed to address the three research questions that have guided this study. In the next chapter, I will bring my analysis into conversation with the relevant literature in order to answer these questions.

Chapter 8: Discussion

8.1 Introduction

> *Revert, then, for a moment more to the psychology of self-surrender. When you find a man living on the ragged edge of his consciousness, pent in to his sin and want and incompleteness, and consequently inconsolable, and then simply tell him that all is well with him, that he must stop his worry, break with his discontent, and give up his anxiety, you seem to him to come with pure absurdities. The only positive consciousness he has tells him that all is not well … There are only two ways in which it is possible to get rid of anger, worry, fear, despair, or other undesirable affections. One is that an opposite affection should overpoweringly break over us, and the other is by getting so exhausted with the struggle that we have to stop,—so we drop down, give up, and don't care any longer. Our emotional brain-centres strike work, and we lapse into a temporary apathy. Now there is documentary proof that this state of temporary exhaustion not infrequently forms part of the conversion crisis…. '* (James, 2015[1902]: 297-298)

This statement from William James' classical work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* relates to the 'crisis' of religious conversion (p. 298). It captures the sense of psychological and spiritual tension within the 'the mind of the candidate for conversion' that may arise as a result of the struggle towards a 'positive ideal' (p. 180). While the statement was written over a century ago by a man in markedly different circumstances to my own, with an ethno-cultural background distinct to my own, and written about conversion to a religion different

to the one which forms the focus of my thesis, the sentiment resonates with the narratives of conversion in this study.

James' description of the feeling of incompleteness and inconsolability brings to mind Umm Musa's portrayal of her life before she felt able to openly commit to Islam: 'I was always down and… just hated living at home… I wanted to move to East London or somewhere there were Muslims… act like a proper Muslim… I feel like my Islamic life kicked off after I got married.' (section 7.3). James's statement about the religious adherent feeling that 'The only positive consciousness he has tells him that all is not well' evokes, for me, Owen's sense of spiritual urgency: 'there was a point where I knew I HAD to accept this… I HAVE to embrace Islam… there is no more need to wait. Maybe there's no tomorrow. And you know, that was sort of a big eye opener for me… I said I'm going to accept this - accept Islam now, and that was it.' (section 5.5).

James goes on to assert two ways in which one overcomes the 'undesirable affections' that are brought on by the need for self-surrender. One way, he insists, 'is that an opposite affection should overpoweringly break over us.' Here, I am reminded of Leanne's account of overwhelming and inexplicable emotion during her conversion: 'I call it my calling. I didn't wake up wanting it. I didn't expect it. It just came like that [clicking her fingers]. I turned to her and said I need to take my *shahadah*, I need to go take my shahadah… And when I took my *shahadah*, I started crying. I was uncontrollably crying, but I wasn't upset… People say to me explain that to me, and I say: It was like before, I used to think about it with my head. This time it was in my heart and it was like a matter of urgency. Like I had to go and do it. I couldn't wait.' (section 5.5). The second way, James posits, is 'by getting so exhausted with the struggle that we have to stop… and we lapse into a temporary apathy'. This recalls Derrick's depiction of his spiritual inaction, which acted in direct contradiction to his inner beliefs: 'Like, I always believed in the creator; that we're created for a purpose. I didn't know what the purpose was… Before, I was just busy living aimlessly, living like day by day or whatever.' (section 5.5).

Yet, despite these resonances with James' description of conversion, his use of the phrase 'the psychology of self-surrender' seems to reveal a dissonance with what has been

presented in the previous three chapters. For, while psychology concedes that the internal tensions, spiritual struggles and emotional yearnings of the convert exist, the socio-psychological literature reviewed in chapter 2 views these tensions, struggles and yearnings as the result of, for example, discontentment with one's social circumstance or as a product of cerebrations (sections 2.2.7 2.2.10). My participants, however, adopted a theological reading of these tensions, struggles and yearning, insisting that they are operations of a Creator. This is exemplified by the statements of Owen – 'Allah guided me to Islam' – Leanne – 'I had no control over that night. I couldn't sleep. Allah guided me to it' (section 5.5) – and Shaheeda – 'Allah guides whoever He wills, you know, He does what He pleases' (ethnographic interaction).

Therefore, my discussion of the convert experience diverges from James's 'psychology of self-surrender' to what I may call the 'theology of self-surrender'. This divergence, I believe, touches upon one of the central implications of the findings presented in the previous three chapters: That the centrality of religious conviction in the minds and lives of the converts in this study is instructive of the enduring relevance of religion as a discursive element of public life for many social actors in Britain. To articulate this argument, and the other arguments I will make in this chapter, I will divide this chapter into three sections. In each section I will engage with the bodies of literature that have been explored in chapter 2, as I bring my findings to bear on the RQ's that have underpinned this thesis.

8.2 RQ1: What were the experiences of a self-selected group of millennial Muslim converts (born between 1981 and 1996) within secondary and post-secondary education settings in the UK (post-9/11)?

The first research question is reflective of my disciplinary focus on education. While I am interested in the broad implications of my research, including its implications for the accommodation of religion in public life, this thesis is primarily concerned with the educational experiences of a particular generation of convert Muslims in Britain. Chapter 7's presentation of findings that exclusively relate to educational experiences acts as a springboard to answering this first question. That chapter's data outlines the various experiences of this group of converts within secondary and post-secondary educational

environments in the UK, within a socio-political context that had been influenced by the events of 9/11. As evidenced in my literature review, that context resulted in a slew of policies designed to prevent radicalisation, regulate speech and religious expression and, as Revell (2012) has judged, served to 'criminalise aspects of theology, education, cultural practice and community that are associated with Islam' (p. 82-83). In spite of, and prior to, the attacks of 9/11, it has been suggested that Britain's liberal secular education system contained a disdain for religious subjecthood generally, and Islam specifically (Carr, 2018: 33). The residuals of orientalism, for example, permeated outlooks on Islam and have thus coloured the ways in which the religion has come to be recognised and accommodated within schooling (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020).

For my participants, their experiences within the education system reflected these longstanding outlooks as well as the contemporary post-9/11 cultural standing of Islam in Britain. Orientalism was visible, for example, within some of the female participants' experiences of having their conversions divested of agency, religious content and rationality (see section 6.5). The post-9/11 cultural standing was visible in the participants' felt need to self-silence and perform apoliticism (see section 7.5.1). Further to this, participants experienced forms of marginality and alterity which were unique to the circumstances of those converting to Islam during their schooling in contemporary Britain. For example, participants struggled with the disclosure of their religiosity and conversion, faced social and familial rejection, loss of social standing and/or felt the need to hide or abate their religious practices and beliefs to avoid 'the zealous convert' trope (see Table * below). As Leanne put it, 'even what I wore was like not what I wanted to wear... Looking back it was so people didn't think I was extreme.' (see section 7.5.1). Furthermore, converts were uniquely faced with the challenge of negotiating the physical and intellectual spaces in which they practiced their newfound religion, all while having the authenticity of their beliefs dismissed or pathologised. This dismissal or pathologisation occurred for any number of reasons: sometimes as a result of their racial heritage or their scriptural literalism or their nonconformity with south-east Asian cultural practices. Participants also faced being essentialised as overzealous, religiously illiterate or motivated to convert by factors other than religious belief. The literature in this regard illustrates that the tendency to read conversion as motivated by extrinsic secular factors has neither been limited to the

millennial generation (see Al-Qwidi, 2002) nor to British converts (see van Nieuwkerk, 2006c). Importantly also, I have illustrated how the tendency to portray converts as uninformed extended to government-backed outlooks (see section 2.4.4.2).

However, many of the difficulties faced by converts were not unique to this subgroup of the Muslim community. As previous studies have shown, like the converts in this study, heritage Muslims also face forms of racialisation (Modood, 2005) and pathologisation (Ahmed, 2005). Commonly, heritage Muslims experience similar types of self-silencing and dislocation within the dominant student culture (Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021); a culture the participants experienced as fixed and broadly homogeneous. Nonetheless, taking into consideration the forms of marginality which do appear unique to converts (something I will discuss in greater detail in the sections to follow), a central finding of this study is the distinctive types of challenges converts face in navigating their journey through the education system.

This was reflected in my data, which showed a propensity for converts to leave or change their educational path. In some instances, this meant resuming education in settings that they considered more favourable. In other instances, this meant deciding to discontinue their education. In all cases, this self-selecting group of converts' experiences may be summarised as a struggle to survive the marginality and alterity brought on by the choice to convert during their educational journey. Importantly, within the backdrop of post-9/11 Britain, conversion has come to be construed as a pathway to extremism (Flower, 2013). This brings the study's findings into a much wider discourse on Muslims in modern Britain; something I have touched upon in chapter 2 (see section 2.4.2). Surprisingly, however, the events of 9/11, 7/7 and the subsequent policy climate in education did not feature prominently in an explicit way within my data. Many of the converts did experience struggles that related, implicitly, to what Shain (2021) has referred to as 'the unequal education space in post-9/11 Britain' (p. 275). Nonetheless, the absence of explicit references to the post-9/11 policy milieu is noteworthy. I have interpreted this to be instructive of the potential 'fading memory' of the 'War on Terror' in the minds of millennial born Muslim converts.

8.2.1 Family and Wellbeing

Given the fact that six of the participants of this study converted prior to the age of eighteen, it is appropriate, when discussing their educational journeys to consider the role of families and other support systems available to them during that period. Feelings of anxiety and the quality of parent–child relationships have consistently been linked with the academic performance of students (e.g., Contreras, 2005; Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993). Thus, the social experiences and family relationships of the participants become relevant in answering RQ1.

In chapter 6, the findings demonstrated that some converts faced being ostracised by their families, having the conversion gendered or facing other forms of social hostility (see sections 6.46.6). As Leanne highlighted, this could occur due to misunderstandings about the religion or assumptions about converts' post-conversion social and political views (see section 6.10). Derrick's data indicated that this could also occur due to a fear of radicalisation and criminality; a trope that the literature demonstrates is promulgated by media portrayals of converts (Sealy, 2017; Spolier & van den Brandt, 2020).

The obvious importance of support systems for any student experiencing forms of marginality means that the mental health and wellbeing of convert Muslims becomes a germane topic of consideration. The data presented in chapter 7 implies that participants may have experienced mental health and wellbeing struggles. Their usage of words such as 'stress', 'altercation' and 'exhaustion' substantiate that interpretation (Norwich et al., 2022). Indeed, given the self-regulatory strategies employed by my participants to avoid the securitisation agenda, reduce alterity, or align their student experience with their religious beliefs and practices, my study lends support to those who assert a relationality between the growing securitisation industry and Muslim mental health (MMH) issues (Younis, 2021). It is troubling then that empirical research has identified a growing number of Muslim psychiatrists and psychologists becoming involved in counter violent extremism (CVE) initiatives without an informed understanding of 'how mental health discourse plays a role in modern projects of nationalism, capitalism, and securitization' (Younis, 2021: 14).

The data collected for this study did not offer sustained focus on the mental health of convert Muslims in educational settings. Additionally, the generational focus of the study,

and thus the historical nature of the narratives, meant that participants were reflecting on their past experiences and needs as opposed to their current wellbeing needs. However, the political implications of MMH, the apparent psychologisation of the securitisation agenda and the underlining racialisation of CVE appear to be fruitful areas for cross-disciplinary research, and may be helpful in determining the current educational needs of the convert Muslim population.

Relevant also may be the differing experiences of those students who lived at home during the educational experiences they described and those who lived on-campus or in other forms of accommodation. While this topic did not feature explicitly as part of my analysis, it is notable that the participants who used words like 'stress' and 'exhaustion' to describe their campus experience, also experienced negative reactions to their conversion from their family. This prompted Uthman and Jameela, for example, to leave home and continue their education in private accommodation. An in-depth exploration of the experiential differences between students living at home and students living on-campus requires purposive research.

8.2.2 Chaplaincy

Relatedly, the responses participants gave to my interview question concerning chaplaincy services in education highlight shortcomings in either the availability, usefulness or visibility of these services. Given what has been discussed about the lack support systems for convert Muslims, these shortcomings imply a need for reform. Some of the literature exploring chaplaincy services in UK universities would suggest that chaplaincy services for a range of faiths are often well resourced (Aune et al., 2019) and can be some of the most active student communities on campuses in the UK (Perfect et al., 2019). However, the data from my study brings into question the extent to which that claim applies to Muslim chaplaincy services and, in particular, their ability to cater for the needs of the convert Muslim cohort. For example, a recent study, which I have reviewed at length elsewhere (Adebolajo, 2021) and which represents the largest empirical study into conceptions of Islam in the UK's HE sector, provides evidence to suggest that some chaplaincy services are largely viewed as Christian spaces (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020: 72). Strikingly, one of the universities that

appeared in that study showed that the director of the chaplaincy services was both a Christian minister and Prevent lead for the university. This brings to mind Derrick's suspicions about chaplaincy in UK educational institutions: 'They use them nowadays as basically spies'. Both the perceptions and experiences of my participants lend support to the idea that Muslim chaplaincy in education needs reform. This is an implication I will address more fully in answer to RQ3.

8.2.3 Summary

In answer to RQ1, it is evident from the findings of this study that the educational experiences of this self-selecting group of millennial Muslim converts may be summarised as a struggle to survive their marginality in education. This struggle resulted, in part, from external pressures such as difficulties with family. And it sometimes resulted from the internal pressures of spiritual change and shifting identity configurations. Importantly, one manifestation of this struggle, which this project has had limited space to explore, is the potential mental health and wellbeing implications for converts. The data points towards a dearth of support from services which are designed to offer support in this area. Services such as chaplaincies were deemed by participants to be absent, invisible, conspiratorial, or otherwise inept. Considering the unique marginality of convert Muslims and the resultant need for pastoral support within education, the inadequacies of chaplaincy services may be instructive of an ongoing educational need for the UK's convert population. RQ2 delves further into the ways my research may better inform the future educational needs of this population.

8.3 RQ2: How might a fine-grained exploration of the conversion narratives and identities of Muslim converts inform the future educational needs of the UK's convert population?

Through my analysis of the data presented in chapter five I introduced the concept of habitus as a way of articulating the social patterns, experiences, practices and communicative habits that are shared between converts, that are socially entrenched, acquired and reproduced by other converts. In doing this, I acknowledge the complexities of the concept and the limitations in deploying the term to overlay my analysis. While I

concede the potential conceptual imprecision of habitus, I have found it an adequate analytical tool and descriptor for articulating those things which are shared between myself and the converts in this study. Similarly, the concept of lived religion has proven adequate as a way of framing the religious identity facets of my participants, as they play out in the social world. As previously noted, the concept of lived religion does not envisage ‘a fundamental rethinking of what religion is’ (Orsi, 1997: 7), therefore it retains the spiritual facets of religious experience present in the lives of my participants while encompassing the everyday religiosity that I witnessed through my ethnography.

In locating my discussions of religion within the genre of lived religion, my findings present a conceptualisation of the converts’ Islamic practice, cognition and self-identification as socially embedded. That is, everyday socially enacted religiosity. It is that very social identity marker – religion – from which many of my participants’ socio-political and educational demands came. It was the identity marker of lived religion which coloured many of the experiences of education that they narrated. This is encapsulated in Jameela’s statement, ‘For me, everything I do is worship’ (see section 5.2). This complex expression of religiosity is widely supported by the literature also (Özyürek, 2015; Panjwani, 2017; Sealy, 2019; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; Suleiman, 2013; 2016) and serves to highlight the problems of essentialised and simplistic constructions of convert identity, such as those discussed in chapter 2 (see, for example section 2.4.4.2). Reductive constructions of convert identity can seem especially harmful when propagated by the Home Office and ministers like Nicky Morgan, due to the potential influence of those constructions.

Chapter 5’s presentation of the various conversion patterns and motivations of the participants and their varied processes of conversion demonstrated that conversion is rarely as unconsidered as the aforementioned Home Office description would imply. My data shows that converts’ investigations into the religion often led to sophisticated and well-informed readings of Islam prior to conversion. Far from being ‘vulnerable to overtures from radicalisers’ (Home Office, 2011: 87), this study signals that converts tended to form their own spaces, both digitally and physically, in which they gained a rich, sometimes classically-oriented, understanding of their newfound religion. This frequently meant a rejection of those who wished to impress upon them theological distortions.

However, as was demonstrated in chapter 6 and 7, this did not mean the acceptance of an apolitical or uncontentious form of Islamic identity. Rather, their conversions often resulted in a traditionalist, conservative and, in some instances, culturally transgressive form of Islam. This form of Islam tended to be literalist and, could potentially appear unsanitized for liberal expectations. This meant that converts' religiosity could be misconstrued as radical, distorted or ill-informed. Such perceptions had major implications for the ways in which converts felt able to engage with civic debate and interact within their educational contexts. This study's fine-grained exploration of converts' identities implies that the space for socio-cultural dissent and non-consensus is an essential element of the pluralism needed to progress past the types of inaccurate essentialisations I have referred to above. This again resonates with Nesbitt's (2004: 3) exhortation:

> *If society is to progress smartly from stereotyping to alert receptivity, both religious education and citizenship education require of us not only a theoretical, distanced, broad brush understanding of religions and cultures but also a fine-grained, close-up awareness.*

Addressing RQ2, therefore, I posit that this fine-grained exploration of the conversion narratives and identities of millennial born British Muslim converts apprises us of two important future educational needs for this population. First, there is a need to move beyond the shallow, essentialised understanding of conversion and converts, instead tending to a more astute understanding of them as part of the existing Muslim population. This requires a conceptualisation of converts, not as theologically distinct and ill-informed, but as experientially distinct, culturally diverse and possessing of the agency to form their own interpretations of Islam. The second educational need implied by this fine-grained exploration is a rethinking of the philosophical underpinnings of policies and approaches to education which seek consensus within an ever-expanding plurality in British society. This theoretical implication will be given more sustained reflection in answer to RQ3.

8.3.1 The Worldviews Paradigm

The advancement of more nuanced readings of religion is an important problematic to consider. Elsewhere (Adebolajo, 2022a) I have discussed the potential role to be played by the developing literature on the reframing of Religious Education in Britain, represented by the Worldviews paradigm debate (CoRE, 2018; Everington 2018; Freathy & John, 2019), and that discourse's potential to frame nuanced conceptions of religious identity (Miedema, 2014). However, here I concede that the shift towards the study of Worldviews may not be a sufficient corrective to what some scholars have suggested is contemporary secular, non-confessional RE's hostile approach to Muslims (Ipgrave 1999; Revell 2012) and other religiously committed students (Moulin, 2015). This is because, while my research echoes the paradigm's insistence that teachers, and by extension students and citizens, should be equipped with a more comprehensive knowledge of the diverse forms of religious and non-religious practice in the modern world (CoRE, 2018: para 9 & 12), the relatively nascent body of work surrounding worldviews means that it is a 'messy' paradigm in need of major clarification (Freathy & John, 2019: 8). For example, there is a need for answers to practical questions about how the worldviews paradigm might be embedded into the existing curricula; how it will be able to preserve good aspects of current practice and knowledge at the same time as evolving to reflect developing research in the field of lived religion. Thus, as contemporary literature continues to unpick questions about the paradigm (van der Kooij et al., 2013, 82), the fullness of the 'worldviews shift' discussion falls beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, the findings of this study validate the sentiment of debates which are currently being represented by this paradigm shift, and may be helpful in providing scholarly evidence to inform conceptualisations of lived religion as these debates develop. The unique expressions of religiosity illustrated by my research offers an example of the diversifying landscape of religious adherence within Britain.

8.3.2 Locating Convert Muslims

An important part of the reconceptualisation implicated by this research relates to how convert Muslims are located in relation to heritage Muslims within the wider discourse (see section 2.4.2). In chapter two, I outlined my rationale for locating converts within the much broader discourse surrounding Muslims in education. I believe that the findings of my study have substantiated that choice. The participants' expressions of belonging to Islam and Islam

forming their superordinate identities provides further evidence of the need to conceive of converts' educational demands, not in terms of conversion, ethnicity or culture only, but as demands for recognition and accommodation in terms of religion. This conception recognises the diversity of Muslim experience. This study's fine-grained exploration of the narratives of British converts points towards a need to transcend the common tropes and misinterpretations still found within textbooks and information about Islam (Revell, 2012). Instead, discussions of Islam as lived should include reference to the forms of deterritorialised Islam that exist across multiple cultures, including among converts within the Western context. Definitions and discussions of islamoprejudice should also reference the types of neo-orientalism (Kerboua, 2016), re-racialisation (Moosavi, 2015a; 2015b), cultural purist sentiment, pathologising and divesting of religious content that the literature explicates. Indeed, my study indicates that these are a part of the everyday experiences of some Muslims. The nuanced expressions of Islam being publicly articulated by converts in modern British educational institutions imply a need to develop educational material and courses that reflect these nuances and the various populations that live Islam. There are already encouraging signs that this is starting to take shape (e.g. SOAS, 2023).

8.3.3 Summary

In answer to RQ2, this study informs of the need for an educational environment in which conversion, religious subjectivity and lived religion can be brought to bear on the teaching and learning of religious education and contemporary conceptualisations of Islam in academic material, as well as in education more broadly. Taking religious subjecthood more seriously as an identity marker, and the thing from which issue a number of the converts' social demands and needs within the educational context, can help to bring converts into the 'Muslims in education' discourse more fully. This speaks to a need for converts to become more visible in ongoing research about the Muslim educational experience. This need cannot be viewed as distinct from the wider need to have converts and other diversities more visible, accommodated and represented within the Muslim community itself (Khan et al., 2020). In that sense, the impetus for meeting the educational needs of converts may conceivably come from within the Muslim community, as my participants appeared to perceive (see section 7.10).

8.4 RQ3: What implications arise from these recounted experiences?

The points I have raised in answer to RQ1 and RQ2 run along three currents, which have academic, theoretical and practical implications. In this final section of the chapter, in answer to RQ3, I will bring those implications to the fore more explicitly.

8.4.1 Academic Implications

8.4.1.1 The 'Religification' Debate

Reflecting upon my methodological emphasis on the religiosity of converts, and my choice to respond to what I perceive to be gaps in existing literature by emphasising the theological perspectives of my participants and their self-identification with Islam as their superordinate identity marker, I am conscious of some of the academic and theoretical contentions that may arise in that regard. Panjwani (2017), for example, has pointed to a tendency for academics to reduce Muslim identity to a Muslim-only conceptualisation which misrepresents the complex bricolage of identifications that Muslims have. This valid concern requires me to clarify that the self-identification of my participants' and their chosen emphasis on the primacy of their Muslim identity did not necessarily represent a denial of other multiple cultural, professional, personal and private identifications. For example, Charlene described her identity in a way that encompassed her religion, gender and professional occupation, noting 'Yes, my identity is a Muslim… a Muslim woman… I'm a Muslim businesswoman' (section 6.7). Overall, however, the participants, in adopting a new religion in which they had, at times, struggled to find recognition and acceptance, appeared to emphasise their belonging to that religion. This may have been part of a mechanism to secure recognition and accommodation according to that religion. This was especially evident in the types of frustrations they expressed about others' failures to acknowledge their Islamic identity.

While some empirical work has warned of the dangers in reducing Muslim identity to 'Just a Muslim' or a Muslim-first outlook (Panjwani, 2017; Panjwani and Moulin-Stożek, 2017), it is

my contention that, in the case of converts, who begin their lives without the ethno-racial and cultural identifications associated with being a Muslim, the prospect of not being recognised as Muslim, post-conversion, poses the greater concern. As Taylor notes 'misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being' (1994, p. 25). While the 'religification' of Muslim identity may be reductive in the case of heritage Muslims (Panjwani, 2017; Panjwani and Moulin-Stożek, 2017), my findings suggest that the de-religification of convert identity may be equally reductive in the case of convert Muslims.

One major contribution of my study, therefore, is to suggest that, in the case of my participants, they themselves encourage religification of their superordinate identity. Further to this, there was no evidence to suggest that this identification inhibited multiple identifications. For, while the participant were mothers, fathers, professionals, siblings, citizens, of varying ethnicities and genders, embedded in religious and secular environments, they were keen to emphasise that they were Muslims also, in each of these contexts. This supports other scholarly perspectives which highlight the ability of Muslims to incorporate their faith into their secular social contexts (Gilliat-Ray et al., 2013). In this sense, my study interrogates the assumption that the religification of identity in academic discourse is equally applicable to those Muslims who already struggle to gain recognition on the basis of religion. This corrective contributes a new perspective within the broader academic discourse on Muslims in Britain.

8.4.1.2 A Case for Insider Research and Digital Methods

The abovementioned contribution is one manifestation of a further academic implication of this study. This implication relates to the methodological benefits of conducting research as an insider in the study of contemporary British convert Muslims. I have discussed before the auto-ethnographic element of this research, which aligns with my insider positionality (sections 4.44.10.3). But I will expand upon this notion further with reference to Alvesson's (2003) notion of 'Self-ethnography', which states that:

> *A self-ethnography is a study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a "natural access," is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants. The researcher then works and/or lives in the setting and then uses the experiences, knowledge and access to empirical material for research purposes*. (p. 174)

The benefits of the 'natural access' available to me during this study has manifested in various ways within the findings presented in the previous three chapters. Most notably, the added candidness, mutual understanding and commonality of experience has enabled me to engage with participants in ways that would be impossible for a non-convert researcher (see for example my discussion during member checking with Melanie in section 5.6).

Another manifestation of my positionality is the data gleaned from the digital ethnographic approach taken. My own experience of becoming a Muslim and interacting closely with the convert community furnished me with what I consider to be an accurate view of the ubiquitous presence of the internet, social media and other digital mediums in the conversion experiences of this population. While my small-scale study is not generalisable, it is hoped that the findings, in being reflective of the centrality of digital environments in the conversion processes and socialisations of my participants, will strengthen the case for future research into the role of digital environments in the experiences of conversion more generally and conversion to Islam specifically. This seems to be supported by contemporary literature exploring the role of digital methodologies in the sociology of religion (Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour, 2016). In arguing that it is my positionality as a convert that has brought these matters to the fore, my work addresses Rambo's observation that 'The field of conversion studies is in flux. We may be approaching a state of paradigm exhaustion. No new orthodoxies have been created.' (Buckser & Glazier, 2003: 195). The value that my insider positionality has brought to this study makes a compelling case for incorporating both insider research and digital methodologies into any new orthodoxy that may develop in the study of modern religious conversion.

I am mindful, of course, that insider research in the field of social science is clearly acknowledged as valuable (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). However, my review of the literature demonstrates that the research being conducted about convert Muslims does not reflect

this valorising of insider research, nor does it reflect sufficient consideration of the ways digital media shapes and echoes the social practices and everyday religiosity of many converts. This limitation, I argue, exhibits itself in the types of misrepresentations of converts that I have noted throughout this thesis. I intend for the ongoing dissemination of my research findings to contribute to addressing that lacuna.

8.4.1.3 Conversion Motifs

Connected to my assertion that digital methodologies are an important addition to the investigation of converts and conversion in modern research, this study brings into question the utility of older models in theorising about conversion. With some of the well-known and commonly applied models used in the theorising of conversion predating the internet, one might infer that the proliferation of 'disembodied' religious communication, exemplified in the rise of the internet, social media and digital advancements, broadens the prevalence of particular patterns of conversion; an inference supported by my data and Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) recognition that 'disembodied modes of religious communication' are on the rise in the West (p. 376-7). However, there is little in the way of contemporary literature in the field of conversion which discusses what these changes mean for the processes and patterns of conversion. This suggests a need to revaluate and adapt theories of conversion which rely upon potentially outdated models.

Related to this is the fact that theorising on conversion has tended to emphasise those motivating factors that are extrinsic to religious motivations: social pressures (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981), societal changes (Chaudary, 2020; Shanneik, 2011), personal traumas and psychological needs (Gebauer & de Araújo, 2016; Köse, 1996; 1999). There appears to be a dearth of reflective theorising about the motivations, which are intrinsic to Islam, that attract people to the religion. My findings indicate that beliefs and practices intrinsic to Islam were the key motivators for conversion for most of my participants. For example, my data indicates that although affectional connections motivated participants like Melanie, this did not imply an absence of theological motivations. Rather, my data revealed a complex interplay between extrinsic affectional circumstances and theological attraction to the precepts of the Islamic religion. New research into conversion might, for example, apply a

nuanced revision of Lofland and Skonovd's affectional motif to encompass this type of plurality in motifs.

The abovementioned limitations of conversion theorising, in conjunction with other noted limitations (see sections 2.2.5, 2.2.10 and 5.7) indicate a need for further research into the conversion patterns and processes of contemporary British Muslim converts. It may be fruitful to explore the design and application of an updated and expanded conversion motif framework, which may be used as a heuristic device with which to describe and analyse conversion as it occurs in this era of disembodied, digital religiosity.

8.4.2 Theoretical Implications

8.4.2.1 Postsecular Thinking

One of the key implications that arise from taking seriously the discretely religious identification of participants, and recognising religion as the identity marker from which issue a number of their social demands and needs within the educational context, is an orientation towards postsecularism. Here I am referring to postsecularism, not only as a deconstruction of theories of secularisation, but as a way of thinking that contests the over-enfranchisement of secular ways of knowing. I am employing the term postsecularism, then, as a way of critiquing the secular treatment of religion in public life (Beckford, 2012).

My findings imply that the desire for my participants to have their religious subjectivity more fully recognised and accommodated adds momentum to the plethora of research indicating the continued prominence of religious adherence as an important discursive aspect of public life, a key argument in postsecular scholarship (Berg-Sørensen, 2013; Winchester, 2008). This, in turn points to a continued need to theorise about which religious demands for accommodation and recognition are to be viewed as troublesome and/or anomalous within a pluralistic secular public setting. With participants like Uthman, Emma, Owen, Aleem, Shaheeda and Derrick indicating that their views and demands were unwelcome or unattended to, my study contributes empirical evidence supporting claims of a secular hegemony within educational settings (Modood, 2013: 77; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020).

Mouffe submits that 'In politics the very distinction between 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' is already the drawing of a frontier; it has a political character and is always the expression of a given hegemony.' (1993: 142-3).

The identity configurations and educational experiences of those who took part in this narrative-ethnography expose some of the limitations surrounding the expression of religious subjectivity within the contested public spaces of educational institutions. As Scott-Baumann et al. (2020) have noted, 'freedom to express one's identity, explore one's understanding of the world and develop academic freedom are central to… plurality that must surely be dialogic, even plurivocal.' (p. 212). However, consensus seeking in educational spaces (Fraser-Burgess, 2012; Narey, 2012), which I earlier critiqued (section 2.4.4.3), appears to contain theoretical impediments to such plurivocality. I propose that this is observable, for example, in policies such as FBV, which standardises and validates a form of consensus on the foundations of British national identity (Olusola, 2023). FBV's demarcation of 'fundamental' British values is very much 'the drawing of a frontier' (Mouffe, 1993: 142-3); especially for those who, like the converts in this study, reject having their identities enclosed within, or reduced to, ethno-cultural boundaries. The findings from this study, therefore, align with Hoque's (2015: 23) view that FBV constructs a narrative in which Islamic values are seen to be 'incompatible' with British values. This reality leads me to question the pragmatism of the current liberal thinking which upholds such policies. Further to this, it causes me to advocate for more postsecular ways of arbitrating the contestations that this study has highlighted.

8.4.2.2 Agonism: In Theory and Practice

The postmodern political theory of agonism, which recognises contestation and conflict as a natural and constitutive part of democracy, is a promising theoretical resource in navigating the abovementioned contestations. The theory's impulse to accept that no consensus can be sought in the socio-political sphere (Mouffe, 1999; 2005; 2013) may offer room for the recognition and accommodation of a greater variety of subjectivities. Further research could be conducted to explore, for example, how agonistic theory might be brought into conversation with pedagogical practices in order to cultivate freedoms of expression in the

classroom, acceptance of disagreement and expanded conversation between oppositional viewpoints on topics such as gender, sexuality, religion, nationalism and identity. This type of plurivocality in practice may remedy the perception of some converts that the fixed cultural realities of their school, college or university is necessarily at odds with their religious values.

Research might be undertaken to explore how agonistic educational practices may empower students to feel able to express religious, transgressive, controversial and/or political sentiment, as well as tackle contemporary issues around censorship and the chilling of speech (Morris, 2015; Sellgren, 2021; Townend, 2017). Such research would be conducted with the aim of more realistically simulating the contestations found within pluralistic societies. It would aim to stimulate more functional pedagogical approaches. After all, 'One of the first steps on the civic journey is the education system. Education should help young people become active citizens once they understand their role within society and how they can go about improving it.' (House of Lords, 2018: 27). My findings indicate that some religious subjects would benefit from 'deeper' forms of pluralism (Connolly, 2005). One of the key contributions of this doctoral research, therefore, is the stimulus it provides for further research into the practical application of agonistic educational practices.

8.4.2.3 In Need of a Neologism?

Throughout this thesis I have alluded to the need to accurately identify and define the forms of discrimination converts face. While the term Islamophobia captures elements of the stigmatisation which convert and heritage Muslims experience, my findings and the literature explored in chapter 2 point towards a more complex nexus of inter-related discriminations that converts face, which are not well framed within the limited scope and application of the term Islamophobia. To illustrate this point, in Table 1 I have drawn upon my findings and the aforementioned literature to define some of the forms of discrimination converts commonly report.

Table 3 - Common Forms of Discrimination Faced by Converts – Source [author]

Name of Discrimination	Description of Discrimination	Presence in Participant Narratives
Colour Racism	There were indications that converts experienced colour racism, in the case of some white converts, for the first time in their lives, as they found themselves in the minority within the Muslim community. Many of the converts were stereotyped and excluded; in the case of black and brown converts, in new ways.	Yusuf, Uthman, Jameel, Emma, Derrick, Owen
Disingenuous Convert Trope	My findings indicate that converts were sometimes disbelieved, with their conversions assumed to be insincere, uninformed or conspiratorial. The literature has shown that this type of suspicion or rejection of faith can lead to converts being feared and excluded in Muslim communities (Roald 2004, 261; Zebiri 2008, 61–68) or being seen as 'religious imposters' (Rogozen-Soltar 2012, 618). In my study, this also led to converts' needs and social demands being dismissed as anomalous or unreasonable within educational institutions. As discussed in chapter 2, at times converts are portrayed as converting for convenience, acceptance or as a form of countercultural protest.	Derrick, Leanne, Uthman
Damsel Trope	A gendered form of discrimination in which convert women were presumed to be oppressed, not acting of their own agency, intellectually deficient or in need of saving from Islam. This trope is widely reported in the literature and present within my data corpus. As it is predicated on an assumption about the status of women in Islam, it reflects orientalist thinking and discounts the ability of Muslims to self-determine (Said, 1985: 97). This trope also relates to the apparent over-emphasis of the affectional conversion motif.	Umm Musa, Shaheeda, Jameela, Melanie
Imposed Assimilation	Converts in this study reported being treated as needing to assimilate into 'Asian', rather than Islamic, culture to gain acceptance. In some cases the failure to do so led to rejection within predominantly Asian community settings. This aligns with perceptions that converts cross the borders of whiteness (Franks, 2000) to become ingratiated into the Muslim community. Köse (1996) referred to this as being 'Pakistanised' (p. 135). This notion of needing to racially assimilate can lead	Owen, Leanne, Yusuf

	to the marginalisation of converts both within and outside of Muslim communities.	
Islamophobia	This form of discrimination is difficult to define and disambiguate. Broadly, however, 'Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.' (APPG, 2018: 50). While this definition is broad and references both race and Islam as its roots, it does not comfortably encompass the forms of discriminations I have described above, which are predicated on assumptions about things such as cultural purity, nationalism, the psychological disposition of religious people and gender.	All Participants
Neo-Orientalism	Özyürek (2009) points to a new form of racism that lies within the established orientalist paradigm, but which is distinct. This aligns with Kerboua's (2016) description of neo-orientalism; a post-9/11 transformation of orientalism, which constructs Islam as a social and existential threat to the Western world and civilisation. In that sense, converts are viewed as a manifestation of the growth and eventual outcome of this threat.	Uthman, Bilal, Emma, Jameel, Yusuf
Orientalism	Orientalism casts the culture, language, religion and identity of Europeans (the Occident) as superior in comparison with the culture, language and religion of non-Europeans, most notably Middle Eastern peoples. (Said, 1978) While this is arguably not a form of discrimination, scholars have highlighted how this type of thinking plays out in the lives of converts and others in contemporary Britain to marginalise and other them (Zebiri, 2011). The Orientalist lens often associates Islam with wanton bloodshed and violence; an assumption harkening back to the crusades (Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 6).	All Participants
Pathologising of conversion	Within what I have called the 'pathologising of conversion' I have contained a number of tropes and assumptions which served to exclude, marginalise and other converts in this study and in others detailed in this thesis. The participants in my study were often constructed as threats to national or communal security. Other converts had the religious content of their conversion diminished or	All Participants

	ignored. Some converts had their practices reduced to fundamentalism, brainwashing, radicalisation and zealotry. It is important to note that there is evidence to suggest that perceptions of convert zealotry are not exclusive to Muslim converts (Pond & Smith, 2009). The experiences of some participants indicated that they were automatically viewed as 'too religious' and were required to demonstrate their innocence and/moderation. This expected demonstration of innocence took many forms related to dress, chosen vernacular and expressions of apoliticism.	
Religious Illiterate Trope	This form of discrimination refers to my participants' perception that some heritage Muslims and non-Muslims regarded converts as lacking religious/theological literacy. This type of association between conversion and religious illiteracy is visible within literature produced by Muslim organisations and other media. For example, the Islamic Human Rights Commission, quoting *The Guardian*, states 'a large number of those involved in terrorism… lack religious literacy and could actually be regarded as religious novices… there is a higher than average proportion of converts.' (IHRC, 2015). While this association does not appear to be intentionally marginalising, it may be misconstrued, and, as my findings indicate, lead to marginalisation in the form of non-acceptance, dismissal or ridicule.	Isa, Uthman, Emma
Re-Racialisation	There are many reports of white converts being repositioned as part of an ethnic minority upon conversion to Islam (Jensen 2008, 390; van Nieuwkerk 2004, 235–236). This sometimes accompanies physical or verbal assaults (Badran, 2006; Franks, 2000; Jensen, 2008; Köse, 1996; Moosavi, 2015a; van Nieuwkerk, 2006b). For example, Suleiman (2013: 37) reports converts being subjected to racial slurs such as 'White Pakis'. Scholars such as Moosavi (2015a), Köse (1996) and Franks (2000) have all described processes by which converts are racially recategorized, with white converts experiencing a denial of access to white privilege. Moosavi	Uthman, Melanie, Aleem

	refers to this process as 're-racialisation' (Moosavi, 2015a). I have presented data which shows that some of my participants experienced this.	
Tokenisation	Some of my participants reported being tokenised within their new communities. This often manifested as exceptional treatment, fetishization of the colour or culture of the converts, or as being utilised in advertising and marketing visuals for Islamic organisations and websites. As this sometimes left the converts feeling used, tokenised or misunderstood, it can be considered a form of marginality. This was prevalent amongst those converts who identified themselves as white. It is reported in some recent literature about converts (Casey, 2021).	Owen, Uthman, Emma
Traitor Trope	This describes a form of discrimination in which converts are cast as cultural or racial traitors due to their conversion. This type of 'cultural fundamentalism' (Stolcke, 1995) conflates Islam with non-whiteness and situates converts as giving their allegiance to the 'race' of the enemy (Özyürek, 2009). The literature suggests that this form of discrimination is found in media and public sentiment across Britain and other parts of Europe (Alyedreessy, 2016; Franks, 2000; McDonald, 2005; Spoliar & Brandt, 2021; van Nieuwkerk, 2006). Mamdani (2004) suggests that this trope has helped to transform the way in which European and Islamic identity is conceived of in the body politic today. Some of my participants reported being cast as traitors by friends and/or family.	Aleem, Jameela, Derrick
Twice Racialised (non-British converts)	While the form of discrimination described here does not relate to my own findings, it is a form of stigmatisation which applies to non-British converts in the UK. As discussed briefly in chapter 2, research indicates that some converts can be 'twice stigmatised and racialised' within the UK context; stigmatised and racialised for not being British and further stigmatised and racialised for having converted to Islam (Pędziwiatr, 2017: 226). This represents an intersectional discrimination combining nationalistic and religious discrimination. It is relevant in developing understandings of the form of convert-specific discrimination I am describing.	None

Table 3 illustrates how, in many instances, the types of discrimination faced by British convert Muslims is distinctive and constructed of a bricolage of prejudices. It may be argued that the incapacity of definitions of Islamophobia to encompass this bricolage is instructive of a requirement to clarify, expand and adapt the definition of Islamophobia. However, it is my view that the types of discrimination faced by the converts, while frequently related to Islam, relate in other ways to sentiments of cultural purity, cultural fundamentalism, betrayal, racial hierarchy and assumptions about gender and religious fanatism that apply to religious converts of other religions also. Thus, I posit that the bricolage of discriminations my study is seeking to frame falls beyond the linguistic scope of Islamophobia; it is a convert-specific genus of phobia. While it would be presumptive of this small-scale study to forward a neologism deemed capacious enough to frame this assertion, I am inspired by the development of words such as 'intersectionality' to work towards the development of a term – or terms – which will provide analytical access to what I have described in Table 3. In relation to the development of the term intersectionality, Collins & Bilge (2016) write:

> *The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other*. (p. 10)

The need for definitional clarity and analytical access to the complex, symbiotic axes of discriminations illustrated in Table 3 provide a natural area for further research.

8.4.3 Practical Implications

In considering the implications of this study it is, perhaps, inaccurate to clearly distinguish between the academic and theoretical implications that I have discussed above, and any practical or policy implications that arise from the data. Indeed, my discussion of the worldviews paradigm is closely tied to the practicalities of developing new learning materials and teacher training; my advocacy of agonistic modes of thinking and the application of that thinking in educational settings is connected to developing policy initiatives which expand and protect free speech in HE, in particular the future implications of the Higher Education

Act 2023 (DoE, 2021). Similarly, my recommendations for a neologism to frame the types of religious discrimination faced by converts relates closely to ongoing policy debates about the definition of Islamophobia (Gould, 2020).

In this section, therefore, my focus on the development of Muslim chaplaincy services is to be understood as intertwined with my advocacy of reading convert Muslims into the broader Muslims-in-education debate. It is also intertwined with my advocacy of postsecular thinking. Thus, in these ways, many of the aforementioned implications of this study have practical applications.

However, it is germane at this point to recall what I earlier described as the 'reorienting' of my initial research intentions, from a concern with policy influence towards a reimagined conceptualisation of what it means to be political (see section 4.2). This, as I outlined, was a recognition that 'the personal is political' and that 'power is exercised in all relationships, not just those connected to the state' (Casey, 1995: 223-224). For this reason, the practical recommendation I will now forward as a result of this small-scale study avoids prescriptive or systematic changes to institutional practice and policy. Rather, it is my hope that the recommendations stated here can be disseminated in a manner that influences individual converts, researchers, chaplains, counsellors and community workers. It is through these individual changes that I hope influence will manifest. As I have signalled throughout this thesis, the study is not intended as merely an academic report on participant observation. Rather, it is also an observation of my own participation within the convert world; an account of my lived and ongoing experience as a convert Muslim.

What follows, therefore, are three practical implications, presented as recommendations for the future direction and development of Muslim pastoral services. As these recommendations arise from the themes explored in this research, they relate specifically to how chaplaincy may be enhanced for British convert Muslims within educational settings. For a more comprehensive examination and discussion of Muslim chaplaincy and the future of Muslim chaplaincy in Britain, see *Understanding Muslim Chaplaincy* (Gilliat-Ray et al., 2013).

8.4.3.1 Digital Chaplaincy

The first recommendation arises from the observable access converts have to digital mediums and the importance of that in their lives. The lived religious practices of the converts indicate that providing digital chaplaincy services may suit the socialising patterns and needs of the convert community in a way that physically located services may not. My findings indicate that in most cases converts were either unaware of chaplaincy services or reluctant to use them, choosing instead to seek support and like-minded networks in digital spaces. Future chaplaincy training may need to consider the technology, training and advertising necessary to ensure a broader access exists. While this need for development may take some time to implement, it is conceivable that digital chaplaincy will increase the number of both people who can access training to become chaplains and those who can access the services offered. One example of how digital chaplaincy may increase access is the possibility of *niqabi* (veiled) Muslim women chaplains having the opportunity to provide services in places they would otherwise be restricted from, taking account of the common policy of schools and sixth forms to ban students and staff from wearing the veil (Adams & Weale, 2016; Coughlan, 2016; Jeffreys, 2016; Ofsted, 2016)

8.4.3.2 Female Muslim Chaplains

The above recommendation connects to my second recommendation. My data revealed that female converts often faced unique difficulties that required the services of female chaplains. One example of this can be seen in an early ethnographic interaction I had with Melanie. She used the term 'spiritual abuse' (Mulvihill et al., 2022: 1) to describe a pattern of coercive control, experienced by a friend and fellow convert, which leveraged Islamic doctrine and religious authority to manipulate and abuse her. The participant had herself been warned about 'spiritual abuse' due to the affectional element of her own conversion (see section 5.6). While the issue of spiritual abuse did not appear in any significant way in her own narrative or in the narratives of other participants, I am alive to the fact that Melanie did not have access to a female chaplain in her educational institution. Given the reported prominence of the affectional motif in female conversion, I believe that there is a need for a concerted effort to increase the number and training of female Muslim chaplains. Accordingly, chaplains (both male and female) would benefit from detailed, research-

informed knowledge about how to help those experiencing spiritual abuse. As Mulvihill et al., (2022) highlight, 'faith leaders are commonly an early confidant for women of faith'. While further research is needed to ascertain the extent to which this observation applies to convert Muslim women, existing knowledge of the potential vulnerability and marginalisation faced by convert women appears to support a need to increase the number and training of female Muslim chaplains.

8.4.3.3 Chaplaincy Training and Talking Therapies

This final recommendation expands upon some of the specific topics of training and development that Muslim chaplains may undertake in order to better support the convert population. With ostracisation being one of the common experiences of my participants, I believe that Muslim chaplains would greatly benefit from specific training on how to support converts who, based on their choice to convert, lose the support systems of friends and family. This would include guidance about how best to disclose conversion, as well as advice on how to respond to common questions that may arise about their new religion. Leanne's narrative has demonstrated how having the ability to clarify Islamic positions on issues such as gender and sexuality may reduce conflict. It has been noted in other studies that outlooks on sexual morality tend to be a significant fault-line between converts and their previous circles (Zebiri, 2008).

This thesis has reported on the experiences of converts who have been negativesed and pathologised within both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. These experiences could concievably have a harmful effect on the mental health and self-esteem of converts. According to the National Health Service (2023) talking therapies such as counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy may provide an effective way to deal with such issues. This leads me to advocate for increased training in talking therapies for Muslim chaplains. This may be developed alongside a database signposting mosques, organisations and services with specific training on how to support converts. With research indicating that 'some Muslim students in particular [see] chaplaincy as a Christian space' (Scott-Baumann, 2020: 72), consideration should be given to ensuring that these services are animated by Islamic pastoral traditions (Long & Ansari, 2018).

8.4.4 Summary

In answer to RQ3, the recounted experiences of my participants have brought to the fore a number of academic, theoretical and practical implications. In relation to the self-identification of my participants, my study implies that converts themselves encourage an understanding of their identity as Muslim first. This acts as a corrective to the assumption that the religification of identity in academic discourse is always reductive. Methodologically, my study implies that insider-research, such as the current study, is able to provide unique access and insight into convert Muslims, as is the wider incorporation of digital methodologies. Furthermore, the experiences of the participants imply the need for more postsecular, agonistic approaches in theorising and navigating the contestations surrounding the role and recognition of religion as an identity marker. The study also implies a need to develop a neologism capable of providing definitional clarity and analytical access to the unique forms of discrimination converts face. Practically, the recounted experiences of my participants imply a desperate need to reform the pastoral support systems available to converts in educational settings. This chapter contributes three suggestions to enact this reform: The expansion of digital chaplaincy, the development of female chaplains and the advancement of chaplaincy training.

Chapter 9: Conclusions

This thesis has addressed the educational experiences of a group of millennial-born British convert Muslims. It has also attended to the ways in which these experiences were impacted by their conversions and subsequent identity configurations, particularly within the post-9/11 British social context. The title of the thesis, *A Critical Exploration of British Millennial Muslim Converts' Identities, Conversion Narratives and Educational Experiences*, highlights the three overarching currents of my study: conversion, identity configuration and educational experience. My literature review reflected upon the prevailing scholarship in these three areas, as they relate to the subjects of this research. What this review exposed were outlooks on the topic of conversion that have largely been based in Christian, secular or socio-psychological literature, offering limited treatment of the Islamic theological perspectives of converts and conversion. This assessment oriented my study towards the recognition and foregrounding of the theological explanations within my participants' narratives. Further to this, the literature revealed dated modes of thinking and forms of discrimination, such as Orientalism and Islamophobia, that prevail in the treatment of converts in academia, media and policy. This fact anchored the critical theoretical stance which I have adopted. The literature's tendency to exclude the narratives and experiences of converts within the discourse about Muslim educational experience led me to adopt a methodological approach which could 'represent authentically the sentiments and aspirations of the subjects of inquiry… to articulate these on their behalf.' (Flanagan, 2008: 257). The dialectical, narrative-ethnographic study which has resulted, and which is elucidated in chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis, thus contributes an overt and intentional theoretical corrective to previous studies on convert Muslims. Not only does my study emphasise the theological perspectives of the convert Muslims, but it does so from the novel positionality of an insider. This contribution to knowledge was inspired by a commitment to my own authentic Islamic epistemological perspective and infused with a critical posture. This represents a significant and original contribution to scholarly understandings of the growing demographic of convert Muslims in Britain. For, while previous scholarship has addressed the identity formation (see section 2.3.9) and conversion processes (see sections 2.2.7 - 2.2.9) of British converts, that scholarship has not been brought to bear on the wider literature exploring the post-9/11 educational experiences of

British Muslims, and not from an Islamic epistemological stance. The deeply personal experience of conversion and the complex identities of those who adopt a new religion suggests that this is a gap in the research which required redress. Given the influence of converts in Muslim education in Britain (Panjwani, 2017: 602) and the growing interest in this demographic (Cardiff University, n.d), my research offers timely insight.

The thesis has presented a number of implications which I argue arise from my investigation of the fifteen participants in this study. Central to these implications is an assumption that religion be understood as something lived and deeply felt, spiritual, worldly, sometimes articulable and embodied in the everyday and, at other times, ineffable and invisible. This understanding of religion as something beyond 'the institutional' makes us alive to the ways in which conversion to Islam has impacted the educational experiences of these participants. In this way, my thesis underwrites evolving conceptualisations of lived religion by working at the interface between the sociology of religion and education. To conclude this thesis, I will draw attention to the study's significant and distinctive contribution to knowledge. I will then highlight the limitations of the project and propose directions for future research.

9.1 Contribution to Knowledge

By describing the educational experiences of my convert participants, this thesis contributes new insights into the forms of marginality which converts are uniquely faced with, alongside distinct manifestations of more familiar types of marginalities which are present in the lives of Muslims and other religious minorities in Britain. The fine-grained exploration of the conversion narratives and identities of my participants justifies a conceptual corrective to readings of religion as a thing which is highly institutional or inexorably anchored to ethno-culture. In this, my study adds to the developing genre of lived religion and provides a critical, nuanced reading of converts as deeply tethered to theological convictions that orient them as social actors. This highlights the need for deeper representation of converts within the discourse on Muslims in education, including more visibility in research by and about convert Muslims. I assert that this will enliven more nuanced and inclusive teaching and learning about how Islam is lived in modern Britain.

I have argued that the implications of these research findings are threefold: academic, theoretical and practical. The academic implications centre on the arguments I forward for foregrounding converts' superordinate Islamic identity, as well as developing the field of conversion studies by taking account of the value of insider research in this area, and the ubiquitous presence of digital sociality in conversion and modern convert experience. Furthermore, this thesis establishes a need to expand and update conversion motifs to act as a heuristic device in the study of contemporary religious conversion. The theoretical arguments I have made throughout this thesis gesture towards the value of postsecular, agonistic thinking in pursuit of deeper inclusivity within pluralistic settings. A further theoretical contribution this study makes is the identification of a need to reconceptualise the types of discrimination converts face. My findings establish conceptual limitations in terms such as Islamophobia, Orientalism and racialisation. I therefore propose the formation of a neologism which provides better theoretical access to the unique forms of marginalisation which my thesis describes. The final section of chapter 8 contributes, more explicitly, three practical implications in the form of recommendations for the advancement of Muslim pastoral services in educational settings.

By concluding my discussion with these three education-based recommendations, I draw attention, once more, to the ways in which my study sits at the interface between the sociology of religion and the field of education (see sections 1.2, 5.2, 8.2, 8.2, 8.3.3, Chapter 9:for further examples of this interface within the thesis). I reiterate the holistic relationship between religion, identity formation and education – a relationship I have previously outlined as central to the way in which my own experiences evolved into my research intent (see section 1.2). Furthermore, this imbrication is true to the perspectives of my participants who expressed discomfort in separating their religious and educational sociality (see section 5.2).

9.2 Limitations and Reflections

9.2.1 Reflections on Practical Implications

I recognise that, given the breadth of my work, the focus upon three practical recommendations that relate wholly to pastoral care within educational settings may appear limited. Even whilst I assert that the recommendations dealing with pastoral care in educational settings comfortably suit the fundamental disciplinary focus of this study, I concede that the limited recommendations discussed in this section could appear to denote a limitation in the practical impact of the study. As I have clarified in section 8.4.3, however, the academic and theoretical implications outlined are interrelated to practical and policy implications (i.e. the incorporation of digital tools in research, the Higher Education Act 2023 and developing definitions of Islamophobia). My choice to limit my deliberations, in section 8.4.3, to practical recommendations for the pastoral care of convert Muslims in educational settings is indicative of what I perceive to be an urgent and swiftly actionable area for future development based upon my study.

9.2.2 Methodological Reflections

The strength of the data presented in this thesis is reliant upon the specific context in which the study takes place and the trustworthiness of the data I have conveyed (see sections 4.10.4 and 4.10.5). Thus, the application of the conclusions I reach are confined to British converts, millennial born converts and converts educated within the British educational context. While I believe that my own personal, anecdotal and longstanding experiences within the 'convert community' indicate to me a generalisability in many of the attributes and characteristics I have described converts as possessing, I am cautious of making any academic assertion to that effect. This caution is furthered by the limitations in my recruitment and sampling processes. There was an attempt, during my recruitment phase, to achieve as much diversity amongst my participants as was possible within the sampling parameters I have described already (section 4.8). This meant that, having received expressions of interest from more than my required participant number, I was able to be selective in recruitment; choosing participants who appeared to have variances in, for

example, social class, social affiliation, marital status and rurality. Nonetheless, it is to be acknowledged that certain social groups remain underrepresented within my sample. For example, while most of my participants did not identify as a particular branch, sect or school of Islamic thought, as I have touched upon, many participants tended toward a literalist or traditionalist interpretation of Islam. This may be a corollary of the limited social groupings to which I had ethnographic access. This limitation may imply that wider participation parameters, which could include, for example, converts of varying generations, nationalities and those educated in contexts beyond Britain, would have yielded different results. Additionally, the specific recruitment of participants self-identifying with various interpretive traditions may have yielded additional knowledge. This could conceivably be redressed by a different, broader research focus, additional resources and a team of researchers with varying social accesses.

9.2.3 Theoretical/Epistemological Reflections

In developing the epistemological outlook that has guided this study, I have become aware of some of the work of other scholars of British Islam whose studies are energised by similar epistemological commitments to my own. This has made me cognisant of a further limitation in the realisation of my theoretical intent. Reflecting upon the style of the interviews conducted within this study and the tone and settings of some of my ethnographic encounters, I now consider that data could have been collected in ways that were more empowering to Muslim participants. For example, in evaluating Dr Farah Ahmed's (2017: xvi) use of *halaqah* in her PhD study – an Islamic oral tradition instituted by the Prophet Muhammad' (Peace be upon him) – as an alternative to focus groups and interviews, I believe that a more Islamically oriented mode of data collection would have enhanced a sense of trust and familiarity for my participants. It may also have acted as a more definitive response to the Western cultural hegemony that I have identified within the study of converts.

It is to be noted, however, that I do not believe that the methodological approach I have taken, as described in chapter 4, is misaligned with my epistemological stance. As noted by the abovementioned scholar, in her earlier work:

> *methodology was a constant point of discussion amongst classical scholars… any Muslim working within western academia/research will to some degree be influenced by 'non-Islamic' ideas… any attempt of engagement with the other necessarily involves a synthesis between different thoughts at some level… it must be recognized that any one perspective cannot speak for an estimated one-fifth of the world's population. (*Ahmed, 2014: 565-566).

Thus, the heterogeneity of Islamic research, especially set within the Western academy, means that it is inaccurate to imply an orthodoxy in the way Islamically oriented social-science research is to be carried out.

Further reflections on the implications of my epistemological outlook lead me to a comparative appraisal of the ethical considerations I have described within this thesis – in terms related to trustworthiness (see section 4.10.5) – and the ways in which these ethical considerations have been described and discussed within the works of other scholars of British Islam. Most notably, Abdul-Azim Ahmed's (2018) paper describing ethical considerations that are inspired and informed by Islamic scriptural principles highlights what I consider to be a more Islamically evidenced and oriented way of reconciling the ethical demands of social science from a Western and Islamic perspective. A more sustained consideration of defined and discrete Islamic ethical considerations and parameters, and indeed their imbrications with more 'Western' social scientific parameters, would have, I believe, fallen into closer alignment with my epistemological perspective and research intent. This limitation, I contend, provides me with a fruitful starting point in developing, describing and designing each of the possible future research projects discussed in the next section (see section 9.3).

9.3 Directions for Future Research

I propose that the limitations which I have outlined above can largely be addressed by future research endeavours. In various places throughout this thesis I have made reference to potential areas of further research. This includes the need for cross-generational and cross-disciplinary research on mental health and wellbeing, research into how converts may further inform conceptualisations of lived religion, explorations of how digital

methodologies can be incorporated into ongoing research, and broader study into the potential applications of agonistic theory and practice within British educational contexts. Most notably, in chapters 5 and 7 respectively I began to develop the concept of modified and modernised conversion motifs and a neologism that provides definitional clarity and conceptual access to the unique forms of discrimination converts appear to experience. There is limited space within this thesis to develop these ideas more fully. Therefore, they require further purposive research. I posit that this research be longitudinal, assessing patterns of conversion over time and across a range of contexts. Additionally, cross-disciplinary research that incorporates scholarship in theology, social science and possibly psychology, would conceivably offer the type of conceptual clarity needed to devise the aforementioned neologism.

An investigation involving a larger sample size could also bring potential benefits to the study of convert Muslim experience in and beyond education. While I have emphasised the dissonances between sociopsychology and religion within this thesis (e.g. 2.2.10), I assert that future study may shed light on potential consonances between these disciplines. Indeed, my data did support a deeper consideration of the emotional content of conversion (see section 5.5). Furthermore, in describing the educational experiences of my participants, I briefly touched upon the potential relevance of different experiences amongst those students who live at home during their studies and those who live in other forms of accommodation, as well as the experiential differences between students according to the size, demographics and location of their institution. Analysis of these differences may yield useful insights into the causes and mitigations of stress, anxiety and exhaustion amongst convert Muslims. I believe that an expansive discussion of this topic would necessitate purposive research and further analysis. Below, I outline some potential questions to guide future research:

1. What are the experiential differences in education between Muslim converts according to their accommodation status and the size, demographics and locations of their educational institutions?

2. How might we provide definitional clarity and conceptual access to the unique forms of discrimination and marginalisation that religious converts experience?

3. What are the experiences of convert Muslims with spiritual abuse and what impact has it had on the convert population?

4. Can a deeper understanding of contemporary Muslim converts extend our understanding of conversion motifs?

5. What are the potential applications of agonistic theory and practice within British educational contexts?

6. Do digital methodologies in research enhance the study of convert Muslims?

7. How might cross-disciplinary research on the mental health and wellbeing of convert Muslims add to the existing knowledge of mental health professionals?

8. How can Islamic philosophies of knowledge be brought into conversation with Eurocentric models of sociopsychology to explore the content of religious conversion experience?

9.4 Thesis Summary

In seeking to document and reflect upon the educational experiences of convert Muslims, this research has established the importance of a holistic exploration of the conversion narratives and identity configurations of that population. This study has situated the investigation within the post-9/11 context, drawing out the significance of that social context in building knowledge about the socialisations of millennial born British converts. The study has, in doing so, made an incremental but significant contribution to understanding the socialisations of the wider British Muslim population.

The arguments I have made, building on the contributions of other scholars, call for the enfranchisement of religious adherents' voices in readings of Muslim identity, and the amplification of Muslim voices in research within and about Muslim populations. From the positionality of an insider, I have asserted the place of converts within that discourse; not reductively, as the subjects of psychological and phenomenological fascination, but as an experientially distinct, yet constitutive, part of the whole religious group. Therefore, the original contribution my thesis makes is its 'bringing together known elements that hitherto have been kept apart rather than conjuring new things out of the void' (Talbot, cited by Finn, 2005: 20). By extending the boundaries of how converts are conceived of as religious subjects I am both creating new understandings of existing issues and extending the work of others in this field. An important part of that 'bringing together known elements that hitherto have been kept apart' has been my application of narrative-ethnography as a research instrument, in tandem with a critical, Islamic epistemological posture. This dialectic took shape as a natural response to gaps I had identified in previous literature. However, it was also inspired by a desire to give back to my participants and my community more broadly. The member checking process, in which I reengaged with participants near the end of this study, was especially enlightening in that regard. The converts were able to speak candidly about their pleasure in being free to express their belonging, devotion and submission with somebody who, they felt, could intimately understand the spiritual and social journey they had undertaken. If this research, the dissemination of this research or the work I do following this research, is able to encourage a deeper empathy for British Muslim converts, it possesses both academic value and personal value to me.

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APPENDICES

Name	Age at time of Interview	Gender	Age of conversion	Ethnic Background	Previous religious affiliation	Level of Education (present)	Interview/Observation Circumstances	Observation Spread across * days
Abdullah	35	M	18	Mixed Race	Protestant	GCSEs (ongoing adult learning courses)	In person/home/Dawah stall/social media[27]/messaging applications	6
Aleem	26	M	17	White	None (Christian family)	Diploma in Arabic/TEFL Teaching Certificate/Ongoing Degree	Coffee shops/Video calls/phone calls/emails/messaging applications/social media/Arabic lesson	7
Charlene	35	F	19	White	Jewish	A Levels (Bachelor's Degree In English Literature completed after participation)	Video calls/emails/social media	8

[27] I have chosen not to provide specific social media applications/websites to mitigate the chances of participants' identification.

Derrick	38	M	14	Black	Jehovah's Witness	B.Ed.	Outside workplace/coffee shop/gym/social media/messaging applications/park walks/Friday prayers	11
Emma	42	F	17	White	Christian	Level 2 Certificate in Accounting	Video calls/emails/messaging application	6
Isa	34	M	18	Mixed Race	Agnostic	Bachelor's Degree	Video calls/messaging application/phone calls/mosque	9
Jameela	37	F	19	Asian	Hindu	BA Degree Biomedical Science	Convert Muslim event/phone calls/video call/messaging application	8
Leanne	37	F	17	Mixed Race	Catholic	GNVQ FE Course	Video calls/phone calls/social media/	4
Melanie	27	F	22	White	Christian (upbringing)	BA Degree /Ongoing master's in political science	Library/video call/social media/emails/messaging applications	7
Owen	27	M	20	White	None	BA Degree	Islamic propagation event/mosque/Eid prayers/social media/video calls	7
Shaheeda	36	F	18	Mixed Race	None (modern Christian family)	GCSEs	At home (with mahram)/video call/messaging application/social media	3
Siobhan	38	F	17	White	Atheist	BA Degree	Video calls/phone calls/messaging applications/social media/emails/Islamic event	6

Umm Musa	31	F	15	Black	Methodist/Protestant	A-Levels various	in-person (with mahram) in shopping centre/video call/messaging application	5
Uthman	30	M	14	White	Agnostic	MSc Computing	Coffee shops/mosques/Islamic events/phone call/video call/social media	12
Yusuf	39	M	20	Black	Atheist	BTEC Level 3 Diploma in Business	Mosque/Islamic classes/phone calls/	4

Data Collection Chronology

Name of Participant	Dates of Interviews (N=Narrative) (S= Semi-structured)	Observation Activity	Observation Dates[28]
Abdullah	(N) 30/08/2022 (S) 30/12/2022 & 01/01/2023	In person/home/Dawah stall/social media/messaging applications	01/10/2022 – 19/04/2023
Aleem	(N) 14/07/2022 (S) 14/10/2022	Coffee shops/Video calls/phone calls/emails/messaging applications/social media/Arabic lesson	19/09/2022 – 21/04/2023
Charlene	(N) 02/09/2022 (S) 17/10/2022	Video calls/emails/social media	05/10/2022 – 19/04/2023
Derrick	(N) 01/09/2022 (S) 09/10/2022	Outside workplace/coffee shop/gym/social media/messaging applications/park walks/Friday prayers	01/10/2022 – 20/04/2023
Emma	(N) 15/07/2022 (S) 04/11/22	Video calls/emails/messaging application	01/11/2022 – 18/03/2023

[28] For a number of reasons, I have given time periods representing the start and end dates of individual participants' observations. I have not, for example, provided exact dates that social media posts were made, commented on or collected, for anonymity purposes. Similarly, phone records have not been stored to account for each phone call and WhatsApp message made, which were sometimes sporadically and brief, asking a single question or clarifying a point previously discussed. These shorter calls/messages often supplemented more substantive meetings, calls or other ethnographic encounters.

Isa	(N) 04/08/2022 [additions in Oct 2022] (S) 29/10/2022	Video calls/messaging application/phone calls/mosque	02/10/2022 – 07/04/2023
Jameela	(N) 10/09/2022 (S) 23/12/2023	Convert Muslim event/phone calls/video call/messaging application	04/11/2022 – 12/02/2023
Leanne	(N) 20/07/2022 (S) 09/12/2022	Video calls/phone calls/social media/	20/072022 – 11/02/2023
Melanie	(N) 14/07/2022 (S) 24/11/2022	Library/video call/social media/emails/messaging applications	10/10/2022 – 23/02/2023
Owen	(N) 09/08/2022 (S) 05/11/2022	Islamic propagation event/mosque/Eid prayers/social media/video calls	13/10/2023 – 21/04/2023
Shaheeda	(N) 18/08/2022 (S) 13/10/2022	At home (with mahram)/video call/messaging application/social media	18/08/2022 – 11/04/2023
Siobhan	(N) 19/08/2022 (S) 10/10/2022	Video calls/phone calls/messaging applications/social media/emails/Islamic event	03/10/2022 – 18/02/2023
Umm Musa	(N) 26/08/2022 (S) 24/10/2022	in-person (with mahram) in shopping centre/video call/messaging application	19/09/2022 – 22/04/2023
Uthman	(N) 26/08/2022 (S) 28/12/2022	Coffee shops/mosques/Islamic events/phone call/video call/social media	20/09/2022 – 15/04/2023
Yusuf	(N) 22/07/2022 (S) 02/12/2022	Mosque/Islamic classes/phone calls/	30/07/2022 – 23/02/2023

Appendix 2 – Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Project:

A Critical Exploration of British Millennial Muslim Converts' Identities, Conversion Narratives and Educational Experiences.

Participant identification number for this study:
Name of Researcher:
Jeremiah Adebolajo

I, the undersigned, confirm that (**please initial boxes as appropriate**):

1.	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet dated _________________ or it has been read to me.	
2.	I have been able to ask questions about the project and my participation and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	
3.	I understand that taking part in this study involves information being captured in the following ways: Stage 1: You will be provided with a pre-interview exercise asking you to recollect and write down a timeline of 'critical events' leading up to conversion and during your secondary and post-secondary education. You will be provided with a guidance sheet explaining how to do this. Stage 2: You will participate in a narrative interview delving into more detail about your critical events with a particular focus on your conversion story. *Interviews will take place in an environment of your choosing, either face-to-face or via a video calling application.*	
4.	Stage 3: I will conduct focused observations of your life and/or digital media interactions. I will observe and access only those areas of your social, religious, private, and educational lives (both physical and/or digital) which you permit me to access. *Observations will only take place in circumstances and environments (both physical and/or digital) which you permit and are comfortable with. Data will be recorded using screen capture and written notes.*	
5.		

	Stage 4: You will participate in a second round of interviews focused upon the observations, interview and pre-interview tasks which preceded.	
6.	I understand that taking part in the study has emotional distress as a **potential** risk.	
7.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	
8.	I understand that the information I provide will be used for: Academic reports, publications, presentations and a PhD thesis.	
9.	I agree that my (anonymised) information can be quoted in research outputs.	
10.	I understand that my real name will not be revealed, and pseudonyms will be used for quotes.	
11.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained to me (e.g. use of pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.).	
12.	I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name, or where I live, will not be shared beyond the researcher.	
13.	Separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me	
14.	I consent to the audio recording of my narrative interview and thematic interview.	
15.	(**For those undertaking online interviews only**) I consent to the video/screen recording of my **online** narrative interview and thematic interview.	
16.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project. Please initial each of the stages you consent to participate in. *You can choose to participate in any or all stages of the project.*	Stage 1 & 2
		Stage 3
		Stage 4
17.	I know who to contact if I have any concerns about this research	
18.	At some stage of data collection, I choose to be accompanied by a *wali* (guardian) who has read the *Participant Information Sheet* and agreed to the procedures surrounding confidentiality.	
19.	Please state your ethnicity in the adjacent box *This may include, but is not limited to, for example: Asian/Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi/Chinese/Any other Asian background/Black/Caribbean/African/Mixed or multiple ethnic groups/White/Gypsy or Irish Traveller/Roma/Arab*	
20.	Please state your gender in the adjacent box	

Name of Participant	Signature (please type full name or paste signature)	Date
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

Version: 1
Date: 18th April 2022

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND PRIVACY NOTICE

TITLE OF PROJECT: A Critical Exploration of British Millennial Muslim Converts' Identities, Conversion Narratives and Educational Experiences.

Invitation

The University of Worcester engages in a wide range of research which seeks to provide greater understanding of the world around us, to contribute to improved human health and well-being and to provide answers to social, economic and environmental problems.

We would like to invite you to take part in one of our research projects. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done, what it will involve for you, what information we will ask from you, and what we will do with that information.

We will in the course of this project be collecting personal information. The UK continues to be bound by the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation which is now the "UK GDPR" Under UK GDPR we are required to provide a justification (what is called a "legal basis") in order to collect such information. The legal basis for this project is "**task carried out in the public interest**".

You can find out more about our approach to dealing with your personal information at https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/visitor-privacy-notice.html.

Please take time to read this document carefully.

What is the purpose of the research?
This study aims to explore millennial Muslim converts' conversion narratives, identity configurations and experiences within secondary and post-secondary education in England in order to extend our understanding of the educational needs of the Muslim population.

Key to the approach taken within this study, my own identity as a convert Muslim means that I am guided by an Islamic theoretical position. This means that during the course of the project I will seek to allow insight into the theological considerations that existing literature on the topics of Muslim converts suggests is central to our identity.

Who is undertaking the research?
Name: Jeremiah Adebolajo
Position: PhD researcher and Associate Lecturer
Role on the project: Sole researcher

Who has oversight of the research?
The research has been approved by the Research Ethics Panel for the College of ARTS, HUMANITIES AND EDUCATION in line with the University's Research Ethics Policy. The University of Worcester acts as the "Data Controller" for personal data collected through its research projects and is subject to the UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. We are registered with the Information Commissioner's Office and our Data Protection Officer is Helen Johnstone (infoassurance@worc.ac.uk). For more on our approach to Information Assurance and Security visit: https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/index.html.

Why have I been invited to take part?
You have received this invitation because you have been identified as a millennial born (born between 1981 and 1996) Muslim convert who has been educated in secondary AND/OR post-secondary education in England. I am hoping to recruit 15 participants for this study.

How do I take part?
It is up to you to decide whether or not you want to take part in this study. Please take your time to decide and talk to others about it if you wish. Deciding to take part or not will not impact on your studies, employment, social or private life.

The process by which you can agree to participate is by sending me an email confirming your agreement within 1 month of receipt of this form.

If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. You are free to participate in any or all stages of the research with a *mahram* (guardian) present. Your *mahram* will need to read the participant information sheet and express an understanding of the procedures surrounding confidentiality (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.). To attend any stage of data collection with a mahram present please initial box number 18 on the consent form.

How can I withdraw from this study after agreeing to participate?

Once you have agreed to participate, you may withdraw from the study within three months after the conclusion of the data collection stages. If you wish to have your data withdrawn, please contact me (contact details are given below) with your participant number/pseudonym stating that you wish to withdraw and your data will then not be used. You will be given your participant number/pseudonym, via email, within 2 weeks of signing a consent form.

After transcription of interviews, participants will be provided with a transcript of their interviews to review, edit, approve or withdraw.

What will happen if I agree to take part?

If you agree to take part, you will enter 4 stages of data collection, all of which are conducted by myself:

- Stage 1: You will be provided with a pre-interview exercise asking you to recollect and write down a timeline of 'critical events' leading up to conversion and during secondary and post-secondary education. You will be provided with a guidance sheet explaining how to do this.

- Stage 2: You will participate in a narrative interview delving into more detail about your critical events. This interview is designed to be more free flowing, allowing you to focus on telling the story of your conversion. I will, however, ask prompting and probing questions when necessary.

- Stage 3: I will conduct focused observations of your life and/or digital media interactions. I will observe and access only those areas of your social, religious, private and educational lives (both physical and digital) which you permit me access to and which are relevant in giving me insight into your conversion, educational experience and identity configuration. For further clarity, examples of places you may wish to permit me to observe include: mosques, halaqaat (Islamic lectures), madrasah (Islamic schooling), home, consenting friend or family gatherings to which I am invited, libraries, hiking trips, cafes, online forums, gyms, social media platforms and dawah (proselytising) stalls.

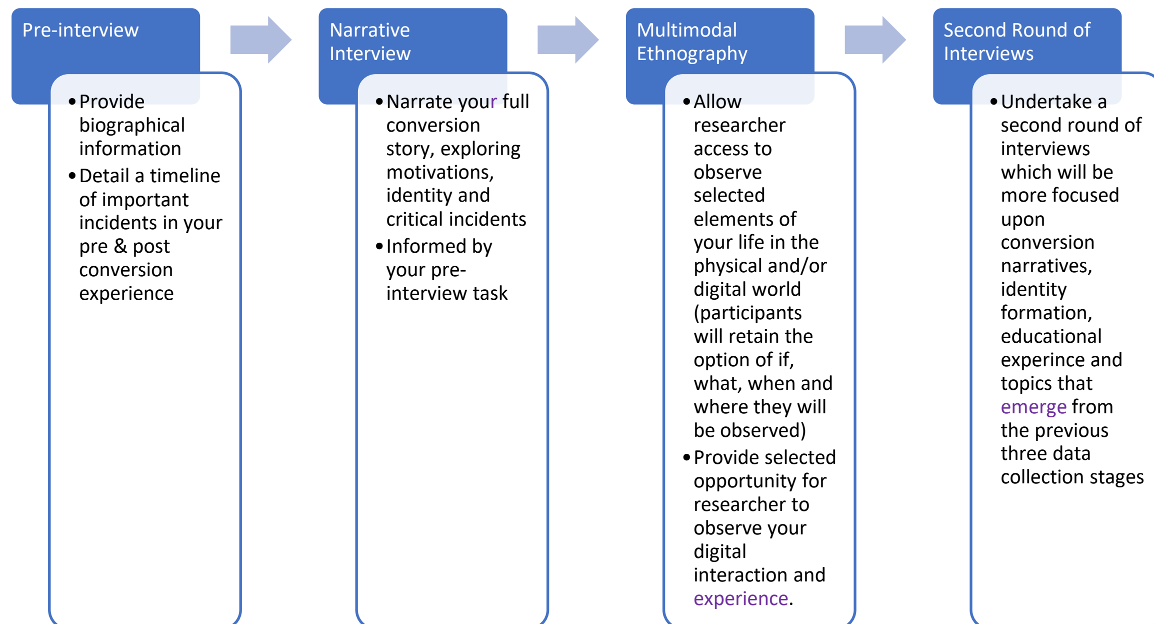
- Stage 4: You will participate in a second round of interviews focused upon the observations, interview and pre-interview tasks which preceded.

Interviews will take place in an environment of your choosing, either face-to-face or via a video calling application (e.g. Zoom, WhatsApp, Teams, etc). Interviews at stage 2 and 4 will be limited to one hour per interview session, before a break is offered to you to determine how you feel about continuing, breaking, ending the interview, or conducting a follow up interview at another time. Interview data (stages 2 and 4) will be recorded using audio recording. For those who choose to conduct online/video interviews, along with the audio recording, video recording is optional.

Observations will only take place in circumstances and environments (both physical and digital) which you permit and are comfortable with. Observational fieldwork will be limited to a period of between two weeks (maximum) and one day (minimum), dependent upon the consent and comfortability of participants. Observations will be

recorded via written notes and, for digital material, via screen capture. All data will be stored securely in encrypted devices (for digital data) and locked storage (for physical data), accessible only to myself.

Below is an illustration of the data collection process you will undertake.



What are the benefits for me in taking part?

As stated in the first section of this information sheet, the intended aim of this research is to extend understanding of the broader Muslim community. As a Muslim convert myself, this research will offer 'insider' insight into the conversion narratives, educational experiences and identify formation of convert Muslims. I hope that in participating in this study you will provide richer understanding of the growing convert Muslim population and contribute towards a re-evaluation of educational policies and provisions available for this community.

Further to this, given the Islamic theoretical approach which underpins my research, I hope that your participation will contribute towards a broader understanding of Islamic conceptualisations of knowledge within Western academia and add momentum the growing number of Muslim academics reasserting Islamic conceptualisations of knowledge and research design within intellectual spaces.

Are there any risks for me if I take part?

The research being conducted is not anticipated to result in any risk or disadvantage to yourself. However, in being asked to recall and recollect past experiences and discuss identity, there is the potential of psychological and emotional impact. Below I have signposted links to services offering support in that regard:

https://www.sakoon.co.uk

https://www.mcapn.co.uk/counselling-directory

https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/counselling/islam/england

To mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission, you may elect to conduct all interactions, interviews and observations digitally.

What will you do with my information?

Your personal data / information will be treated confidentially at all times; that is, it will not be shared with anyone beyond myself. It will also not be shared with any third parties specified in the consent form (e.g. academic reports and publications, etc) unless it has been fully anonymised.

During the project, all data/information will be kept securely in line with the University's Policy for the Effective Management of Research Data and its Information Security Policy.

We will process your information for a range of purposes associated with the project primary of which are:

- To use your information along with information gathered from other participants in the research project to seek new knowledge and understanding that can be derived from the information we have gathered.
- To summarise this information in written form for the purposes of dissemination (through research reports, a thesis, conference papers, journal articles or other publications). Any information disseminated/published will be at a summary level and will be fully anonymised and there will be no way of identifying your individual personal information within the published results.
- To use the summary and conclusions arising from the research project for teaching and further research purposes. Any information used in this way will be at a summary level and will be fully anonymised. There will be no way of identifying your individual personal information from the summary information used in this way.

If you wish to receive a summary of the research findings or to be given access to any of the publications arising from the research, please contact us.

How long will you keep my data for?

Your personal data will be retained until the project (*including the dissemination period*) has been completed.

At the completion of the project, we will retain your data only in anonymised form. This anonymised data will be archived and shared in line with our Policy for the Effective Management of Research Data

How can I find out what information you hold about me?

You have certain rights in respect of the personal information the University holds about you. For more information about Individual Rights under GDPR and how you exercise them please visit: https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/requests-for-personal-data.html.

What happens next?

Please keep this information sheet.

If you would be interested in taking part, please contact us using the details below and we will be delighted to answer any further questions you have about the research.

Our contact details are:

Jeremy Adebolajo

adej2_19@uni.worc.ac.uk

If you have any concerns about the project at this point or at any later date you may contact the researcher (contact as above) or you may contact the Supervisor: Professor Stephen Parker (s.parker@worc.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

If you would like to speak to an independent person who is not a member of the research team, please contact Esther Dobson at the University of Worcester, using the following details:

Esther Dobson
Secretary to Research Ethics Panel for College of Arts, Humanities and Education
University of Worcester
Henwick Grove
Worcester WR2 6AJ
ethics@worc.ac.uk

Appendix 4 – Participant invitation

Initial Invitation Text Templates

Text 1

Asalaamu Alaykum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakaatuh (peace be upon you and the mercy of Allah and His blessings),

I hope you're well!

I'm just getting in touch to invite you to participate in a research study for the University of Worcester.

I am a convert Muslim researcher hoping to gain insight into three main areas: the story of your conversion, the way you have formed your identity and your experiences within the education system.

Importantly, I hope to approach this research from an 'insider' perspective, allowing you to be part of the construction and representation of the data that my study produces. This will mean you are given input into how your data is interpreted and reported throughout the research process.

If you are interested and/or would like more information, can I ask you to reply directly to me, using the following email address adej2_19@uni.worc.ac.uk

Text 2

Asalaamu Alaykum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakaatuh (peace be upon you and the mercy of Allah and His blessings),

I'm just reaching out because I was hoping that you may be interested in participating in a research study for the University of Worcester.

As you may have heard, I am a convert Muslim researcher hoping to gain insight into three main areas: the story of your conversion, the way you have formed your identity and your experiences within the education system.

Importantly, I hope to approach this research from an 'insider' perspective, allowing you to be part of the construction and representation of the data that my study produces. This will mean you are given input into how your data is interpreted and reported on throughout the research process.

If you are interested and/or would like more information, can I ask you to message me a reply or email me at adej2_19@uni.worc.ac.uk.

Appendix 5 – Ethical Approval

COLLEGE OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND EDUCATION RESEARCH ETHICS PANEL

(CAHE REP)

CONFIRMATION OF APPROVAL

26 May 2022

REP CODE: CAHE21220014-R1

A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF MILLENNIAL MUSLIM CONVERTS' IDENTITIES, CONVERSION AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES WITHIN ENGLAND

Dear Jeremy,

Thank you for your application for full review ethical approval to the College of Arts, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Panel on the 25th May 2022.

Your application has been reviewed in accordance with the University of Worcester Ethics Policy and in compliance with the Standard Operating Procedures for full ethical review.

The outcome of the review is that the Panel is happy to grant this project ethical approval to proceed.

Your research must be undertaken as set out in the approved application for the approval to be valid. You must review your answers to the checklist on an ongoing basis and resubmit for approval where you intend to deviate from the approved research. Any major deviation from the approved application will require a new application for approval.

As part of the University Ethics Policy, the University undertakes an audit of a random sample of approved research. You may be required to complete a questionnaire about your research.

Yours sincerely,

Alison Kington

Alison Kington
Chair - Full Review Panel
College of Arts, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Panel (CAHE REP)
Ethics@worc.ac.uk

Appendix 6 – Pre-Interview Task

Pre-Interview Task Sheet: Profile & Timeline of Critical Events

This task is a precursor to the far more in-depth interviews and observational data that will be collected later in this study. The purpose of this document is to collect information which will help to build a profile of you, your reversion/conversion to Islam, pre-reversion/conversion and educational experiences. It is a reflective task which requires you to recollect and describe events which you consider significant in your life leading up to reversion/conversion, your identity formation as a Muslim and your educational experiences after reversion/conversion. If you have any questions about this task, please contact me.

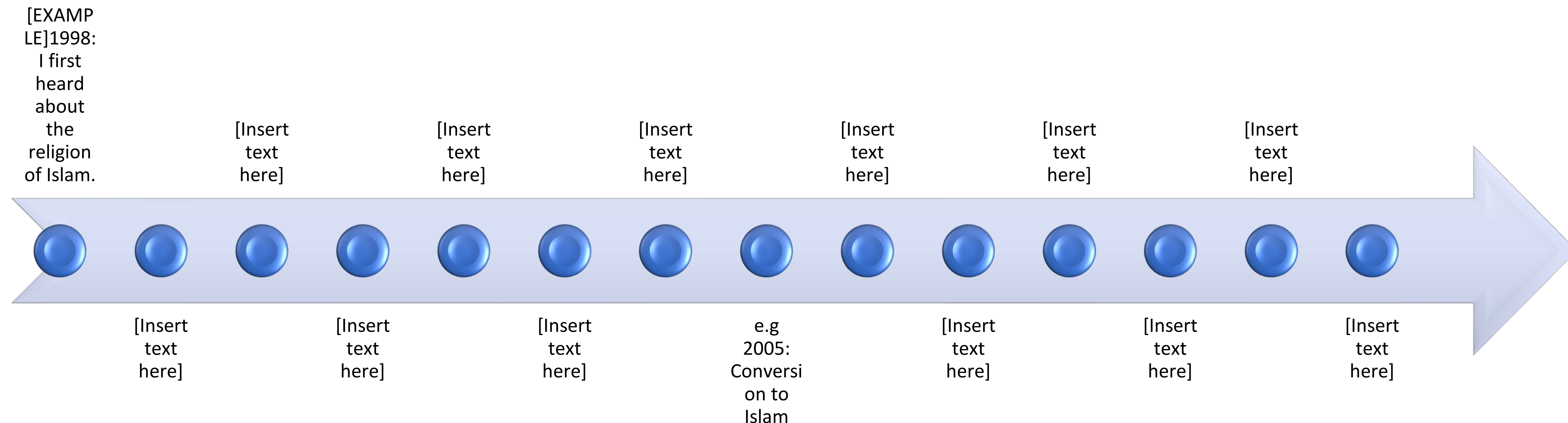
Please use the table below to provide profile information, where applicable. Please include as little or as much detail as you choose.

Age Now	
Age of conversion	
Year of conversion	
Level of education when converted	
Level of education now	
Previous religious affiliation/spiritual beliefs or otherwise	
Islamic school/branch or otherwise (e.g.	

sunni/sufi/salafi, etc)	
Gender	

Please use the template below to detail any events/incidents/observations/experiences which you consider significant in your life leading up to reversion/conversion, identity formation and/or educational experiences after conversion. Please note that you will have the opportunity to go into more detail about all of these events during the narrative interviews which take place later.

All text included within the template below are examples, provided for illustrative purposes and prompts only. Please delete and populate the template with you own information. Alternatively, please feel free to design your own format in presenting a timeline of critical incidents.



Appendix 7 – Interview Prompts

Narrative Interview Prompts

Probing and Prompting Questions:

1. Kindly explain your upbringing in a few sentences (if you were raised in a religious household, non-religious etc.)
2. How did you come to learn about Islam? What attracted you to the religion the most?
3. Did you read about Islam? If so, what kind of material did you read? (Book names, online articles etc.)
4. How long were you interested in Islam before converting to it?
5. Do you belong to any particular sect? (Sunni, Shia, Sufi etc.) and why this particular sect?
6. How did you inform your family/how did they find out you had become a Muslim and how long after your conversion was this?
7. How did they react to your conversion? Please explain why.
8. If you were involved in a previous religion, did you face any hostility from its members/family or friends when you converted?
9. Do you wear Islamic dress in public? If so, please describe it.
10. Have you faced and challenges or consequences as a result of converting? If so, what are they?
11. Were you able to receive any support with your challenges and hardships? If yes, from who? (e.g. Muslim communities, organisations, family, non-Muslims etc.)
12. Please list a few of the daily challenges you may face/or have faced as a new Muslim and explain how you deal/t with them, if you do/did.
13. Have you had any positive or negative experiences with other Muslims?
14. Were your expectations before converting to Islam of other Muslims and the Muslim community met? If yes, how? If not, how?
15. How are you currently receiving your Islamic education and what provisions exist near you for new Muslims?
16. After you first realised that you were a Muslim, or that you wanted to become one, what did you do?
17. Did you adopt all the Islamic practices and outlooks that you know/knew of, immediately, or was it a gradual process?
18. Were there any things you stopped doing? Was this immediate or gradual? Why do you think this was?
19. Did you, as a person, change?

Semi-Structured Interview Plan

Now that I have had the chance to learn more about you, understand your conversion, your educational experiences and observe your day-to-day **interactions/digital interaction**, I'm very interested in exploring some of the most fascinating themes that relate to my own research and the data I have collected so far. If you don't mind, I just want to ask you some questions around the themes of conversion, identity and educational experience. It may be that you feel some of the questions relate to other theme or more than one theme or all themes; feel free to voice this.

I'll start by asking you some questions surrounding your conversion to Islam.

Theme 1: Conversion

1. Family
    a. Can you describe your relationship with your family, both Muslim and non-Muslim?
    b. How did your family react to your conversion?
    c. Did you marry before or after your conversion?/Do you want to get married?

2. Conversion narratives
    a. Which term do you use to describe your embracing of Islam (e.g conversion/reversion) and why?
    b. What was your perception of Islam pre conversion?
    c. Why did you consider the 'critical events' worthy of note or important?
    d. What was your religious practice like before conversion?
    e. Before embracing Islam, have you had any experiences that you only now, after conversion, consider to be significant?
    f. What was most impactful in your decision to convert?

3. Conversion Motifs/Types/Models and Processes
    a. Do you consider your conversion to be a process, a moment, both of these, or something else?
    b. How long would you say it took you to convert to Islam?
    c. Did you explore/investigate Islam before conversion? For how long?
    d. What did you do when you wanted to convert to Islam?
    e. Did you consider any other religions?

Thank you for your patience: I'll now move on to probe some issues related to your identity. I'm particularly interested in finding out how you have come to possess the identity or identities you have.

Theme 2: Identity

4. Identity Configuration

a. Do you consider yourself as having an identity? (What is it/why)
b. What has had the biggest impact on your identity?
c. How do you negotiate your identity/ies within a secular society?
d. Were you happy with society before conversion?
e. Are you happy with society after conversion?
f. What is your impression of Islamic identity pre and post conversion?
g. How were you received by the Muslim community?
h. How were you received by the non-Muslim community?
i. Have you noticed any psychological effect? (e.g. more or less self-confidence, change of self-identity, happiness, depression, etc).
j. Did your attitude to your previous society or culture change after you came to Islam? How do you see your former life?
k. To what degree do you regard it as desirable and/or possible to integrate your life as a Muslim with wider British society?

5. Creed & Epistemology
    a. How do you consider that you were guided to Islam?
    b. Do you think it important to be able to understand the Qur'an in Arabic?
    c. Did you feel the need to adopt outward signs of Muslim identity for instance, *hijab,* beard, or change of name?
    d. Do you consider yourself related to the ummah (global Muslim community)

I'm keen to know a little more about how your conversion has interacted with your education. These questions will explore what it has meant to you to be a millennial Muslim convert in the British educational context.

Theme 3: Education

6. Educational experience
    a. What has your experience of secondary and post-secondary education been pre and post conversion?
    b. Have you experienced anything positive or negative, expected or unexpected within the education system?
    c. Have you sought after or utilised any chaplaincy facilities during your secondary/post-secondary education?
    d. Have you experienced any educational challenges stemming from your conversion to Islam?
    e. Did 9/11, 7/7 or other incidents of terrorism have any impact in your life, pre or post conversion?
    f. What recommendations do you suggest to help deal with the educational challenges faced by convert Muslims?

Theme 4: From the literature and Observations

7. Media

a. How do you feel about the way Muslim converts are portrayed in the media?
b. Have you faced any positive experiences after your conversion within the non-Muslim British community?
c. Have you faced any negative experiences after your conversion within the non-Muslim British community?
d. What type of support do you feel is the most needed for new Muslims in the UK?
e. Was there anything you liked/feared/admired/disliked about Islam or Muslims before or after conversion?
f. Where did you get that perception?

Is there anything else you would like to add/mention?

Appendix 8 – Observation Schedule

Observation Schedule

Date:	Start/Finish Time:	Location:	Participant:
Description of Field:			

Area of Observation	Notes	Relation to Research Theme
Spaces		
Actors		
Activity		
Objects		
Acts		
Events		

<table>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Time</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Goals</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Feelings</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Reflexive Comments/Journal Reference:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Additional comments & Reflections:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Emerging Questions:</td></tr>
<tr><td>Pictures (Y/N)</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Videos (Y/N)</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Audio (Y/N)</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Other (Y/N)</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
</table>

*The key below indicates the codes I will use in the right-most column of this schedule to make explicit the links between my observations and research themes:

- *Conv* = conversion narrative
- *Ide* = Identity formation
- LifeW = Lived Experience/Lifeworld
- *Edu* = Educational Experience

Below is the code I will use to delineate observations made in physical and digital environments

- Dig = Digital environment observation
- Phy = Physical environment observation

Appendix 9 – Codebook and Themes Maps

Codebook & Themes

Codes/Nodes
Conversion and Religion as it Is Lived
Aqeedah-reasoning in conversion
Comparison with christianity
confusion with Christianity
homosexuality
Islam as rationalising Christianity
Islamic learning
Pre-conversion religion
previous religious affiliation
Conversion Motifs [Lof & Skon's]
[conversion motif] mystical
[conversion type] affectional
[conversion type] coercive
[conversion type] experimental
[conversion type] intellectual
[conversion type] revivalist
Conversion style and pattern
[conversion type] adherent communication
conversion as a moment
conversion as deeply spritual and personal
conversion Emotions
conversion process - asking Allah
conversion process - leading up to conversion
Conversion Processes
conversion motif - revert motif
conversion process - shahadah
conversion stage - ritualistic
Conversion type - meeting muslims
conversion type - pull factor
Conversion type - Questioning previous religion

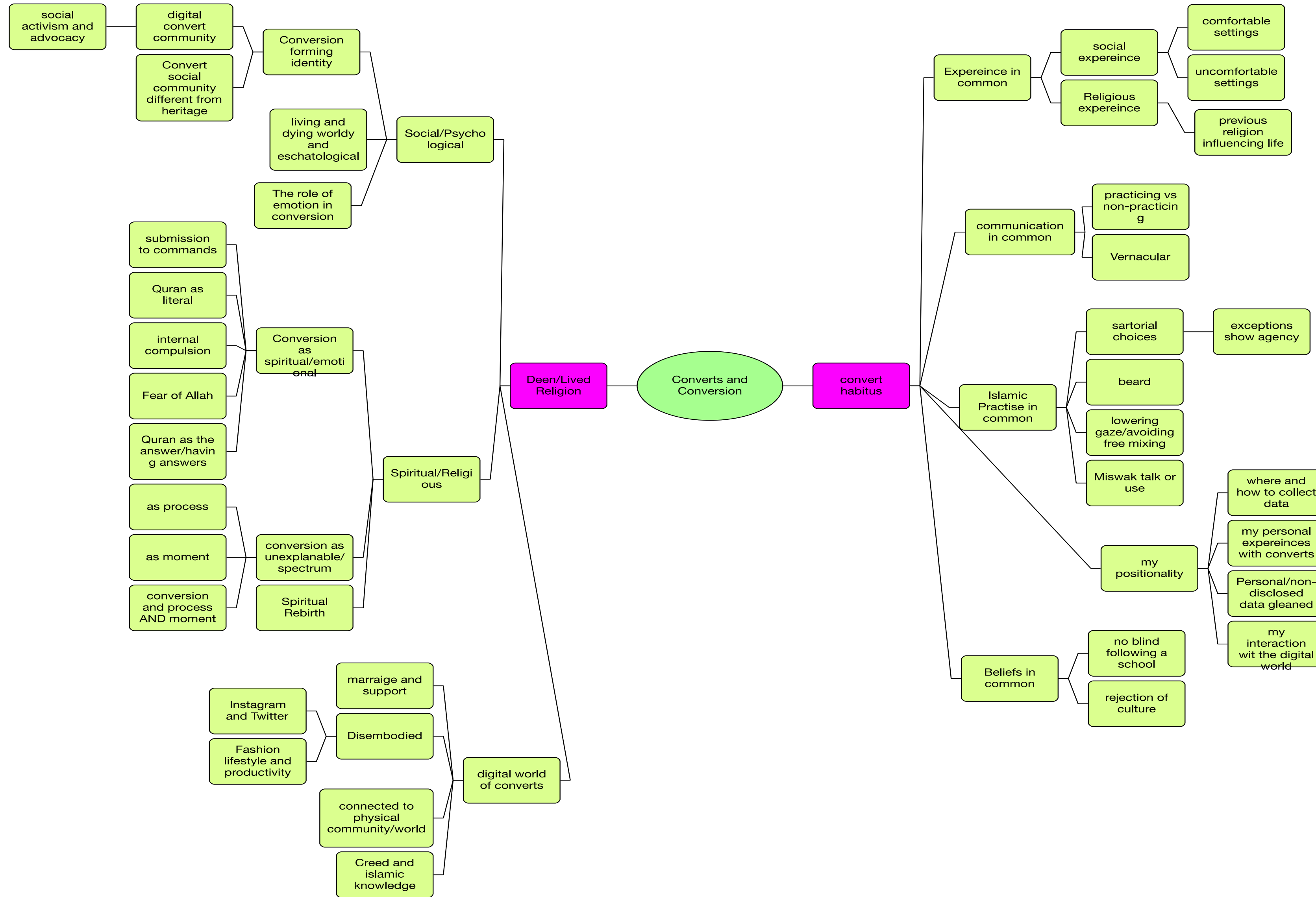
Codes/Nodes
Conversion type - stages
impact of islam
Post-conversion disincentive
Spiritual Compulsion
Internal religious compulsion
shahadah urgency
Convert vernacular
non practising
Qadr of Allah
Converts in digital space
Insta
Other social media
Twitter
Whatsapp
Youtube
Digital Convert World
digital world - convert celebrity
Family and conversion
Emotional Health
family and friend ostracisation
family reaction
Justifying conversion
Religious continuity
Habitus
Christianity as failing
Convert Habitus
Convert politics (their own cultural issues)
convert vs heritage communitiy conflict
no dawah from non practising muslims
Critiquing 'Western' life
deep religiosity
Encountering Islam first time
Failing to socialise with heritage habitus
Islamic development
Marginality
Pre-conversion mental health

Codes/Nodes
Pre-conversion mentality
Reversion terminology
Name for embracing Islam
Educational Life and Expereince
agency and representation in education
Desire own choice
Chaplaincy
convert needs
conversion as a gateway into education
Disclosing Conversion
Silencing [Main]
Treatment of conversion in education
education as importsnt post islam
Intellectual Space in Education
agonism
echo chamber
Free Speech
silencing in education
Terrorism & Security
Marginality in education
comments from public
Educational experience - Islamophobia
Islamophobia in education
Mental Health - wellbeingMaybe
Emotional Health
trauma
Physical Space in Education
Prvent - FBV - Policy
Student culture
Surviving
silencing of self
Urgency of conversion
shahadah urgency
Methodology
dealing with me as an insider
Giving me dawah

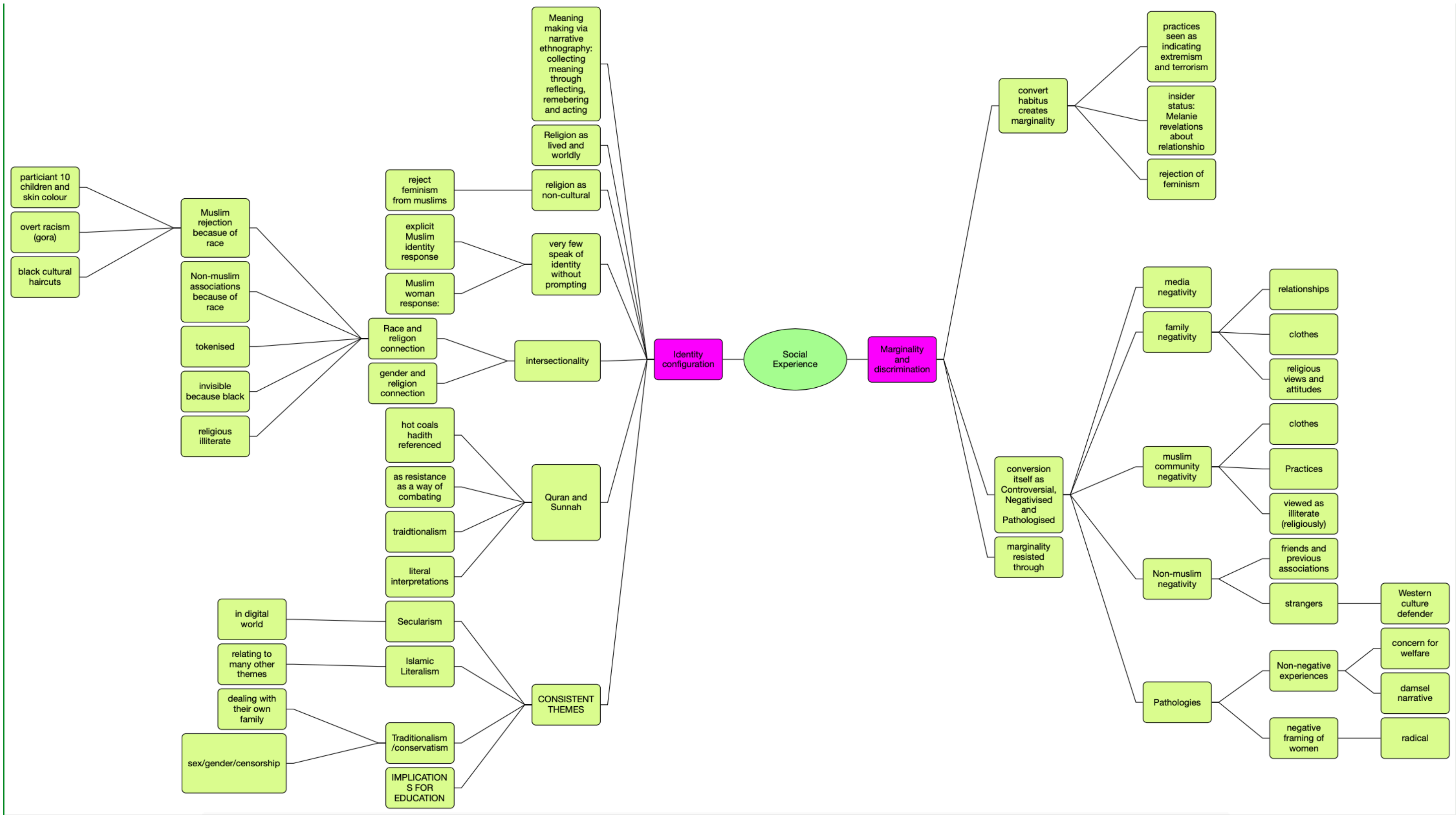
Codes/Nodes
Pull factors
Other
agonism
convert networks
Convert organisations growing
Cultural critique or Islamophobia
Cultural remission - Islamophobia
homosexuality
Post Education
pre-conversion - multicultural exposure
UNthemed
Cultural continuity
Socialisation - Building trust
Wider Social Expereince
Conversion as controversial
Conversion as negativised
convert vs heritage communitiy conflict
Racialisation from within
Conversion as Pathologised
Avoiding inter-cultural politics of hertiage Muslims
pathologising conversion
seen a Religious illiterate
Convert Identity
Conservatism
continuity - religion
Convert religious struggle
cultural isalm
types of Muslims
Dawah
deep religiosity
defining the self
discouragment as a source of strength
Discretely religious - Beyond sectarianism
Liberalism and feminism
Literalism
new family

Codes/Nodes
Rejecting secularisation theory
critique of secularism
Secularism - secular imposition
Resistance [New Copy]
sartorial choices
staying firm until resolution
Creed - Aqeedah
Allah's guidance
Choices from Hadith
convert way - arabic
Expereince as an ayat
Hijrah
sartorial choice
Ummah
Intersectionality [New Copy]
Gender
Race
Lived Religion
abandoning old habits
Conversion type - centring of religion
family reconciliation
Help from community
pre-conversion lifestyle
Marginality
convert way - unity
Cultural Islam
cultural treachery
orientalism
Racialised
Wanting Independence

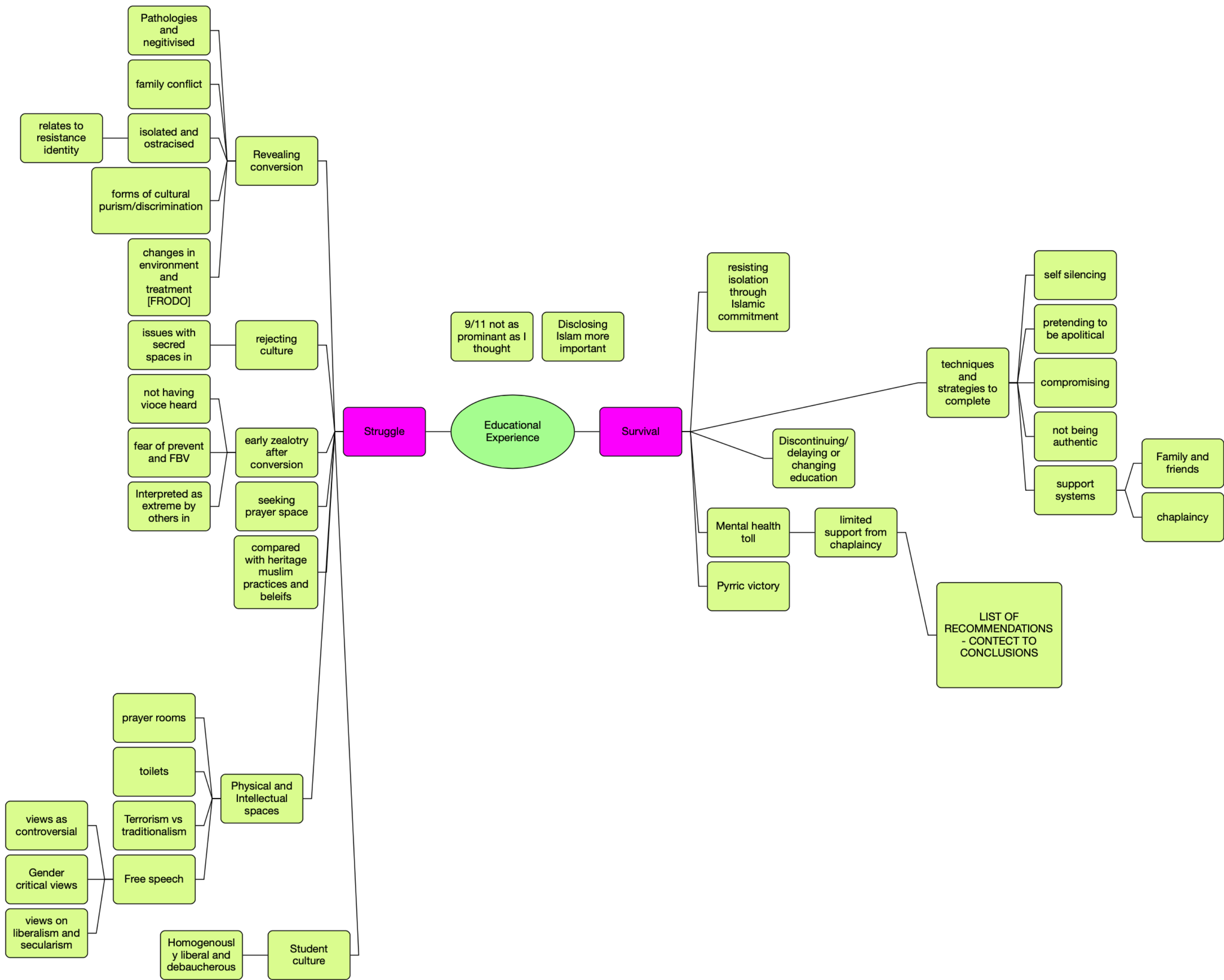
Theme Map 1: Converts and Conversion



Theme Map 2: Social Experience



Theme Map 3: Educational Experience



Appendix 10 – Literature Search Process

Section One: Search Databases

University of Worcester Library Search: **https://library.worc.ac.uk/**
Summon System: **https://exlibrisgroup.com/products/summon-library-discovery/**

Databases Included

Academic Search Complete
Business Source Complete
Cambridge Companions to Literature and Classics
Cambridge University Press
CINAHL
Drama Online
Emerald Management
International Bibliography of Theatre and Dance
JSTOR
Medline
Project Muse Humanities
ProQuest Central
ProQuest Newsstreams
PsycArticles
PsycInfo
Sage Journals
ScienceDirect
SportDiscus
Taylor & Francis
VLEBooks
Web of Science
Wiley-Blackwell

Databases Excluded

Anatomy.tv
Box of Broadcasts
British Education Index
British National Formulary
British Newspapers 1600-1950
Cochrane Library
Digital Theatre+
Euromonitor
Fame

Hein Online
Historical Texts
House of Commons Parliamentary Papers
Lexis Library
Martindale Complete Drug Reference
Mintel
Westlaw

Section Two: Four-Step Search Method

Step 1: What is your topic

1. What are the experiences of millennial Muslim converts within contemporary educational settings in the UK?

2. What insight can more nuanced explorations of cultural identity amongst Muslim converts offer into the emergent educational needs of the UK's Muslims.

3. What policy implications arise from the educational experiences of millennial Muslim converts in the UK?

Step 2: What are your main themes

1. Millennial Muslims/Muslim converts/Muslims in UK education/Muslim education experience

2. Muslim identity/educational needs of Muslims/religious conversion/conversion to Islam

3. Education policy/ UK Muslims

Step 3: What are your keywords and related terms

1. **Millennial**: Millennial Muslims/Young British Muslims/social media/Religiosity
2. **Muslim converts**: Conversion/Religious Conversion/Conversion to Islam/Muslim converts/Female conversion/Male Conversion/religious change/converts in Media
3. **Muslims in UK education**: Prevent/Fundamental British Values/History of Muslims Britain/British Muslim education
4. **Muslim identity**: British Islam/Muslim identity UK/Racialisation
5. **educational needs of Muslims**: Muslim education needs
6. **Religious conversion**: Muslim converts/Convert Muslim identity

7. **Education policy**: Multiculturalism/British multiculturalism/Multicultural education/Prevent/Securitisation policy UK
8. **UK Muslims**: British Muslims/Islam in the UK

Search Strings

- (young British Muslims OR millennial) AND (Muslim education)
- (social media) AND (British Muslims)
- UK Muslims religiosity AND "Britain"
- "Muslim" AND "campus" 9/11 "UK"
- British Muslim convert
- Muslim converts in Britain AND "Education"
- Female Muslim converts
- Muslim converts AND Britain OR British OR UK
- Female Muslim converts Britain
- convert Muslims
- Male Muslim converts AND Britain
- religious conversion
- religious Conversion theory
- religious conversion AND Islam AND "British" OR "Britain"
- Muslim convert AND "Racialisation" OR "Racialization"
- Conversion AND Islam AND UK OR "Britain"
- Conversion AND Islam AND UK OR "Britain"
- religious Conversion theory AND "Britain"
- religious Conversion studies AND "Britain"
- Prevent and British Muslims OR Identity
- Prevent and British Muslims
- Fundamental British Values AND British Muslims
- British Muslims AND multiculturalism
- British Islam AND multiculturalism
- Islam AND multiculturalism in Britain
- convert Muslims AND multiculturalism AND Education
- convert Muslims AND multiculturalism
- Muslim education needs AND Britain OR British
- Muslims OR Islam AND Campus AND Britain
- Muslim converts AND media AND Britain
- Conversion religious change AND Islam
- British Muslim Convert~4
- Convert Islam education~5
- Education policy convert Muslim Britain~6
- identity configuration AND Muslim
- post 9/11 British Muslims AND Convert
- Thomas Sealy
- Farid Panjwani

- Farah Ahmed
- Lynn Revell
- Vini Lander
- Sophie Gilliat-Ray
- Leon Moosavi
- Lewis Rambo
- Esra Ozyurek
- Tariq Modood
- Kate Zebiri

The above does not constitute an exhaustive list of the search strings used throughout the research. This represents the initial and traceable search strings I utilised to develop my literature review. As my writing developed, my research questions evolved and I further searched specific topics, developing relevant and specific search strings related to names, places, events, resources, theories and papers according to my needs. This included more general google searches and thus the use of wider databases. Given the limitations in my recordkeeping (see section 2.1), I am unable to provide an exhaustive list of search terms used throughout the project.

Appendix 11 – Example Transcript

Narrative Interview: Abdullah Transcript

Jeremiah:
Okay, it's recording, and the transcription looks like this. Okay, so we'll start then just

Abdullah:
it's crazy how good these things are as well. So do they pick up like Arabic terminology.

Jeremiah:
I'm not sure let's find out in sha Allah, Alhamdulillah… this will… Bismillah. It doesn't matter I'll sort of transcribe it as… yeah well its saying that on it now.

Was it the 30th today? I need to. Okay. So if you could, if you could just run through, you know how you became a Muslim particularly I'm looking at the critical incidents you mentioned before you became a Muslim and leading up… Was there anything in your life that you think was important, like significant to you becoming Muslim?

Abdullah:
So you want me to run through the story or go into those specifics

Jeremiah:
for now? Yeah, just before running through the story. Or you can, you can look back on anything in your life you mentioned on the form.

Abdullah:
Right. In my early days, my relationship with the church and my adherence to Christianity from a very early age from as young as I can remember, actually, that definitely had an impact on me. The belief in God that was passed on to me from my mom from an early age definitely had. And that I suppose that sense of belonging to a church to a specific church and affiliation with that church. Sort of, you know, translating in my later life is like that, the Ummah and that brotherhood, so I had that concept of, you know, affiliation with a specific religious group, which I loved and some of my sweetest memories. So that definitely had an impact on me, the belief and their affiliation with a religious group...

[PARTICIPANT PICKED UP HIS PRE-INTERVIEW CRITICAL INCIDENTS SHEET]

So, my conversion story is, as I said, raised Seventh Day Adventist by my mum, single mother, household, brother, sister at that time until my mom was married later on in life. So, going to skip, like a lot of the childhood really. I say normal but, in a sense, just normal upbringing, nothing, no significant events or trauma or any bad memories, really, generally speaking, from my childhood. Have some really good memories, holidays, school, spending time with my mum. Get to my adolescent years in high school. That's when my personality started. As with most teenagers, I suppose. That's when, as they say that the phrases you try and you try to find yourself, find out who you are, what your likes, dislikes are etc. That's when my

personality starts to change and more specifically, my relationship with God definitely started to change and when I mean change, what I mean is I didn't have a relationship with God. Although if someone would ask me the question, What religion are you I would say proudly, I'm a Christian. If they said what, or do you believe in God? I would say absolutely. So I still had that affiliation with Christianity. Seventh Day Adventist, but it was by name only at that point. So other significant changes were my behaviour started become a little bit problematic in high school, started gravitating towards the wrong quote unquote, wrong crowd, etc. finished school early, not by choice, shall we say? Which was year 10. My mom, was- she really was a strong West Indian mother and my only option then was to be put into what's called a PRU centre its [INAUDIBLE]. And my mom just thought if I'm going to be yeah, stuck in courts, if I'm going to be around those people, she thought that my behaviour is going to become even worse. So for example, in September, I'm one of the oldest in my years. She went down to Technology College, and you have to efficiently be 16 but efficient also have left school. Of course, I was still in year 11. So she went down and she she fought for me to have a place there. And it started out really well, but again gravitate to the wrong crowd. And this became a pattern throughout my life. A pattern of doing good and being on the right track, so to speak, and then being distracted by either other people or just being into the wrong things and mixed with laziness, etc. So as, as I left, what was it was college at that time. My life then was very, very social. So it was, so we're talking about 17 18 years old now. Very social life. Very normal western life; had a girlfriend went nightclubs you know, done what most people do in the West. You can probably figure that out yourself. And, unfortunately, I was involved in quite a bit of *jareema* (crime in Arabic), you know *jareema* (crime in Arabic). And that, unfortunately, to cut out quite a bit, that unfortunately… I say unfortunately now, but I now know that it was actually fortunately, it happened for me. So, this led me to [REDACTED AT PARTICIPANT'S REQUEST]. So I've been three times. The first time I
was, I think 19 I was with my partner at the time. And [REDACTED AT PARTICIPANT'S REQUEST] … for 18 to 21 years old, and I was paired up with a French African guy called Bello. I still remember his name, called Bello, and he was a revert to Islam. And this was the first time that – and its strange because I know of, you know prominent figures like Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, these people, well known Muslims, but it never really struck me that they were Muslim. If you know I mean, because I always had Islamic religion as a religion that came from the subcontinent, I suppose because predominantly the Muslims in the UK are of Pakistani origin. If you go to America, they probably think of Muslims as Arabs. Yeah. So it really didn't strike me as Black, Muslims, of course because I'm mixed race myself. And as I mentioned before, I'm still at this point, even into my early 20s, still trying to figure out who I am, still trying to learn about my culture, etc. So this guy I was paired up with called Bello whose French is African Muslim. And that was my first introduction. It was the first time I ever met a revert actually. And that definitely, nothing changed in my life at that point, but that definitely, in hindsight, had a profound effect on me. I would see him pray. He would ask me, and because of my character, it was - I never had a problem with turning the television off. Even when I was in the middle of watching something. He asked me, Can you turn the TV off? We need to pray. He would pray. I would ask him a few questions, but nothing really too significant. We didn't. We didn't really go into detail about religion. He was quite a new revert himself. He didn't really have a lot of knowledge about Islam. But I did find it interesting. But as I say nothing changed. So I'm going to skip…

Jeremiah:
Don’t feel like you have to, its cool if you want…

Abdullah:
The reason why I'm skipping quite a bit, is basically to find like events that lead on to my conversion. Yeah. So we now get to the second time [REDACTED AT PARTICIPANT’S REQUEST] now. Now, this time, I’m not a Muslim. I'm Christian, but at this time I'm really starting to reflect on my life and realise that I'm thinking, I’m about 22 maybe years. And I'm starting to realise that my life is just going downhill and something needs to change. So I tried to go back to what I knew. And that was to try and have a relationship with God because I believed in God, as I said, that has never changed throughout my life. So the first…

Jeremiah:
You're at this stage, you were Christian, right? Yes. And you just knew that you want to have a relationship with God?

Abdullah:
Yeah, because I knew I needed my life to change for the better, because it was it wasn't going anywhere I was… I recognised that I was getting older. I recognised that I was making the same mistakes. [PAUSE TO DEAL WITH PERSONAL ISSUES IN THE HOME]…

… So yeah, it was because of these reasons that prompted me to say okay, what where do I go, what, where do I look for for, you know, for help. So, that's, that's the reason I thought, Okay. And it's, it's very well known that when you're in [the participant’s particular life situation] you have a lot of time on your hands, that time to think, ponder, self-reflect. So I thought immediately, let me turn back to God and that my first point of call is going to be the Bible for anything because that is the religion that I'm part of. At that time. I started reading the Bible and when I started reading the Bible… I personally don't know any Christian… I mean that they do exist. I'm not saying that there aren't Christians, but majority of Christians… The average Christian has never read the Bible back to back. Not like, I mean, as opposed to the Muslim faith. So when I say read, the Bible, you know, sort of, there's no systematic approach to it. It was just pick the Bible up and try and get some guidance from it. I found it very hard to get guidance from the Bible and it was at that point, actually, it was Ramadan. It must have been about, I cant remember, but it was Ramadan and they cater for the people who are fasting, so they bring like outside food, or they have food specially cooked [REDACTED AT PARTICIPANT’S REQUEST] ... And I became friends with a guy called Shahzad and I started asking him, you know, oh what's this, asking him things about the religion? I don't know what… well, I do know actually, it was because at this point, as I say, I was looking for some guidance. So it was almost natural to ask him about his religion. And again, this time… I recognise that there are other black Muslims and even more so mixed race Muslims, so it's like, it's that human. It’s that human

Jeremiah:
Yeah, that’s normal, sort of relation?.

Abdullah:
Yeah, so I saw even mixed race Muslims, and you have that thing you know, he looks like me. You know, and sometimes humans, we gravitate towards the people who look like us, etc. So again, this intrigued me. I saw Muslims with tattoos that looked like me. So I was really like interested so I started asking him about Islam, etc. And he gave me a book, I think it was - it was.. I had two books. One is a very famous book it has like, the science

Jeremiah:
Ah, it has a black cover.

Abdullah:
I can't remember books. Yeah, something like that.

Jeremiah:
With like stars and pictures of planets

Abdullah:
Yeah, in black. That's right. Yeah, that's the one Yeah. So I had that book. And I had another book, which is more of like a school book. It was like Islamic guide, like a red and black book. And so I had these two books, and I started reading these. And immediately I was just like, the first month. This was my first actual like, insight, if you like Islam, and my immediate thought was, because I grew up with Muslims in school, was how did I not know any of this? At that point, I did not even know that Jesus was a prophet of Islam. Even after all that… later,

the more I explored on the internet and read, the more it kept me sort of captivated and I couldn't put the books down. It was… it was so interesting. And at that point, it was fun. It's like I just wanted to stay inside. Because I just wanted to be reading and reading and reading and reading. I find it so interesting, so enlightening, and so refreshing that some of the things I found problematic with Christianity, not necessarily by my own reading, but because of my own beliefs, this certain Muslim brother had highlighted them to me, highlighted my own beliefs that I didn't even know I had – things like the Trinity. Things like Jesus as a god. Questions like, how can, you know, God be a man, etcetera, things like this?

Now, because I was still… there was still a lot of Christians around me. I would ask them, the other Christians, these questions, see if they could answer. They would. They would go to church on a Sunday. They would ask their priests and I never, ever, ever, to this day and I still ask questions if I ever get to dialogue with them. There is no answer to be honest. And I could never, ever get an answer. So it wasn't very long before I realised okay. I now have these two huge religions. Two Abrahamic religions. My initial thought was, you know, that I would never look into another religion because I felt like I would be turning my back on Jesus. It would… it felt very strange. And so it should in a way, if you've been, you know, affiliated with something your whole life, because what they're essentially telling you is what your mom taught you is-was incorrect. Yeah. And that's a hard pill to swallow sometimes. But for me, the truth, it overrode all of that. And so it wasn't very long, I would say a matter of well, so the start of Ramadan, so it could have been a matter of three weeks. Before I took shahada. I then… moved [REDACTED AT PARTICIPANT'S REQUEST]… I started praying… as

well. That had a massive impact on me, just being in that position of *sajdah* (prostration), had a massive impact. And there were some changes but I sometimes, when people asked me when did you revert? I sometimes give them a two-part answer, because when I really reverted was when [REDACTED AT PARTICIPANT'S REQUEST]. In my life at that time, even though I was Muslim at this point, [REDACTED AT PARTICIPANT'S REQUEST] The only changes that I would say is I used to go to *jumu'ah* (Friday sermon and prayer). I was still looking into Islam, I spent a lot of time watching Peace TV… like a significant amount of time watching TV. I was eating halal food. I did the halal diet. Apart from that, I was still in nightclubs, still girlfriends, still using substances, etc. So it was [later on]… when I actually said. No, I asked myself the question, or, I gave myself the ultimatum, actually, if I really believe in Islam, I believe is the truth. Yeah. I believe my life will change if I follow Islam. I now have to force myself to follow Islam. And that's not taking away my *yaqeen* (certainty) or my certainty in the in the religion. That is me saying, I haven't really given Islam a proper like go, if you like, I haven't really submitted. I believed and I'm Muslim, but haven't really become a believer. Because my actions say otherwise. And that's when this time I got a different book. I got a book by Bilal Phillips. I think its called *tawheed* (Oneness of Allah) or something like this. And then again, so you have the second time where I was enlightened. That what I believed in was wrong. Christianity. And then you have this third time I read this book about *Tawheed* where I really realised some of my beliefs in Islam were wrong. So my practice, so we have this third conversion if you like, of me adhering to a more maybe, like…

Jeremiah:
A particular *aqeedah*?

Abdullah:
Yeah, yeah, yeah, to a more like more conservative, more like, more black and white, literalist, more literalist approach of Islam.

Jeremiah:
I just want to… I just wanted to kind of characterise this right. So, there were sort of three stages in a sense, yeah, stage one you would say…

Abdullah:
In a sentence, it was the seed being sown. Yeah.

Jeremiah:
Okay. And what about the second stage?

Abdullah:
the second stage was realising that - and I could elaborate on that more - but it was realising that that the fundament fundamentals of the religion of Islam was in line with what I believe naturally. i.e the oneness of God. So it was the acceptance of the religion first stage was the adherence to the religion.

Jeremiah:
Then you mentioned a literalist approach?

Abdullah:
Yes. Yeah, so yeah, this third stage was, it was following Islam in accordance to the early generations of Muslims. In Arabic, the *salaf-As-saaleh* (pious predecesors). This again, it was like, whoa, so many things, beliefs and practices that I was doing that people had taught me from my local mosque. When I used to go to jummah or the occasional other prayer, they told me things that actually had no basis in Islam, or were not substantiated by any proofs. And so I would be reading this book. Now it's telling me that's totally wrong. And here's the evidence. Now I follow a very different approach. It was, this is Islam. Here's the evidence. Here's what the salaf would do, how the salaf understood fiqh. I mean, this is why when you look at that population of reverts, it's clear that so many of them gravitate towards this. This form or version of Islam, because it's-it's so simplistic in its approach, and it offers a more authentic version of Islam that is closer to how the Prophet *salalahu alayhi wa selem* and his companions sort of understood it. So this is, when a revert comes to Islam, he falls in love with the prophets *salalahu alayhi wa selem* (peace and blessings be upon him) and the Sahaba. So they want to be naturally closest to him, as opposed to following someone in you know, the year 2022. They steer clear of culture. You're saying, oh, you don't need to wear that. You don't need to do that. You don't need to do that. I'm just following everything the Prophet *salalahu alayhi wa selem* (peace and blessings be upon him) said. So for me, this was- this was amazing. It was this point where I started to actually practice Islam, praying five times a day, given up all the other evils that Islam prohibits, you know, like, alcohol, women etc. And you know, the list goes on. And this is when I really came on that path. And really, this is when I started to learn how to recite the Quran. When I started to learn Arabic, and when I started networking with other Muslims, when I started to frequent the masjid, the mosque, a lot more, etc. So that was when I changed, at this point. *subhanAllah* (glory be to Allah).

Jeremiah:
Okay. So is that the stage you'd say you're, in a sense, at now, like, at that third stage?

Abdullah:
I will say I'm at the first stage now. Yeah. That was how I converted

Jeremiah:
So next time, we'll kind of move on to the questions then which are a bit more themed…

Transcribed by https://otter.ai

INTERVIEW STOPPED

Semi-Structured Interview: Abdullah Transcript

Jeremiah:
Can you explain your upbringing I think you've pretty much done that [during our ethnographic encounters]. But, like how did you learn about Islam? Kind of, how long were you interested in Islam before converting.

Abdullah:
As I say, the first stage, and the seed was sown. My actual interest was, as I said, quite quick, actually, because some people will be two years, three years of researching Islam. For me, I had a very different approach. See, some people they say I want to know more and a little more I want to make sure this is right for me. It was a simple case of I already believe in God, so that part was sort of done. For me, it was the questions I had surrounding Christianity were answered by Islam, the fundamental questions. I'm not - so I'm not saying there were not things in Islam that I came across after my conversion that I struggled with. And I had to ask people of knowledge to understand it, and then I understood it. Because other people they tried to understand absolutely everything. And I just felt that the religion is too vast for me to do that. I believe in the fundamentals, I believe, now in-in the Jesus of Islam, that he was a prophet, and it makes absolute… like sense. So this period, my actual interest when that brother, when I asked that brother about Islam, was about three weeks before you took shahada,

Jeremiah:
And that was the first stages then.

Abdullah:
That was the second stage.

Jeremiah:
Okay. So how did you inform your family? How did they find out about you becoming Muslim? And how long was it after your conversion

Abdullah:
so that was that second time when [REDACTED AT PARTICIPANT’S REQUEST]. And I think I informed my mom on the phone. Yeah, I think I definitely did actually, I don't know if it was straightaway like that day, or whatever. But I definitely informed them when I was [REDACTED AT PARTICIPANTS REQUEST]… So it was within, you know, maybe a week I informed them by phone. Yeah.

Jeremiah:
And how did she take it?

Abdullah:
There was no resistance in the sense of why have you done that than that. My mom's always been very, like always had the attitude of you're an adult, it's your life. You know, not gonna force my views on you, etcetera. She did sort of think it was another phase, understandably, because I'm her son, she knows me the most and I've been through so many phases, growing up as many children do. But because I think, me, maybe more so than other people.

So and I go from one extreme to the other. So at one point, example, at one point, I was like, proper, you know, into heavy metal like proper rock like, spikes coming out? Yeah, I used to have slip knot t shirts. Yeah, and everything was [sign to indicate disarray]. It wasn't long after that, I was really into hip hop and I was wearing like baggy tops and things and FUBU. And, you know, durag hanging under the hat. So, you know, rock artists for hip hop started [?out in my Space?]. So my mom just thought, you know, here we go. Because it is an extreme thing, to some people, to change your religion. So she did think it was like, another phase. I can't remember the exact words and then you probably just said, oh god here we go. Like that sort of attitude. But she had no resistance. She wasn't, you know, unhappy with me for anything like that.

Jeremiah:
Alhamdulillah. Did you face any hostility from any family members or friends after you converted or, if you were associated with a previous religion, from them?

Abdullah:
Okay, so um, not from friends. Not from any, em, members from a previous religion at that time. I had disassociated from the church really. The only member I still have contact with is, well, I don't call – I don't like to call her by this name – is my godmother. I don't call her that now, but she's part of that church still. And even she showed me no hostility. Erm, the only comment I have ever had from a family member, from my erm nan – or step nan, you could say. Her first reaction, when she – the first time she was me was, she said that, Oh my God, she was very scared and she said that I'd been brainwashed and that it was something bad, was negative and she was scared actually she was like, Oh my God, you've been praying much more than… you know what's happening and what's going on and like in terms of like thinking terrorism and all that.

Jeremiah:
Ah, Yeah.

Abdullah:
That was my only negative comment from a family member.

Jeremiah:
Did it affect you in any way? Were you particularly close to this family member?

Abdullah:
not particularly close no. I just, I just think that particular person as with many people, just blinded by social media, because this is just not backed, substantiated by any proof to just say I've been brainwashed, just because I've change my lifestyle, is a huge claim. Yeah, you know, yeah.

Jeremiah:
So do you wear Islamic dress in public? If so, can you describe it?

Abdullah:

Yeah, I do like wear Islamic attire in public. Not all the time. But more so then. A lot of Muslims actually, the city I live in in is predominantly non Muslim is not a common sight to see somebody in Islamic attire. The most you may see is an old Pakistani or Bangladeshi person in their traditional salwaar kameez. Yeah. I personally like wearing traditional thobe. Like a robe, Moroccan style or like an *khaleeji* (Gulf) style. That's the style. Yeah. Sometimes wear like headgear, but not all the time. And usually it's just the thobe I wear. I wear that around the city quite happily. Yeah.

Jeremiah:
Okay. Have you faced any consequences or challenges as a result of converting? Obviously that's very broad, but just think, just generally.

Abdullah:
any consequences or..?

Jeremiah:
…or challenges after converting? So I'm thinking more in terms of within society,

Abdullah:
Without doubt, absolutely. Loads I can. We could do a whole talk on just this alone. And what is quite unique as well, what not unique to me actually, what is different to me as opposed to, for example, a white Muslim revert, you know, English, European origin, is being a mixed-race person are also faced, you know, racism prior to my conversion. So I can actually sort of compare the two right and I can, you know, draw lines between the two is to see which has been more which is more severe. Yeah. You know, and there's no doubt in my mind that… So, I can ask myself this question, you know, as a person of colour as a black person is what have I faced more as a black man or as a Muslim? I will say, the latter without doubt, I face more negative comments, hostility, etc. Being a Muslim, as opposed to being a black person, and I have faith that seems to be [inaudible]. Definitely.

Jeremiah:
And this is really, where you've grown up, in quite a white area, yes? Were you able to receive any support with the challenges you've just described, the hardships? Did you ever kind of receive anyone from the Muslim community, organisations, family or non-Muslim family or non-Muslims more broadly?

Abdullah:
Not really, no. And that's probably because I haven't gone out seeking any support. I mean, there was there was a... I can draw an isolated incident where somebody did support me, a member of public who was non-Muslim. The support he saw the injustice of somebody you know, being Islamophobic basically saying, being a very abusive to me, and he did stick up for me, support me. But that generally speaking is an isolated incident. The majority of times if somebody makes a comment, people around don't say anything. Yeah.

Jeremiah:
So have you had generally positive or negative experiences with other Muslims… what has been your experience with other Muslims as a convert?

Abdullah:
if I if I had to say, generally, if I had to make a generic evaluation on it, generally speaking, positive, but then if we have to really dissect it and break it down, it really depends on what demographic, I'm speaking to your Muslim community. very vague term very fast.

Jeremiah:
So I'll kind of touch on two things that sort of run through the literature generally on converts and that you mentioned when we were talking. One is racialization. But then there's the questioning of the reasons for conversion or suspicion of conversion. So, you know, for converting or just it's not seen as authentic for one reason or another. What kind of has been your experience with those two phenomenon?

Abdullah:
I would say, definitely. Not necessarily my intentions as to why I converted. The question I have definitely faced, sort of some opposition in terms of how I practice my Islam. Yeah. In terms of specifically, you mentioned [PRIOR TO INTERVIEW] the tattoos, yes, I get a lot of comments. And dare I say it, probably because I'm a black Muslim. And I don't want to, you know, cast aspersions upon a particular group. It's predominantly coming from one group of Muslims. Because when you look at other groups of Muslims, they really do integrate. Yeah. But this group, you have to ask yourself the question, they rarely call people to deen. Their mosques are very divided. You get a Pakistani mosque, Bangladeshi mosque, you know, when there's only need for one mosque there, they have to, because they don't want to mix with each other. They're not very welcoming to outsiders. So, this is something embedded, entrenched in their culture… Being black, you feel it, they look at you differently.

Jeremiah:
I mean there is… it's about what's in the literature as well. Yeah, exactly.

Abdullah:
That's been my experience. And I mean, if you look at it, if you look at the history of Muslims here, they are the first sort of group that came here in the 60s or whatever. 50s.

Jeremiah:
After World War Two…

Abdullah:
So yeah, that's right. Yeah. After they came to the country. I always ask this question then I mentioned earlier on how I grew up with Muslims and they never told me anything like this. It is very, very profound that that group of people, and you have to ask yourself the question why, why have they been here for decades; they were the predominant Muslim force, and they never called people to Islam. Now, you may have non-Muslims. You may have heard them say things like, You, Muslims don't integrate. Yeah. Now, are they talking about Muslims? Or do they still have this particular group of Muslims that they're just so familiar with and they just now, you know, consider them or categorise Muslims all together as one? Yeah. And that that has been clearly shown throughout their own history in this country, and Alhamdulillah the youth, some of them are starting to change and you only have to go to

and again, this is another attraction to salafia, that when you go to the Salafi mosques, you will find Pakistanis who aren't - don't think like this anymore. Young generation Bangladeshis, black people. Chinese you'll find, like loads of different cultures altogether under the banner of Islam. And this is what attracts people, because, what have I got to offer or what do they have to offer me, if they're so segregated, right? So, yeah, that would be my answer to that. Again. I think I might have just touched on it, but *SubhanAllah*, it's coming up again, specifically with this certain group of people. Yeah, I faced that without doubt. In fact, I'll give you a very recent incident, of where an old uncle who was actually born in the same street as my mom. So I've known him since I was a child before my conversion. Yeah. Now he knows I'm Muslim and you know, he's okay with me. Now, the Imam doesn't come on a Sunday. And as you mentioned [during ethnographic conversations], you learned Arabic. I myself also learned how to recite the Quran correctly and, not in an arrogant way, but just because of their way of learning, I can recite it better than the uncles at this mosque. because they don't recite it with *tajweed*. So the uncle himself, sometimes I'll be pushed forward to lead. And I said, the imam's not there. So the uncle asked, he said, Look when you lead it, do you mind leading *maghrib* [early evening prayer]. I said, Yeah, that's fine. He said when you come, he said, you must wear a hat. And I said, Okay, I said my exact words were "okay, uncle". I said, "sometimes I do wear a hat", which I mentioned, I do wear a headdress sometimes, and I said, "but sometimes I don't". I said, "Well, I'm not going to, with all due respect, I'm not going to put a hat on because you've told me to, because then I would be making it a *biddah* [religious innovation] that I have to wear the hat for the *salah*. And he goes, he said, "You must wear hat." So I then asked him, and in a very calm manner, wasn't being obnoxious or rude or anything. I said Uncle - He told me this is a sunnah, you must wear a hat when you lead the salah – and I said Uncle… Now at this point, I know from my religion, that I now have to correct them as a part of Islam. And our prophet [peace be upon him in Arabic], you know, taught us that anyone who lies upon him, that to take his place in hellfire. So I questioned him, and I think its a very good way of not causing a *fitna* [trials amongst the community] like by asking them, can you give me the evidence even if you know the evidence doesn't exist? So I asked him to give the evidence. He said, it is a sunnah. I said, that's fine. Can you give me the evidence? And he kept arguing with me, and he looked and there is no evidence for it. Yeah, it's in the Hanafi school of thought. Since that time, since that day, he had like disavowed me in a really aggressive and rude manner. He has done the same to other people who are reverts as well. Because as you said [during our conversation], we take a literary approach. And they still have this belief that because they're older, because they have long, grey beards, they're born Muslim, that they are somehow more knowledgeable, more superior and have more authority as a Muslim, because of these qualities. And that's not the case. And yes, there is a sensitivity about calling out the older generation, because we have to be respectful. Yeah, there's no doubt about that. But we also have to speak the truth and this is a common theme within Islam, that we speak the truth, even if it's against ourselves, or our families, etc. That is a very well-known theme in Islam, truthfulness in justice, so I see it with other people, they will just accept it because they're older. With people who adhere to the *manhaj* [path], we will not accept something that is lying against the Prophet (peace be upon him). It's a red line for us, even if it's very small, but we will always try and do it [question it]. There is a mannerism around, you know, advising people, no doubt. So yeah, this is just one incident. But there's been others, plenty of times actually, to be honest. Whether it's my T shirt needs to be going down over the elbows, or et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. There's many, many, many times

and, you know, they always have that question mark, or that belief or notion that again, you are a revert, you're still a baby Muslim. Yeah. And I was born Muslim and I'm almost, dare I say, I'm better than you. And I'm not saying this is what they believe, but it can be perceived that way.

Jeremiah:
And what were your expectations before converting to Islam, of the Muslim community?

Abdullah:
Subhanallah. What I saw as an outsider's perspective, before I actually became a Muslim, or even when I was an early Muslim, actually, was that the ummah, the Islamic community is one, they are united. The brotherhood is you know, something really, really unique and special, which it is to some extent, but not in the way *I* perceived it before. I thought it was more united than I did. To be honest. I always… it's very hard to get down into the specifics, the difference between… because Christians will try, you know, to say that, for example, when we try to have dialogue with Christians, we will try and call out their sectarianism. And they will say, "Well, you guys have the same. You guys are so divided. You have, you know, a school of thought you have Shia, you have Sunni you have…"

Jeremiah:
they'll try to equate it with

Abdullah:
Denominations, exactly. What I always say back to them, and this is my proper understanding of the Muslim brotherhood now, is that our fundamentals, yeah, are united in Islam. We have one Quran, we have one Quran that we agree upon. Now, there are some groups that are not Muslims at all. Yeah, that may claim to be but every single, every single Muslim denomination, has announced that they're not from the Muslim community, for example, Ahmadiyyahs, Qadhiyaanis. However, generally speaking, the difference between the sectarianism in Christianity and Islam, they're very different, it's apples and oranges, yeah, so our fundamentals, as I said, are united. And then the brotherhood with Islam is we go anywhere on the world we see someone who's a Muslim. We don't get into questioning people, right? We don't start, you know, theology checking people straightaway. So straightaway, there is a brotherhood there no matter what denomination they're from. I know for a fact that this person is a Sufi. I know still he believes in one god. Yeah, I know he reads the same Qur'an, I can take his Qur'an off him and it's the same one as mine. Christianity doesn't have this. It has to be very, very different, their fundamentals, they differ upon them. Some Christians say Jesus is not God but he is the son, others say he's not the son or he's not God. Others don't believe in the Trinity. Others believe in Mary is part of the Godhead. etc, etc, etc, these are the fundamental core beliefs that they differ upon. That they can't agree upon. Muslims it's very simple, we believe our fundamentals are united one Qur'an and we believe in one God, we believe in the Prophet (sallallahu alayhi wa sallam), and then from that sprouts, different schools of thought, and I realised that one of the beauties of Islam actually is that in relation to the some of the ritualistic things. The differences are actually, ironically, what you notice. And this is actually something quite beautiful in Islam, that as opposed to when I was an early Muslim, and I may have had a little bit of naivety and arrogance, maybe around, 'I pray that this and he, this person next to

me is not praying properly.' And as you get more knowledge, you know, you realise that, you know, for example, in the Hanbali Madhab is quite accepted, and you see many Hanbalis in Saudia praying with their hands down low it's accepted, you know, whether to sit in the *Jalsa* (sitting) to have a pause or not some of the scholars upon Salafiyya say the Prophet (sallallahu alayhi wa sallam) did this towards the end, end part of his life. So there's *khilaf* (difference) on it to *ya'ni* (I mean) go down with your hands first or not. These differences are within the umbrella of Ahlus Sunnah (the people of the sunnah) and they're actually something beautiful that unites us in a strange way. So I still see that the beauty in the brotherhood, but I am aware that there are differences, some that are beautiful, and we see the beauty in it that, you know, you follow this way and we can have debates - healthy debates about it and something really beautiful and part of our tradition actually. And then there are some differences there that we don't accept from each other and can cause division between us and that does exist. So, I'm just more aware of what the brotherhood actually means. But it still exists. I still see I still see that.

Jeremiah:
So thinking back now to the sort of three stages, the first stage and that seed being sown. When you realise, so I'm looking at question number 16, when you realised that you were Muslim, or that you wanted to become one, what did you actually do? So literally you know, did you take shahada in your room? Did you do it to an Imam, what did you actually do?

Abdullah:
I took shahada around a group of brothers in [REDACTED] yeah, literally

Jeremiah:
Would you say it's kind of quite formal, or you did it like informally? Would you say it sounds quite a formal sort of ceremony of the shahada, or just informally?

Abdullah:
Very informal? Yeah.

Jeremiah:
So yeah, did you adopt all of the Islamic practices and outlooks immediately? I think you've pretty much described that in the sort of stages you went through. Okay, so now we're kinda gonna go on to the last question. It's purposely vague. Did you as a person change?

Abdullah:
Yeah.

Jeremiah:
Could you elaborate, how would you…

Abdullah:
Okay, so it's very, I've had this discussion before. So in Islam, you have your two things that sometimes the Prophet (sallallahu alayhi wa sallam) actually separated. For example, when he advised about the woman marrying the man, he advised that she should look for his religion. You know, his Deen, and separately his character. Now, why is the character not part

of the deen? For many reasons, but the reason I mention this is because for myself personally, it changed. Islam changed my actual character. So it wasn't a case of now implementing these Islamic practices, you know, I'm praying salah, I'm not drinking alcohol anymore. But I'm still this, for example, if I was arrogant, or if I was stingy, or example, you know I wouldn't, say for example, because some people they don't change their character. And that's unfortunate. But Islam actually changed my actual character changed me as an actual person. And to the point where, when I meet new people today, when I come sort of when I become sort of like, close to them to the extent where I can talk a little bit about my past, they're in absolute shock that somebody like me could have ever been in prison just because of the way I carry myself. The way I've become educated, more motivated, more pleasant, more forgiving. Like, this was a natural, some of it was, most of it was a natural process, but a lot of it was and I think this is where people make the mistake is they don't read the Seerah of the Prophet (sallallahu alayhi wa sallam). They look at a lot of the ritualistic parts of Islam which is, of course, very important, the salah how to pray, etc. But without reading the Seerah of not just the Prophet SAWS, but his companions as well, you, it's going to be very difficult for your actual personality to change, because some people will argue, and you'll hear, like 'ah your personality, your personality' or, 'that's part of your fitrah'. Or if you're, you'll hear this people will say that, 'Oh, that's your natural disposition. You're born like that. That's just who you are as a person.' But I don't really buy that. There's some things that *are* part of your natural disposition. But there's other things that I don't believe that, you know, you're just, you're just an angry person. Like, you're just, that's just you, that's just part of your character that you're angry and, you know, you just have to accept that you know. I'm, if someone you know, wants to marry my daughter, and he says, 'I have really bad anger problems, that's part of my natural disposition.' I'm not gonna say 'oh, okay, then you marry him that his natural disposition, you can't change that'. You know, this is ridiculous claim, really. So, definitely, my actual personality changed. You know, there's been many incidents that have happened, going back to one of your earlier questions, yeah, with Islamophobia, where to be frank, I would have dealt with it in a different way, prior to being a Muslim, but because of my Islam, because of my religion, and the fact that it has changed my character, it then forced me or it came naturally to me in that incident, to act in a way according to how the Prophet (sallallahu alayhi wa sallam) would act or his companions.

Jeremiah:
Okay. So I'm going to move on to the family section now, yeah? These ones you've already answered in the first interview, but did you marry before or after your conversion? Or do you want to get married? Obviously, that's for somebody who's not married.

Abdullah:
Okay. Yes, it was after my conversion.

Jeremiah:
Okay. Just… simple, alright. So conversion narratives. Which term do you use to describe your embracing of Islam? Conversion, reversion, embracing Islam, become Muslim? What term do you use?

Abdullah:

I usually use revert but I know there's nuances between revert and convert, but I sometimes use convert as well, predominantly revert. But I think sometimes, I just don't think it's necessary to get into the semantics of you know convert and revert. Yeah, we've reverted back to our natural disposition is why we use revert. But in linguistical sense we are also converting something that we were not at one point, in terms of practice.

Jeremiah:
Subhanallah, you know surprisingly you know, you'll find nearly everyone's given the same answer, exactly the same answer, and nearly everyone has assumed that other people kind of find it problematic, but like, you know, 12 or so reverts I've spoken to they've all said convert and revert, you know, it's not really important, it's just you know, whatever word and this that the other, you know, one person had a particular viewpoint but everyone else was just like, 'conversion, sometimes I'll say reversion, because people know what I'm talking about, but you know, doesn't really matter.'

Abdullah:
Exactly, so depending on my interlocutor, I might use, convert or revert, yeah exactly.

Jeremiah:
Okay, so before embracing Islam, have you had any experiences, and you've touched on it, that you considered after conversion to be significant? So was there anything that you went around in your life thinking is normal, but after you became a Muslim, you found it to be significant? Is there anything that you can think back on that you consider *now* to be significant that you didn't before?

Abdullah:
The only thing? Just the mention of the first brother I met. I find this to be significant because it wasn't significant at the time, and it only became significant in retrospect.

Jeremiah:
The French-African brother? Yeah.

Abdullah:
Yeah. And that's why whenever I retell my conversion story, he's always a part of it. Now, why am I making him a part of my story? He obviously plays some significance in sowing that seed. Yeah, just mainly seeing him. Just mainly him being the first black, because, by the way, just a side point, not that it makes a difference being black but at this point in my life, that meant something to me, you know that he was a black Muslim as well. Now it means nothing to me whether it's a black or white Muslim. Yeah. It was significant. It was like he was the perfect person for me to be paired up with, in a [REDACTED] full of, I think that's the biggest [REDACTED] in Europe. I think one of them.

Jeremiah:
Which one, was it [REDACTED]

Abdullah:

It was [REDACTED]. So out of all, it's like he was the perfect person for me to be… [REDACTED SECTION], and although at the time I didn't possibly see the significance in it. There was great significance in it in retrospect.

Jeremiah:
Okay. It's hard to say but, what was the most impactful thing in your decision to convert? Is there something that you would single out as the most impactful?

Abdullah:
The nature of Jesus and the simplicity in understanding the nature of God as well. These two things, you know, in Islam, you can explain this to, and I do, to my young children, five years old, six years old. In Christianity. You may be able to tell a five, six year old that Jesus is the son of God and they might just say, 'Oh, okay', but when you actually question this, it brings about more questions than answers and it's very problematic. In Islam, there is no question because it's so simple. It is so easy to digest. And, as I say, it was the answers that I was looking for in Christianity. So these two things, which being a Christian I, I felt that I didn't want to turn my back on Jesus. And I assume many Christians who probably see Islam as the truth or see the truth in it, are afraid of that Jesus being the "Son of God" of following that way, that they don't, they feel they're turning their back on something, when in fact, you're opening up the door to so much more.

Jeremiah:
Okay, so do you consider conversion to be a process, a moment, both of these things or something else?

Abdullah:
I think it's both of those things. I think yeah, I think so.

Jeremiah:
How long would you say it took you to convert? Did you consider any other religions? I think you mentioned earlier as well… Identity now. So, do you consider yourself as having an identity?

Abdullah:
Yes.My identity is 100%, I'm Muslim. First of all, I'm not really nationalistic at all. I'm not really over proud of my country or my ethnicity. And I see that as just a default of where, you know, my mum and dad settled essentially. And that is pretty much my ethnicity, the predestination of, of God, I have no choice in it. So, I have nothing to be proud of. So, the only thing I can be proud of, is my Islam. Because number one, I'm proud that I'm sticking to something that I've been guided to by The Most High Himself

Jeremiah:
So how do you negotiate your identity within a secular society?

Abdullah:
In terms of like?

Jeremiah:
How do you kind of manage to, you know… religion tends to be sort of looked down upon or looked at like you're a bit crazy?

Abdullah:
Yeah.

Jeremiah:
So how do you kind of, how do you negotiate your everyday dealings with non-Muslim family members, non-Muslim people, being so religiously identified?

Abdullah:
I think I'm just I'm quite open to them I'm quite open, quite flagrant. And quite transparent. And the reason why I'm like this, is because I found in my experience, a lot of the time when you hold back on something or try to appease someone or try to water down some of your beliefs or or any of those things, what happens is, that becomes counterproductive. Why? Because now in this age we live in the for example, the secular community, whether it's your work or whatever, they have access to all the information. So sometimes you'll find very strangely, a secular person may question why you're not praying. So a secular person may question I'm a Muslim, 'Why aren't you praying? How comes I don't see you pray?' Yeah. When they've seen another Muslim pray. So I think it's important, yeah, as a form of da'wah, as a as a form of just, you know, educating people sometimes to just be straight up, and that's how I am now. I tell people so for example, my job my job delivering delivering parcels, sometimes there'll be bottles of wine. Not regularly, but every so often, there'll be a bottle of wine, crate of beer. Now, my boss, I told him the first time I saw one, I spoke to my boss and I told him, unfortunately, I can't deliver the alcohol and because of my experience with him, and he knows that I practice my religion, straightaway he was accommodating. He was very respectful. And he realises that this is something that I take seriously, and that it's, you know, dear to me. And, to be honest, in my experience I've found that when you're like this, actually people respect you. They respect you a lot more. I don't know any other, maybe there are, but many people that will sort of hide their, you know, their way of life and stuff. But when as you say when it comes to religion, because of how other people perceive it, suddenly, you know, you have to, you know, hide your identity, essentially. And I'm not prepared to do that. And when I haven't done that, I've found that actually, this is the better option anyway. You know, so Subhanallah.

Jeremiah:
So were you happy with society before conversion? What were your thoughts about you know, the society we grew up in; how did you feel about that?

Abdullah:
I always had question marks around whether some of these practices were moral. But I suppose, because I indulged in them myself. Well, I don't I don't know was was I serious about these questions? but the very fact that I actually have these questions, many people don't question these things, and they just see this as normal behaviour and part of, you know, human life, you know, part of being an adult that you just, you know, for example, sleep with multiple people. I've always had question marks around that. And a lot of these

things people do have question marks around it, and they question it, but society, and usually, a minority, have such a loud voice, that they push these ideas down your neck so much that you ended up end up being desensitised and not accepting it, and I think that's the stage I was at at one point. I just, it's like what's called you like, sheepish mentality. I just was, I just followed what everyone else was doing. And, you know, majority rules, isn't it? As they say, and because everyone is saying, Oh, this is acceptable now, that I say, oh, okay, then it must be acceptable. And that really isn't someone who's independent thinker, and Islam destroys all of that. Islam. And Islam really gives you an objective way of see of seeing measuring what is moral or not moral, what is good and what is bad for you. What is right and what is wrong. And that that's again, another beauty of Islam is we call it guidance, but it is it's such a practical guidance as well. Such a practical guidance. So all these questions all these things, the minute you take shahada, the minute you start following Islam all these questions they're answered for you it's very clear. Now you have a clear way of you know, I don't need to ask myself these questions. Is this moral? Islam tells me straight away no, this is not moral. This is wrong or this is wrong. This is not righteous. *This* is right. You should do this. So now Alhamdulillah Yeah, that my my outlook on society, of course now is in line with Islam. So

Jeremiah:
So wrapped into the same question. Have you noticed…? Have you noticed any psychological effects, or did you notice… so more or less self-confidence, change your self-identity, happiness, depression, etc.

Abdullah:
Can you repeat the question?

Jeremiah:
So, have you noticed any psychological effect of becoming Muslim; less or more self-confidence? Change? These are just examples, by the way, e.g. less or more self-confidence change of self-identity, which you've described from happiness, depression, any psychological effects?

Abdullah:
There, there's a happiness that is very, very, very different to happiness that I've experienced before, because it would be false for me to say, oh, because I'm a Muslim now, that yeah, that's something I've experienced in the past before as a Muslim that not, that might be prohibited in Islam, I didn't have any fun from it at that time. I'd be lying, in fact, so I definitely had fun from certain things I did before, however, the way I explain it is like materialistic fun, like, for example, going on holiday for example. It's very short lived. It's very intense. So the fun is, you know you go on holiday have that. So you have the anticipation the airport and the butterflies I mean the airport so a lot of people the most fun yeah, love that part. Then you have the holiday itself, you see all these different things, new smells, colours, culture, and then you come back and what happens when you come back? well they call it holiday blues, you have a really big come down. And I found this common theme throughout my life, looking back in hindsight, is any of the fun, I experienced, it always came with a massive come down you know, because the fun was so it was too extreme. If you know what I'm saying, you know what Islam offers is a more level, more like

the correct word I would say is contentedness with every situation. So now Islam you can have you could be on a low income or not that much money and you know, not enough money or just enough money to feed your family for the week but, and many studies have been done on this, countries like Afghanistan on happiness, studies etc. on the happiness of the population and I definitely see that in Islam, no matter your situation, being a Muslim it offers this sort of levelled contentedness in your everyday situation. Now you still get those moments of extreme happiness and highs even within Islam. Like you know when like Ramadan comes many Muslims they get that excitement etc. And then it goes down, but you keep that level maintained contentedness of your everyday situation. And that is a different type of happiness that I didn't experience before. Outside of Islam Yeah.

Jeremiah:
That's really interesting Subhanallah. So to what degree do you regard it as desirable and or possible to integrate your life as a Muslim with wider British society?

Abdullah:
It's possible. And a Muslim in New York, you will hear the non Muslims many times politicians etc saying that Britain is a very tolerant society. We tolerate, we tolerate tolerate. They always use that word tolerate, for me tolerate has more negative connotations. It connotations of something that you hate in that person, but you just put up with it. Then anyway what I say is look, as a Muslim, and as Muslim societies have always done in the past, as opposed to just tolerating people, we actually coexist with them, so we live side by side. You can have a look at any of the Islamic societies in the past, we coexist with them. And, you know, subhanAllah some of the Islamic societies are so interesting. How, you know, the Jews and the Christians had their own sort of like not parallel system law, or jurisprudence system, but in terms of like, family law, and stuff like that they were allowed to, you know, conduct the things according to their book. Even though we totally disagree with that book. And I find that interesting.

So, as a Muslim, I think it's possible to coexist. However, there is a red line and there are there are instances where we have to… or have to say – for example – to distance ourselves in certain situations. Why? Because the lifestyle of the average, non-Muslim, most of the time, the situation that you will be in is not congruous with Islamic principles, whether that's free-mixing, whether that's going to a place that's not permitted for Muslim, etc, etc. So, there are times like, for example, I've been at work, have been invited to Christmas parties. And, you know, this is a situation where I say sorry, I can't free-mix, and they say, Well, why, and sometimes they will say, you don't have to drink alcohol, because maybe another Muslim has gone and not drank alcohol. But I will say, it's not about the alcohol, it's about Christmas itself and other things and I'll try and educate them. And I think it's a great opportunity. And I don't know why Muslims, as I said earlier, yeah, don't take these opportunities to educate them, and I find it ludicrous and just astounding how non Muslims have been here for, sorry Muslims have been here for so long, and still a non Muslim won't know something like that we don't drink water in Ramadan. I mean, that's just crazy. I mean, really, and truly, they should know that. And maybe that's the fault of the Muslim but maybe it's the fault of the non Muslim also. But who's to blame is irrelevant. The fact is, when you're living with someone, you should know something like this. This is very, very basic. You should know that Muslim prays by putting his head on the ground.

Jeremiah:
Do you think it's important to be able to understand the Quran in Arabic?

Abdullah:
Without doubt 100% absolutely. The Arabic, what the Arabic offers, the English, and any other language, in fact, doesn't even come close. The Arabic language has a richness and a vastness in meaning that no other language can can offer and that in itself is a clear, clear indication or clear reason rather, as to why the Quran was revealed in Arabic. And it's the Arabic language is, is beautiful in sound, in meaning, in richness and it's easy for people to to memorise, and they say that if the Quran was written in English, it would probably be about three or four times thicker! Yeah subhanallah. So definitely I think, for you to understand that Islam in its true sense and one of the evidences for that is because we see what's happened to the Bible. One of the reasons it's changed it changed is not just because of manipulation of man, it's because any linguists will tell you, when you translate from one language to another, and then to another, so from Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, to kind of Greek because yeah, to the other Latin-based languages, without doubt you lose meaning there's no doubt about that. So the how to resolve that would be to go back to its original source. So for me, it's very important. Yeah.

Jeremiah:
I'm just gonna go to the toilet if you don't mind. Just put on pause. [AFTER RETURN] So did you feel the need to adopt outward signs of Muslim identity for instance, hijab, beard or change of name?

Abdullah:
Yeah so initially I think a lot of it was like this this new thing this new like religion I'm part of, this new way of life I'm part of and a lot of it indicative of my character prior to Islam was this saying, idiomatic expression, in the West it says 'all gear, no idea' and my mum's always said that to me, you know, whether it's been cricket and I buy all the cricket stuff, and then I start playing after two weeks, yeah I've always been like that. So that is part of my character that I wanted, you know, I wanted to you know, adorn myself and you know, nice long white gown and change my name to the most, you know, Islamic sounding name wasn't really looking for meaning or anything like that. I mean, it was only later on after, you know, I attained a little bit of knowledge about the religion, I realised my name was original, it's not even permissible in Islam, it was one of the names of Allah. So it was just yeah, a lot of it was like novelty, and stuff like that. But now, so initially, yeah, I did, name change, attire change straightaway, I felt the need, yeah, I have to I have to express this to the world. But looking back on it, I don't think that was necessarily a thing that I needed to do at all in fact. And some of it in fact, I was advised, I was advised to change your name. Pete the first thing people know what are you gonna change your name to? what are you gonna change your name to? And now, although I do have a Muslim name, many people refer to me with my previous name. And I have no problem with this, I'm not offended, in fact, I sometimes refer to myself with that name, now, to be honest. I mean, in hindsight, if I could wouldn't have changed my name, I'd have just kept my name, the whole way through, I would still be known, like I would never change it.

Jeremiah:
Do you consider yourself related to the Ummah, the global Muslim community?

Abdullah:
Yeah, definitely. Without doubt, definitely part of the Ummah, but that is Yeah, categorically, I'm part of the Ummah.

Jeremiah:
Okay, so what has your experience of post-secondary education been after conversion? So any education you've been involved in, has it been affected by your conversion?

Abdullah:
I have been involved in post conversion education, but I wouldn't say that my conversion has had any effect on me actually being involved in it or in the outcome of it or anything like that. No.

Jeremiah:
Have you experienced anything positive or negative? Did you experience anything unexpected in the education system? Have you used any chaplaincy services in education? You know, after you became Muslim?

Abdullah:
Yeah, well the only chaplaincy service I have used, the first one was when I was in [REDACTED] then the course I'm on now, I would say I'm not actually on the grounds or the college enough, so to you know really know… But the first one, so he became quite a good friend of mine, the Imam he helped me a lot actually he got me books. He was the one who helped me to read Arabic, etc. And I have contact with my local Imam here in my city. Apart from that, that's it actually, to be honest, I'm a regular contact here.

Jeremiah:
Did 9/11, 7/7 or other incidents of terrorism have an impact on your life post conversion; the way people treated you the things that you kind of witnessed in the media etc?

Abdullah:
I don't know any outward, like expressing Muslim who that hasn't impacted personally. Yeah, it has had an impact on me in the way probably people see me in the way my adherence to the Islam I follow i.e., like the early generations it's usually or sometimes the most, where they they connect this with terrorism or it's it's just, you know, Salafiyyah is just another synonym really for a radical they all intertwine, they're all the same. They they put them all in the same category. So I now I'm in that category when they see so when they see somebody like you know, somebody who they keep putting on CNN or news what have you media like, I am the same as them, they view me as the same the same mindset as them. You know, I believe in exactly the same things they believe in, etc etc. So it definitely has an impact. Even within the Muslim community, unfortunately, we have many Muslims, many Muslims questioning me, many Muslims calling me extreme. Many Muslims calling me radical, many Muslims calling me derogatory names like Wahhabi, this is coming from our own Muslim community. Yeah. So yeah, really profound effect, yeah.

Jeremiah:
Okay. What recommendations do you suggest to help Muslims deal with the educational challenges they face? You don't have to say anything. It's just one of the questions that's there.

Abdullah:
Is that secular education?

Jeremiah:
Yeah, it was really sort of in education settings, so the kinds of challenges that people have faced.

Abdullah:
I haven't really faced challenges myself, so…

It's difficult for me to see through my own experience, but I mean, the only thing I can point out is a point I made earlier and that's just to be very clear with your beliefs, transparent with them, and not to compromise and to have openness, open, honest education and especially always remember that when you're Muslim, or in fact, when you're in another community that, many times, you represent that community, especially if you're the only one in that classroom setting. So actually a lot rides on our shoulders in terms of how you conduct yourself, and what you say. In Islam, what you say matters. Words matter in Islam. It can be a matter of *eman* and no *eman*, so be conscious of what you're saying and educate people. People want to learn. Oh and, they say you can talk about things, but you can't really. There was literally nowhere to even debate the topic of some things in college in the early days. Like foreign policy or anything. If you're Muslim you need to be careful and it's put up or shut up, when it comes to that stuff. Like I said, my own family saw me as weird because of what I thought about what was happening in Palestine *filastine*. Trust me, in school or whatever, in education, it was a no-go area. I would advise being careful about that.

Jeremiah:
Okay, so that's pretty much it. Is there anything else that you would add or you can mention kind of just about conversion and about you know, your experience or anything like that?

Abdullah:
I would just add, you know, that, of course, every, every experience is unique definitely and my interactions with other reverts, is every single story carries is unique. It has its own unique journey and twists, etc. And I would just say really and truly in terms of beneficial for this dialogue. And well, there's many things I could say in relation to that but just for the benefit of this again, my strongest point that I want to drive home is that is just transparency of your beliefs. Education, openness, honestness with people who you live with, and that and that, that alone, what it will, it will dispel many misconceptions and it will break down a lot of barriers, to be honest.

Jeremiah:

You mentioned something briefly, I've just remembered before we started recording about when Christians convert when Muslims convert that you said something how do students tend to convert?

Abdullah:

Nearly every, I personally, well, I don't know of any other, obviously I'm speaking from my own personal experience, any other revert story where they haven't converted by means of like an academic approach to the intellectual motif. Yeah. This is almost always the case. If there hasn't been a Muslim who said that they had a dream where they you know, I know someone for example, who said, Spanish guy who I used to work with, he said that he kept hearing the word Allahu Akbar in his dream, and he never even knew this word. So even though he has had a subjective experience is accompanied with the academic approach that then prompts him to look into Islam, and he only accepts Islam once he's satisfied, academically and intellectually that will this is the truth. Now, on the flip side, Christianity, the other big world religion, the majority of people who enter into Christianity is number one, the predominant reason is to do with some subjective experience with the Holy Ghost or what have you. That is usually the case that there'd be some story and they kept seeing the Messiah Jesus came to them. They had Revelation, the Holy Ghost hit them. So something like this subjective experience only that it's not academic. You can't prove that to me. And that's their experience which I won't take away from them, I'll give them that, or they may have had, the other reason is they may have had a really, really bad personal experience with Islam. And then somebody from that faith – Christianity – has extended their hand, extended the hand of kindness, and they have then accepted Islam based on emotional reasons. So it's either subjective experience or emotional reasons. Whereas Islam, everything else is irrelevant, it's always well, even some people who are here will say, I never wanted to become a Muslim. I didn't want to be a Muslim. But I couldn't deny the truth. It just made so much sense. And you'll see that all the time.

Jeremiah:

Even in my own experience, you know, very much that you know, I didn't I didn't really want to I was trying to find a way to argue against it so that I could just keep on batting away my feelings. Yeah, Subhanallah. Okay, Jazakallahu Khayr.

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