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# **CONVERSION TO ISLAM IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN: MOTIVATIONS, PROCESSES AND CONSEQUENCES**

AKIL N. AWAN

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD  
in the Study of Religions

2011

Department of The Study of Religions  
School of Oriental and African Studies  
University of London

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis adds to and extends our limited knowledge of conversion to Islam in Britain by addressing the important questions of *why* and *how* does one become Muslim in contemporary Britain, but equally importantly, what happens after the act of conversion?

The study adopts a broadly phenomenological approach and employs the Grounded Theory methodology specifically to interrogate a large dataset of conversion narratives garnered through unstructured interviews and Islamic conversion testimonies located on the Internet. The study reveals conversion to Islam to be a rich, complex and multi-faceted process that defies easy classification, and mirrors findings from studies of religious conversion in other traditions (Rambo, 1993). The study also reveals the contours of post-conversion life, exploring the myriad adjustments that converts make (including onomastic, sartorial, dietary and other changes) in order to successfully negotiate the boundaries of *faith*, as well as issues of social embedment in the host group, navigating orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and maintaining the conversion. One of the most important contributions of this study has been in delineating a sophisticated, innovative and empirically based methodology for elucidating motivations for religious conversion that does not necessarily negate or undermine the convert's own narrative.

The study also deals with the role of testimony and narrative, and the way in which language transformation, and the adoption of host rhetoric is likely to occur, alongside processes of biographical reconstruction in light of the new faith.

## **DEDICATION**

*For my parents,  
who taught me the value of knowledge.*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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# **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 Research Aims & Methodology**

### **1.1.1 Aims of Study**

The overarching aim of this thesis is to add to and extend our limited knowledge of Islamic conversion in Britain, addressing the important questions, *why* and *how* does one become Muslim in contemporary Britain? In the process, it is hoped that we may learn a little about the kinds of people who find themselves drawn to Islam, the processes involved, and the reasons behind the attraction of a faith often popularly misconstrued as representing a hostile and alien culture (Runnymede Trust 1997; Poole 2002; Fetzer and Soper 2003; Asad 2002), in an increasingly secularised society. Furthermore, the present study is essentially a work that attempts to engage with and understand religious conversion as a complex and multi-faceted process, as opposed to simply a singular act or event. I shall endeavour to adopt a holistic view of Islamic conversion by tackling the very nature of the phenomenon, the motivations and rationale behind it, its consequences, and key aspects and stages of the process, namely, pre-conversion context, search, decision, ritual act, and post-conversion experience and change, which will all ultimately help to paint a more complete and vivid account of conversion to Islam.

The work is comprised of two main parts. The first section (chapter 2) is a study based upon Islamic conversion narratives and testimonies located on the internet. This section of the thesis, which draws on a uniquely untapped resource,<sup>1</sup> will aim to examine the primary motivations behind penning conversion narratives. I shall also be examining the role of testimony and narrative, and the way in which language transformation and the adoption of host rhetoric is likely to occur. In addition, I will be exploring the relatively new phenomenon of ‘conversions in Cyberspace’; the use of Internet chat rooms and discussion forums as a means of facilitating conversions. Finally, the findings will provide an empirically founded framework for the main part of the thesis which will be elaborated upon further in the methodology.

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<sup>1</sup> Since this study commenced in 2001, one other study has also sought to examine Muslim conversion narratives on the internet, see Nieuwkerk (2006) who attempts a comparison of offline and online Islamic conversion narratives.

The second section (chapters 3 to 6), which is based on a large dataset of unstructured interviews with Muslim converts in Britain, constitutes the major part of the study, and will attempt to delineate the processes, motivations and consequences of conversion to the Islamic faith in contemporary Britain. Chapter 3 will look at the pre-conversion milieu, seeking to characterise the individual's former predicament vis-à-vis religion and society, exploring aspects such as religious affiliation and religiosity, milieu tension (or dissatisfaction with existing context), and degree of social embedment.

Chapter 4 focuses on the 'decision' phase, exploring the milestones of conviction and commitment, the moratorium period, and examines the threshold that signals a decision to convert has been arrived at. Chapter 4 also looks at the conversion 'act' itself examining the significance attributed to the *Shahadah* (testimony of faith),<sup>2</sup> and its specific contours, including its manner, location and relationship with religious sanction from authority figures.

Chapter 5 will look closely at the events and changes that transpire once the actual conversion has been enacted, from the immediate consequences to longer-term repercussions of converting to Islam. This section will also explore the convert's relationship with their social matrix, and the ramifications of a change in religious affiliation. Chapter 5 also examines the 'lived reality' of conversion and aspects of post-conversion life that militate against remaining converted.

Chapter 6 focuses on the motivations and rationale behind religious conversion, attempting to delineate the primary factors that may influence or impel an individual to convert to the Islamic faith. As opposed to identifying causal factors for conversion, I instead ask more usefully, 'what positive outcome is achieved, or what negative issue is resolved, through religious change?'

### **1.1.2 Methodology**

Most studies of religious conversion seem to be plagued by three major issues, which I shall address below before attempting to circumvent in this study. Indeed, the current study's *raison d'être* can be seen in some ways as a remonstration against these predominant research paradigms:

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<sup>2</sup> For ease of reading I will dispense with standard diacritical marks used in transliterations of Arabic words.

1) Virtually all conversion studies find themselves blinkered by the parochial nature of their particular disciplines and quite often fail to address or even apprehend the complex and multifaceted nature of religious conversion - a failing particularly evident in studies within the field of psychology. Consequently, the bottleneck effects imposed by the researcher's disciplinary focus often impinge heavily upon potential research findings.

2) Second, studies of conversion also have a tendency to be debunking of participant claims and are therefore highly likely to be rejected by the converts themselves (Heirich 1977:656). Consequently, all too often, scholarly endeavours simply perpetuate the traditional and rigid scholar-subject dichotomies. A leading scholar of religious conversion, Lewis Rambo (1993: xiv) writes:

*The secular assumptions that pervade the human sciences result in an often derogatory tone by those purporting to 'study' religious phenomena. Little wonder that many (though not all) religious people see the "psychology, sociology, and anthropology of religion" as subversive at best, completely erroneous at worst. Work published in the human sciences is regarded first with suspicion, then, if at all, as interesting or useful only to professionals in the field of religion."*

3) Finally a distinct lack of empiricism appears to be widespread in the field:<sup>3</sup> abstract concepts are defined, theories formulated and models expounded, often on a purely theoretical basis with little or no recourse to empirical work. Those studies that do have a solid empirical grounding, will often attempt to extrapolate their highly specific findings to religious conversion in general, overlooking the specificity and parochial nature of any given faith or group.

The first issue can be partially resolved by approaching the subject from a religious studies perspective. The study of religions is unique in that its methodology is undefined and ambiguous, allowing appropriation of research methods from diverse disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology and numerous others, thereby creating a variegated research methodology. However, this creative eclecticism is not in itself sufficient to ensure that this first pitfall is avoided. Rather, the researcher should also engage in an active process, not unlike the (*phenomenological*) *epoché*,<sup>4</sup> in which he or she attempts to abandon, or at least suspend prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions pertaining to the phenomenon under

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent overview of the literature, see Paloutzian *et al.*, (1999).

<sup>4</sup> A term originally coined by Edmund Husserl and synonymous with his other terms 'bracketing' and 'phenomenological reduction'. For more recent usage of 'Epoché' see, Patton (1990), Moustakas (1990), and Ihde (1977).

investigation. My usage of the term, and the wider stance adopted, refers not only to the researcher's personal views but also to the *a priori* assumptions, ingrained biases and pre-conceived hypotheses of the discipline within which the researcher is embedded and with which he or she must contend. Naturally, this process involves a high degree of *self-reflexivity*. Moreover, the researcher should attempt to suspend early judgement, particularly by avoiding the imposition of meaning too hastily. Instead, the researcher should endeavour to explore diverse avenues of enquiry and embrace multiple modes of interpretation and analysis, including those of the participants themselves.

Hook (1990), writing on subaltern studies, provides a powerful critique of conventional modes of scholarly engagement with the subject or 'other', arguing that the academic only seeks to discover the experiences of their subjects, but not their explanations for those experiences, which can only be provided by recourse to the expertise of the academic,

*"No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk."* Hook (1990: 241)

Instead, Hook contends, the researcher needs to decenter him or herself as 'the expert', in order to gain a fuller and more profound understanding of the experience.

In order to address the second issue we must ensure that the work in question remains phenomenologically true to the participant's words and experiences, and does not stifle the individual's voice, but rather allows their very real experiences to permeate the layers of theory and analysis and come to the fore.<sup>5</sup> As Durkheim suggests,

*"Let him experience it as the believer experiences it, for it really only exists in virtue of what it is for the latter. Thus whoever does not bring to the study of religion a sort of religious sentiment has no right to speak of it!"* Quoted in Lukes (1973: 515)

Furthermore, the work in question should sincerely attempt to hold some relevance to the participants themselves. The researcher may even decide to *negotiate the outcomes* of the research with participants prior to publication, particularly as it is

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<sup>5</sup> This perspective extends even to the terminology adopted, insofar as the term 'participant' is deemed eminently preferable to the more passive 'respondent' or the more condescending 'subject'.

their perceptions of reality that the researcher wishes to reconstruct.<sup>6</sup> Extending this premise to its logical conclusion, we as researchers must view the participants in the research as essentially collaborators, who together with us mutually shape and determine what we come to understand about them and their situation.<sup>7</sup>

The empirical nature of this present study would suggest that the contentious issue of non-empiricism has been redressed *ipso facto*. However, the mere presence of field research is not in itself sufficient to assure us that ensuing analysis, conclusions and theories are truly empirically founded, or in other words, derived from and grounded within the said data rather than extraneous to it. There exist a great many paradigms within the human sciences which facilitate precisely such an empirical analysis, each with their own inherent strengths and weaknesses, however, I have opted to pursue a broadly phenomenological approach.

First articulated in the seminal works of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the philosophy of phenomenology was later extended and developed by philosophers such as Alfred Schultz (1899-1959), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). The term's etymology traces its origin to the two Greek words *phainomenon* (appearance) and *logos* (word) thus rendering a literal translation as 'the description of phenomena'.<sup>8</sup> Hammond *et al.*, (1991: 1) define phenomenology as:

*"Description of things as one experiences them, or of one's experiences of things".*

Consequently, the phenomenological approach holds that there is no ontological separation between an objective reality and a subjective manifestation of that reality, as there is no independent, objective reality that is waiting to be discovered through rational, empirical, 'scientific' methods and thus the only 'real' world that can be described adequately is that which is pre-scientifically experienced (Hammond *et al.*, 1991: 2). Moran (2000: 15) recounts this central phenomenological tenet succinctly:

*"The whole point of phenomenology is that we cannot split off the subjective domain from the domain of the natural world as scientific naturalism has done. Subjectivity must be understood as inextricably involved in the process of constituting objectivity."*

At this stage some clarification is necessary, as there appears to be a little uncertainty over precisely what is entailed by the term phenomenology. This is due in part to the

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<sup>6</sup> Lincoln and Guba (1985: 41) go so far as to suggest that *negotiated outcomes* should in fact be one of the stated axioms of all naturalistic enquiry.

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this viewpoint, see Maykut and Morehouse (1994: 70).

<sup>8</sup> For a historical overview of the term and its development, see Pivcevic (1970).

fact that there is a great diversity of thought subsumed under the phenomenological rubric. However, Patton (1990: 68) suggests that this ambiguity is also due to the term having become popularised to such an extent that its meaning has become confused:

*“Sometimes phenomenology is viewed as a paradigm, sometimes as a philosophy or as a perspective, and it is sometimes even viewed as synonymous with qualitative methods or naturalistic inquiry.”*

I suggest that for the purposes of this study, phenomenology is taken to represent a broad philosophical perspective with clear, well-defined, ontological and epistemological assumptions that are distinct from, and set in opposition to, more positivistic forms of enquiry.<sup>9</sup> It is not an explicit qualitative methodology as such, but rather an interpretive paradigm that guides research methods and directs goals.

In a way it is virtually impossible to undertake a study of the conversion phenomenon *per se*, as we are inevitably only ever presented with retrospective reconstructions of prior conversion events and experiences in narrative form. Moreover, the authors of these reconstructions have made, as one might expect, fundamental decisions with respect to what the key experiences, events, symbols, figures and defining moments are within the narrative.<sup>10</sup> Of particular concern is the fact that converts may omit, or at the very least recast in a better light, that which they feel poses discomfiture to their newfound faith.

Conversely, as Heirich (1977: 658) suggests, individuals may also exaggerate ‘sinful’ or hedonistic aspects of their pre-conversion lives, so that salvation appears that much more powerful and pronounced. Beckford (1978) and Richardson *et al* (1978) similarly contend that (re)constructed biographies narrated by converts cannot be accepted as objective reports as they inevitably focus upon juxtaposing a difficult of sinful past with a more favourable present. Indeed, American evangelical narratives of conversion almost ubiquitously narrate accounts of personal transformation and redemption from a life of vice to a life of virtue (Miller 1997; Tipton 1982). Beckford (1978) commenting on this problem of accepting actors’ accounts of experiences as objective and unproblematic reports, follows Taylor (1976) in arguing that they should instead be viewed as “artfully accomplished

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of these assumptions see, Holstein and Gubrium (1994), Hammond (1991), and Taylor and Bogdan (1984).

<sup>10</sup> These may not always correspond with what the researcher potentially wishes to learn about the experience or phenomenon.

constructions...[that] embody socially transmitted rules for constituting certain experiences as religious conversions". These "artful accomplishments" or "scripts" are rehearsed, often unconsciously in order to reinforce official doctrine or ideology of the group (Beckford 1978: 250). Similarly, Griffin (1990) reports how autobiographies of religious conversion may use the resources of narrative form to "construct myths of self", in order to testify to the sincerity and significance of the conversion experience.

These issues may result, in a worst-case scenario, in an inaccessible, incoherent or partial account that provides little illumination for the experience and wider phenomenon within which it is situated.<sup>11</sup> As Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998) suggest, this "report bias" may undermine the validity of convert's narratives and by extension, the conclusions that a researcher may draw from them. At best, a reconstruction still divests the researcher of the original, unadulterated experience in its entirety. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994: 12) suggest,

*"Subjects, or individuals are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they did and why."*

Moreover, the study of religious conversion through an individual's interpretation of the experience will be predicated upon the implicit assumption that its author possesses a coherent worldview that allows him or her to articulate the experience in a way that is comprehensible to the researcher. As Bainbridge and Stark (1981: 1) infer, this is indeed a contentious assumption to make,

*"A powerful tradition among sociologists of religion is to regard human beings as theologians and philosophers. It assumes that people almost universally possess a relatively coherent, overarching, and articulated 'Weltanschauung', 'world-view', 'perspective', 'frame of reference', 'value orientation', or 'meaning system'."*

However, leaving aside the fact that we are not presented with evidence to the contrary, this inherently derogatory view of participants is diametrically opposed to the phenomenological stance and should be rejected. A more convincing argument for the unfeasibility of the task at hand, and indeed, one of the major and perhaps most erroneous assumptions underlying all studies of religious conversion is that one *can* begin to understand a profoundly personal and 'life-altering' experience such as conversion through another's recollection, reconstruction, and transmission of the

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<sup>11</sup> For an excellent recent discussion of the issues inherent in using religious conversion narratives for academic research see, Warburg (2008).

said experience. It brings to mind a line from Joseph Conrad's classic novel, *Heart of Darkness* in which he writes,

*"It is impossible to convey the life sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream – alone..."* (Conrad 1902: 39)

The cumulative effect of all these issues may result in the conversion narrative bearing little semblance to the original experience.

Ideally we may envisage a scenario in which we are made privy to the events and experiences of the conversion as they unfold, so that we are better able to witness and document them accurately and contemporaneously. As Miller and C'deBaca (1994: 254) suggest,

*"Scientific inquiry typically starts with systematic observation to describe the phenomena to be understood. Yet prospective access to such occurrences may not be readily arranged. [Spiritual transformation] as reported in biographies are often, private, unexpected, even uninvited events. They occur on the desert road to Damascus, waiting at the front of the library, lying in a hospital bed, or doing what one has done thousands of times before -- except this time it is different."*

However, this scenario is not entirely unproblematic either. Religious conversion is rarely, if ever, sudden or confined to a singular event and certainly cannot be equated to the ritual conversion act alone. Instead, conversion is invariably a protracted multi-stage process, where the time elapsed between stages may be months, years or even decades – clearly an unfeasible prospect from a research perspective. In addition, the task of imputing meaning to the experience remains solely the prerogative of the participant and is intrinsically an act of interpretation. Moreover, the problems pertaining to omissions, distortions or selective reconstructions within this interpretation would not necessarily be lessened by virtue of being temporally closer to the original events.

Ultimately, although conversion narratives may be an imperfect means by which we attempt to understand religious conversion, pragmatism and necessity dictate that we must use them. Moreover, despite this seemingly unpropitious start to our research, all is not in vain, for one of the central methodological implications of the phenomenological focus is that an individual's interpretation of the conversion experience is an integral part of, and indeed inextricable from, the experience itself (Rambo 1993: 119). This line of thought is particularly suited to a study of conversion narratives, as we are not really studying religious conversion at all, but

rather the individual's interpretation of their conversion, reconstructed in the narrative form. Consequently, we must concede that we can only really understand religious conversion from the perspective of those who experience it; by exploring the subjective meanings and explanations that individuals attribute to their experiences.

As suggested earlier, phenomenology represents the wider philosophical framework within which the current research study is situated, however, I have yet to explicate fully the precise methodology employed. It may be helpful at this point to reiterate our broad aims for this study before delving into the details of the method itself. The overarching aim of this study was to develop an authentic and holistic understanding of religious conversion *as it is*, rather than *as it should be*; not based upon previous theoretical presuppositions and assertions. Consequently, the aim was not to confirm or refute existing theories or extant knowledge on religious conversion, but rather to inductively generate rich, substantive theory that was inextricably grounded in the descriptions of experiences given by participants. Glaser and Strauss' (1967) reassuringly named *Grounded Theory* method facilitated precisely such an undertaking.

Grounded theory first appeared at a critical juncture in social science history, serving as the vanguard for the 'qualitative revolution' (Denzin and Lincoln 1994: ix). It challenged the hegemony of the quantitative research paradigm and defended qualitative research from critics steeped in the more traditional, 'scientific', methods. Glaser and Strauss (1967: 3) defined their method as,

*"A strategy for handling data in research, providing modes of conceptualization for describing and explaining."*

The method itself, initially articulated in Glaser and Strauss' (1967) *the Discovery of Grounded Theory*, is deceptively simple. Analysis begins with a meticulous scrutiny of individual units of meaning (essentially any packet of data) using a constant comparative method which leads to the inductive emergence of conceptual categories. As each new unit of meaning is selected for analysis, it is compared to all other units of meaning and subsequently grouped with those that are similar to it. If there are no similar units of meaning, a new category is formed. The goal of this initial step is to identify a large array of potentially important ideas, experiences, concepts, and themes in the data. As the analysis proceeds, conceptual categories and their relationships become progressively more refined, so that the

more salient concepts emerge as a matter of course. The data collection and analysis is emergent and sequential, as subsequent sampling is focused on conceptually fruitful avenues and dependent upon emergent concepts. Glaser and Strauss refer to this as *theoretical sampling* as it allows the researcher to broaden theoretical insights in the ongoing process of data collection and analysis using a method of maximum variation sampling. The entire process continues in this way until a saturation point is reached; when newly collected data proves redundant or we reach a point of diminishing returns from our sampling or analysis efforts.

Glaser and Strauss later disagreed strongly over exactly what the method constituted and published separate monographs on their ‘definitive’ versions of the grounded theory. Glaser held the view that Strauss’ later works,<sup>12</sup> had distorted the original grounded theory vision to a more formulaic and forced method of full conceptual description that betrayed its original inductive and emergent focus (Glaser 1992: 122).

One of the most serious and damaging criticisms levelled at the grounded theory method lies in its philosophical underpinnings. The original grounded theory method and its proponents appear to uphold a realist ontology and positivist epistemology, assuming the existence of an independent external reality that researches can discover and record (Charmaz 2000: 509-11). In addition, they write as if their data holds an objective status,<sup>13</sup> thus adhering to a somewhat archaic view of science untouched by either epistemological debates of the 1960’s or post-modern critiques (Denzin 1996; Kleinman 1993; Adler *et al* 1992). Whilst I appreciate that seminal works can often have the effect of unfairly reifying their authors views over time, Glaser has continued to defend, often quite vociferously, his positivistic leanings.<sup>14</sup> Despite Glaser’s protests, data can only ever serve as reconstructions of experience, later recast for our consumption; they are not the experience itself. Moreover, what we bring to the research will inevitably influence what we learn from it; no two researchers will approach the data in the same way, nor are their subsequent findings likely to be identical.

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<sup>12</sup> In particular, Strauss (1987), and Strauss and Corbin (1990).

<sup>13</sup> For example, Strauss & Corbin (1998: 85) use phrases such as “the reality of the data” and “the data do not lie”.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Glaser (2003), and Glaser (2002).

Charmaz (2000: 510) suggests that researchers starting from other vantage points do not necessarily have to embrace the positivistic proclivities of the founders of grounded theory, but rather can adopt an alternate approach,

*"A constructivist grounded theory recognises that the viewer creates the data and ensuing analysis through interaction with the viewed. A constructivist approach to grounded theory reaffirms studying people in their natural settings and redirects qualitative research away from positivism."*

It is easy to become mired in arguments over the relative merits of postmodernism, constructivism, and positivism. However, this kind of philosophical ‘hand-wringing’ over epistemological and ontological assumptions needs to be tempered by a certain pragmatism if we are to actually get any real research done. As Melia (1997: 35) suggests,

*"Phenomenology and postmodernism have challenged interactionism, but if the upshot is methodological paralysis it may be better to take a more anarchic, or at least pragmatic, approach to methods and do what is plausible."*

Although I have opted to pursue a grounded theory methodology, my work has also been heavily influenced by Robert Towler's (1984) *The Need for Certainty*, and William James (1902) seminal study *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Both of these works are unique in the sense that they are empirical studies based upon *data* in the most stringent sense; information which already existed but more importantly, came into existence independently of their research (Towler 1984: 10). Indeed both were acutely aware of the potential pitfalls associated with generating *new* interview data without having first delineated what it was that they wished to learn from the data, particularly as if one were to assume prior knowledge of what the important questions may be, then in essence, one would be inducing set responses and answers, or at the very least constraining the range of feasible responses permitted. Furthermore, these sorts of assumptions would constitute a level of scholastic arrogance, and may create a bottleneck effect upon the data, resulting in a distorted account which reflected the authors own bias. Towler (1984: 9) writes,

*"this is an intolerable weakness for it presumes that social scientists are omniscient and rules out the possibility of finding what one did not know was there... [instead] one needs to take the evidence as it offers itself."*

Towler's research material came in the unlikely form of 4000 personal letters written to Dr. J. A. T. Robinson (then Bishop of Woolwich) in response to his best-selling and controversial book *Honest to God*. In fact, the vast majority of these letters were

not even remotely concerned with the contents of the book but rather the book acted as a catalyst for people to voice their own religious opinions and concerns (Towler 1984: 15). Consequently, this corpus of *raw* data provided Towler with a unique insight into the types of *conventional religiousness* that existed in Britain at the time. Towler's methodology was not unlike the grounded theory method in many ways,<sup>15</sup> although it does appear to lack the latter's systematic meticulousness and rigour. Essentially the method involved first identifying prominent themes from the letters followed by the construction of a thematic catalogue. The catalogue was then employed in the subsequent sorting process in which the salient themes were used to sort the letters into comparatively discrete types (Towler 1984: 15-7). Consequently Towler was able to demarcate five distinct types of religiosity, similar to Weber's (1949: 89) "ideal types", which he felt were able to subsume all the diverse themes encountered in the letters.

Following both James' and Towler's enlightened and convincing use of pre-existing data, I opted to make use of published Islamic conversion narratives which have recently witnessed a rapid proliferation on the Internet, for the initial study. The conversion narratives or *testimonies*, as they are more frequently referred to, were obtained from a wide variety of internet sources in an attempt to reflect the diversity inherent within both Islamic thought and the World Wide Web itself. Many narratives were accessed from the websites of Islamic organisations,<sup>16</sup> whilst others were taken directly from the personal websites of converts or postings on discussion forums, newsgroups, and bulletin boards. The resulting data set cannot be referred to as strictly representative in any quantifiable manner as a wholly randomised sampling method was not employed during data collation. However, the extensive efforts undertaken to diversify the range of data sources were adopted precisely for the purposes of ensuring that the sample was in some way representative of the range of views present within the Internet's convert population. Consequently the analysis was empirical but not quantitative. A modified grounded theory analysis was carried out on the conversion narrative data and the emergent themes were recorded and

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<sup>15</sup> The similarities between the two methods can perhaps be explained by Bechhofer's (1974: 77-8) contention that grounded theory is not that different from long-accepted good practice in sociology anyway.

<sup>16</sup> These were primarily web-based organisations, often run by converts themselves such as [www.islamfortoday.com](http://www.islamfortoday.com) and [www.convertstoislam.org](http://www.convertstoislam.org)

categorised, paying particular attention to how they related to points of interest raised in the original aims of the study and previous conversion literature.<sup>17</sup>

One significant concern in using internet data was in the difficulty with effectively archiving internet material. The transient quality of much internet content means that sites and pages are regularly deleted, moved, edited, or often simply disappear without trace, leaving behind a confounded reader and the exasperating *error 404: file not found* message.<sup>18</sup> The problem is rendered even more perplexing if one attempts to archive content from sources that are truly ephemeral in nature; discussion forums, newsgroups, bulletin boards, and internet relay chat (IRC) servers. The problems can be partially overcome by saving HTML pages as *offline content* on the user's hard drive or other data storage media, or by producing static screen captures of the relevant material using the *Print Screen* function. In addition, certain web search engines such as Google and Yahoo often maintain a cached impression of indexed content, which can often yield an impression of obsolete web pages as they appeared at time of indexing. Occasionally, missing files will be hosted in different guises and locations on mirror-sites, which can sometimes be an effective method for 're-finding' defunct web pages.

In line with current research practices in the social sciences, I did entertain the possibility of altering the names ascribed to narratives, thus rendering them completely anonymous. However, data garnered from internet sources differs in one fundamental aspect from more regular interview data, in that it is placed squarely in the public domain,<sup>19</sup> and authors publishing on the net are implicitly consenting to their work being disseminated widely and attributed back to them.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, all quotations are ascribed to their original authors, and accurately referenced, wherever possible. Converts publish on the net because they have stories to tell and

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<sup>17</sup> Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to this aspect of the grounded theory method as *theoretical sensitivity*.

<sup>18</sup> Bunt (2003: 6) encountered similar problems in his study on 'Cyber Islamic Environments'.

<sup>19</sup> However, the idea that the Internet itself constitutes a public domain is now increasingly being challenged; see for example Trend (2004).

<sup>20</sup> There has understandably been a great deal of debate on this issue for some time now with compelling arguments put forward on either side; to follow the evolution of the debate, see for example, Waskul and Douglass (1996), Reid (1996), Bassett and O'Riordan (2002), Beaulieu (2004), and Markham (2005). The issue is complicated further by the growth in new Web 2.0 technologies, which include social media and social networking sites and further blurs the distinction between producers and consumers of media and texts, giving rise, as some have suggested, to a new category of *prosumer* (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010).

opinions to express. If these are accurately represented as I have endeavoured to do so here, then those opinions will gain wider circulation by being reproduced here.

For the second and major part of the thesis which focused on conversion to Islam in Britain, pre-existent data was not used as it would not have provided an adequate basis for the study nor yielded satisfactory results, for a number of reasons. The relative paucity of British conversion narratives,<sup>21</sup> and the lack of detail within the narratives themselves would have proved a stumbling block for the sort of in-depth analysis initially envisaged. In addition, internet conversion narratives could only ever be potentially representative of the *Internet's convert population*; not all converts possess internet access, nor can they all use this medium with similar levels of proficiency. Perhaps more importantly, it appears more and more likely that only a small proportion of converts willingly disclose personal information about themselves on open public forums, whereas the vast majority of converts would perhaps require gentle prompting before they divulged their stories. Indeed, this may in fact constitute one of the major differences between putative *ideal types* and all the more reason to ensure that these voices are also heard.

Consequently, I was required to generate *new* data for this section of thesis, however, this did not automatically mean a descent into the *ad hoc* methods and *a priori* assumptions criticised earlier. Rather, the data from the first part of the study and its subsequent analysis served as a sort of empirically grounded framework that suggested the avenues of enquiry and lines of questioning to be pursued. Thus, any assumptions or pre-conceived hypotheses were not extraneous to the data but rather derived from within.

The data set was comprised of 143 in-depth interviews with British converts to Islam carried out between Aug 2002 and June 2005. Participants were approached by explaining the nature of the study, its phenomenological standpoint and associated issues of respect for the participant's experience, the interviewer's desire to authentically portray the words and experiences of converts to Islam in Britain, and the interviewer's desire to 'hear their story'. Indeed, this phrase was found to be particularly conducive to preparing respondents for the interview process, and was likely to produce relatively coherent conversion narratives as the participants had in many cases thought about the ways in which they wanted to narrate their conversion

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<sup>21</sup> Of the 301 conversion narratives analysed only 34 originated from the UK.

experience during the interview, and allowed a relatively large amount of information to be imparted in an efficient manner during the interview, with limited digressions.

The interviews themselves were conducted in the participant's home or other mutually convenient location and usually lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. The interview typically began with open-ended statements or questions from the interviewer such as "please tell me about your journey to Islam", or "I would like to hear about your conversion experience", and these were found to facilitate fairly focused but nevertheless, highly specific responses. Most converts responded to these prompts by broadly dividing the interview into three parts; life prior to conversion, the conversion experience, and life after conversion. Not all parts were given equal importance within the interview, but this was largely the choice of the participant. Interviews were tape-recorded for later transcription, whilst salient themes, notes and concepts were noted during the interview and utilised to 'organically' steer the conversation towards points of particular interest throughout the discourse. Endeavours were also undertaken to ensure that all key areas identified from the previous section were amply covered, unless the convert consciously chose not to disclose or discuss certain aspects of their conversion experience. However, I was also acutely aware of unduly influencing the course of the interview, particularly following Burrell and Morgan's (1979: 6) suggestion that the phenomenological interview should be ideographic, in the sense that it,

*"stresses the importance of letting one's subject unfold its nature and characteristics during the process of investigation."*

Consequently, I strived to maintain a fine balance between keeping the interview open and unstructured, thus allowing the participant to dictate the scope and bearing of the interview session to a large degree, and ensuring that I was not completely divested of all control. As a result, the largely unstructured interviews should be thought of as oral narratives or testimonies, analogous in many ways to the Internet conversion narratives encountered in the first part of the study.

There are of course important differences between the Internet conversion narratives, and the British conversion narratives created through interviews as part of this study. These include:

- i) The initial impetus or motivation behind the creation of the narrative: Internet conversion narratives may be penned for any number of reasons including

attempting to edify, inspire, justify, convince, and confess to co-religionists and others (Hermansen 1999: 56). The Internet narrative may even be considered a form of ritual associated with religious conversion, the penning of which also facilitates entry and acceptance into the host group. Most importantly, such narratives are created entirely independently of the researcher who chooses to study them, and the participant is largely responsible for the manner in which they are presented and disseminated to audiences. Conversely, conversion narratives created as part of datasets for research studies are largely the result of the researcher's intervention and created at his or her behest. Consequently, whilst the participant may choose to narrate the account in a certain manner in order to provide a positive appraisal of the conversion experience to the researcher, they cannot possibly envisage how, or indeed if, their narrative will be employed within the broader research study. Moreover, the participant cannot reasonably know how the researcher will analyse, interpret, comment upon or translate the narrative, or indeed employ the narrative to propound certain theoretical or empirical propositions. Thus by agreeing to take part in the research study, the participant has largely acknowledged that he or she will be divested of control over the way in which the narrative will be presented and manipulated.<sup>22</sup>

- ii) The perceived audience of the narrative: Converts publishing conversion accounts on the Internet are, for the reasons enumerated above, likely to be highly conscious of a general audience profile for which the narrative is being created. Moreover, converts are consciously publishing these accounts within public spaces, which have potentially significant ramifications for enlarging putative audience profiles. Conversely, the highly truncated and edited narrative presented in a research study is likely to be read by a relatively small and specialised audience.

Converts were contacted through Mosques, Islamic organisations and institutions, Islamic chat forums and discussion groups, and through numerous convert friends and acquaintances employing a range of sampling techniques, including convenience and snowball sampling, and theoretical sampling (Glaser and Straus 1967). In

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<sup>22</sup> Unless of course researchers agree to 'negotiate outcomes' of the research prior to undertaking the study.

addition, continuing my *overt* approach to data collection, I also sought out key individuals or *gatekeepers* (Becker 1970), who were helpful in locating other study participants. In light of the criticisms levelled at previous studies for being unrepresentative of the convert population, efforts were undertaken to incorporate diverse elements into the sample group, including non-White converts, women, political activists, members of radical fringe groups, incarcerated individuals, and those who choose to disassociate themselves from institutionalised forms of religion.

There were a number of practical concerns of particular relevance to a study of Islamic conversion which needed to be addressed prior to commencing fieldwork. The issue of defining and identifying subjects for the study was a daunting one as the Muslim community in Britain is comprised of diverse, and occasionally conflicting traditions, including Sunni, Shiite, Sufi, Barelwi, Deobandi, Wahabbi, Salafi, Ishmaili, Ahmadiyyah, Nation of Islam and numerous others.<sup>23</sup> Needless to say, establishing criteria for determining who is and is not a Muslim would be virtually impossible and may draw criticism for promoting partisan viewpoints. Conversely self-definition was adopted as a useful means of avoiding value judgements. This is following with practices of ‘religious self-identification’ generally adopted by most sociologists of religion today (Smith *et al.*, 1998: 233). This practice avoids the problem of constructing theoretical categories and placing (or even forcing) participants into these pre-conceived constructs or typologies, and ensures that participants themselves are comfortable with their positions vis-à-vis religious traditions, organisations and levels of religiosity (Hackett and Lindsay 2008; Smith *et al.*, 1998).<sup>24</sup>

In the past, some researchers have encountered considerable resistance when attempting to gather similar data on the Muslim community in the West. Poston (1992: 160-1), who faced similar difficulties during his study, suggested that this is attributable to a lack of confidence in the ability of non-Muslims to properly understand and portray those who adhere to the Islamic faith. Although this may be true to some extent, the problem appears to lie much deeper. Much of the reticence on the Muslims’ part can also be attributed to a fear of misuse or distortion of the

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed profile of the British Muslim community, see Ansari (2002), Nielsen (1999), and Iqbal (1989).

<sup>24</sup> Curiously, this view also resonates with a number of Islamic traditions or *ahadith* which maintain that a Muslim’s status vis-à-vis their faith, as well as their motives for professing said faith should not be questioned by another, as this remains the sole prerogative of God (*Sahih Muslim*, Book 1, Chapter 27: 116/117), and is therefore likely to be more conducive to participant engagement.

information obtained. Indeed, some of this mistrust is quite understandable and legitimate. A study conducted by Jay Smith (1997) of the Christian Hyde Park Fellowship entitled *The Attraction of Islam and a Christian's Response*, was based upon similar interview material conducted with American converts to Islam. Initially purporting to be an objective academic endeavour, none of the respondents were made aware, certainly at the time of interview, that their testimonies would later be distorted and misused in order to support a polemical work commissioned by a missionary organisation.

My position as a Muslim researcher granted me largely unfettered access to mosques, prayer rooms, Islamic organisations and other such places where Muslims were likely to frequent. Moreover, the fact that participants and I shared a common faith often allowed me to traverse the fine line between *insiders* and *outsiders*, helping to quell much of the participants' initial cynicism, as well as enlarging my potential participant base to also include those individuals who may not normally choose to disclose information to a non-Muslim researcher. In conjunction with an articulated desire on my part to authentically represent their words and experiences, the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, and a candid admission of my research goals and objectives at the very outset, I was able to foster an open, honest and often intimate dialogue with the participants.

The data collection and analysis stages were not conducted independently of one another but rather, following an *emergent* grounded theory paradigm, both stages proceeded concurrently. Fairly early in the research, I discovered that fracturing the data, as suggested by the *line-by-line coding* method of grounded theory, would potentially act as a hindrance to understanding, particularly as it was likely to generate less useful, fragmentary, theoretical 'sound-bites' which were unlikely to allow an accurate and full portrayal of participants' experiences.<sup>25</sup> Instead a *selective* or *focused* coding method which typically analyses larger units of meaning was employed (Charmaz 1995; Glaser 1978). Analysis of the initial data collection stage (comprising approximately half of the sample) yielded highly significant results and in an attempt to maintain analytical productivity and minimise redundancy of the data, a maximum variation sampling technique was employed; subsequent participants were selected on the basis of being putatively different from

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<sup>25</sup> Both Conrad (1990) and Riessman (1990) suggest similar criticisms of the *line-by-line* coding method.

initial participants. Despite the use of this theoretical sampling method, the remainder of the sample yielded far fewer new conceptual categories, although this analysis was far from being futile as the frequency of recurring themes helped to crystallise and refine emerging categories. The decision to discontinue data collection was based upon a redundancy quotient; when conceptual categories appeared to be approaching saturation and I had reached a point of diminishing returns from newly collected data.

## **1.2 Conversion to Islam in Britain: A Historical Perspective**

This chapter seeks to provide a brief historical overview of conversion to Islam in Britain, in order to help contextualise the sociological profile of British Muslim converts that is developed as part of this study. Moreover, this section also explores the historic positioning of British Muslim converts vis-à-vis British society and political institutions, as well as their relationships with other British Muslims and indeed the wider Muslim world, in order to locate many of the changes and developments witnessed over the last decade, which are pertinent to a discussion of the spaces occupied by converts today. Finally, this section also allows familiarisation with many of the organisations and institutions with which converts have historic links, and which are referenced throughout the study.

### **1.2.1 The Early Encounters with Islam**

Conversion to Islam has a rich and ancient history in the British Isles, that is often overlooked. As early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century, King Offa, the Anglo Saxon King of Mercia (d. 796) ordered the minting of a coin inscribed with the Arabic words ‘*la ilaha illa-Allahu wahdahu la shareeka lahu*'; there is no god except Allah and He has no partner (Carlyon-Britton 1908: 55-7). These coins have given rise to much speculation as to the religious inclinations of one of the most powerful English monarchs before the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, although it is possible that Offa may have converted to Islam *sub rosa*, it is more likely that he simply needed the coins to engage in trade with Muslim lands (Blunt and Dolley 1968: 158-60). Whether or not Offa did become a Muslim is a moot point, however, it does illustrate how precarious history truly is; assuming Offa did convert to Islam, he may have chosen to impose his newfound faith upon his subjects, a common occurrence in medieval societies, but certainly one that could have had monumental consequences. A more convincing account of the near-conversion of the English to Islam appears much later, at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of King John (d. 1216). It appears that John often found himself in contention with the Church, particularly after the Papacy attempted to have him deposed. In addition to this quite tenuous hold on the monarchy, he also had considerable trouble subduing some of his more rebellious barons, and this combination of factors eventually led him to seek military

support from the Sharif of Morocco, Muhammad al-Nasser. In return, John pledged to abandon Christianity, which he considered false, and was willing to accept the Saracen faith along with all of his subjects, in addition to marriage to the Sharif's daughter. However, the Moroccan King was either unable or unwilling to provide such support and spurned his offer (Daniel 1975: 108-9).

It is unlikely that significant numbers of conversions to Islam took place in Britain before the 16<sup>th</sup> century, particularly as there appeared to be little incentive in converting to a 'hostile' faith. Certainly, sufficient contact was established between Britain and the Islamic world to allow for at least the possibility of the traversing of religious boundaries. The Quran was available to the English in its Latin translation as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Hourani 1991: 8). In addition, Englishmen often travelled to Spain in order to study at the great centres of learning like Cordoba, and witnessed first-hand the 'cultural superiority' of the Muslims there, which must have left some mark upon them (Daniel 1975: 273). And yet, the popular perception of the Islamic faith remained largely negative, being characterised by open hostility and calumny, making it difficult to imagine this environment of vilification and animosity being in any way conducive to religious conversions.<sup>26</sup>

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the Ottoman Empire's unchecked military expansion, particularly due to its naval superiority, was a cause of great consternation for the British, who consequently suffered considerable losses to their naval fleet (Playfair 1884). The crews of these vessels were often captured by Barbary corsairs and later sold into slavery, held for ransom, or sometimes even forcibly converted to Islam (Colley 2002: 45-53). Although the latter does not appear to have been a regular occurrence, the fact that it had occurred at all was of grave concern to the Church, who were appalled by the notion that some of their countrymen had been compelled to 'turn Turk' (Clissold 1977). However, what was infinitely more disconcerting for the British was the fact that subsequent raids off British coastal waters were often led by free Englishmen and *mamlukes*, who had themselves converted to Islam. For example, in September 1645, "seven ships from Barbary landed in Cornwall and their crews were led inland by some renegade of this country" (Matar 1999: 25-7). Presumably, these 'renegades' (from the Spanish '*renegado*', meaning one who has denied), were English seamen captured during

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<sup>26</sup> For a more thorough account of endemic themes within early Western literature on Islam, see Awan (2001: 4-7).

previous incursions. The British authorities were also particularly rattled to hear that considerable numbers of Britons in Muslim captivity were converting to the Islamic faith, and whilst some of these conversions may have been forced, most were clearly not. British travellers to the East also regularly brought back reports, much to the Crown's dismay, that a number of their compatriots who had travelled to North Africa in search of opportunity, had cast off their Christianity along with their earlier lives (Davis 2003: 45-7). Many had prospered under Ottoman service, taking up posts as diverse as Head Eunuch in the Ottoman household and Royal Executioner for the King of Algeria. Despite numerous attempts by the British Crown to entice these converts back home through special envoys sent to the Barbary Coast, the 'renegades', now enjoying considerable material and spiritual benefits, refused to return (Matar 1999: 32). Davis (2003: 49) estimates that between 1580 and 1680, there may have been as many as 15,000 of these 'renegades' in Barbary (most of whom had never been slaves), including around half of the corsair captains, or *re'is*, and even some of the *pashas*.

Thus far we have primarily encountered conversions to Islam in Britain precipitated by Muslim capture, although once again, in these scenarios it is incredibly difficult to account for the converts' commitment to their newfound faith, following what appear to be fairly expedient Islamic conversions. However, not all conversions appear to have taken place under Muslim sovereignty. With the rapid expansion in trade and communication between the two nations, a great many 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Englishmen from all walks of life found themselves drawn to the teachings of Islam, from the son of a noble yeoman, John Nelson, to the Westminster and Oxford-educated scholar, Henry Stubbe. Matar (1999) cites a document dating from 1641 entitled *Discovery of 29 Sects*, which suggests a sect of "Mahometans" had even been discovered "here in London", along with twenty-eight other "Divelish and Damnable sects". The document further states,

*"This sect is led along with a certaine foolish belief of Mahomet, which professed himselfe to be a Prophet, and this was his manner of deceiving: He taught a pigeon to pecke a pease from forth his eare, bearing the ignorant in hand that the Holy Ghost brought him newes from Heaven"* (Matar 1999: 43).

All manner of explanations were sought to explain this growing trend, from the effects of the newly fashionable Oriental drink of coffee or "Mahometan berry",

which rendered the drinker susceptible to the Turkish spell, to Sir Thomas Shirley's more sombre realisation,

*"conversation with infidels doeth much corrupte...Many wylde youthes of all nations, as well Englishe as others in euerye 3 yeere that they staye in Turkye they lose one article of theyre faythe"* (quoted in Matar 1999: 51).

The magnitude of this 'problem' is perhaps best evinced by the fact that the Archbishop Laud was forced to devise a special ceremony for the penance of apostates to Islam, who were occasionally recaptured and returned to Britain where their 'reconversions' were promptly effected (Matar 1999: 54). It is interesting to note, that the concerns voiced by the Church and Crown over this issue were, in part, the initial impetus behind the academic study of Islam, with the first English translation of the Quran appearing in 1649 (Ross 1649/2004).

### **1.2.2 The Establishment of a Community: 18<sup>th</sup> Century to Present Day**

From the 18<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, the East India Company, the Levant Company, the Turkey Company, and the Barbary Company were recruiting significant numbers of Muslim sailors and servants from the Malay Archipelago, Canton, Arabian Peninsula, Indian sub-continent and elsewhere. Often, the sailors or lascars (from the Arabic *al-'askar*, meaning [ship's] company) would be employed for the long haul to Britain but were laid off once the ship had docked and consequently left stranded in Britain for at least six weeks before even hoping for a return passage, with little or no means at their disposal (Visram 1986). The wretched predicament of the foreign seamen was finally recognised in 1822 by the well-known anti-slavery campaigner, Thomas Clarkson (d.1846), whose investigation resulted in the establishment of permanent boarding houses for them (Nielsen 1999: 3). Upon being fully domiciled in Britain, a number of these individuals went on to marry local women, who often converted to Islam shortly prior to or upon marriage, establishing the first tentative Muslim communities in Britain. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, this burgeoning community was further augmented by an influx of Yemeni Arabs and Somalis attracted by the booming steel industry, and who also continued the practice of taking English wives. For many of these women, conversion to Islam initially constituted little more than a nominal adherence to the faith of their husbands, and this often remained the case until the arrival of a Sheikh and the subsequent

establishment of a *zawia* (religious centre) (Sergeant 1944: 144). These centres provided basic religious instruction and carried out many social and religious functions, becoming focal points for the English wives, as one wrote:

*"Before the Sheikh came, we felt that we were only Arabs' wives, but after, we felt differently. We felt better. We had our own religion and priest, and we are proud of it"*  
(Quoted in Collins 1957: 143).

Concomitantly, individuals continued to convert to Islam of their own accord, as is evident from the account of one Thomas Baker who writing in 1861, recorded that,

*"William Gunner of ye Francis and Benjamin Pink about noone went into ye Castle and presenting himselfe before the dey declared that hee was come to turne Turk, and several tymes uttered the usual words whereby such villaines are admitted into that accursed superstition"* (Quoted in Matar 1999: 95).

As time went on, Muslims from a greater diversity of backgrounds started to appear in Britain, including significant numbers of students, professionals, and aristocrats. Stemming from the higher echelons of their own societies, these Muslims possessed the inclination and the means to mingle with British middle and upper-class society. In addition, their highly proficient command of the English language allowed them to effectively articulate aspects of their faith. As a result, a number of distinguished personalities entered Islam, beginning with the peer and uncle of Bertrand Russell, Lord Stanley of Alderley (Clark 1986: 41). This period also witnessed the emergence of perhaps the most seminal figure in the history of British Islam; Henry William Quilliam. A close descendent of Captain John Quilliam, who had served as First Lieutenant on the *H.M.S. Victory* with Admiral Nelson, he had also gained considerable recognition as an eloquent lawyer of his time. Quilliam spent a number of years abroad, travelling throughout the Ottoman Empire, but it was his stay in Morocco that finally prompted his conversion to Islam in 1887 (Quilliam 1896: 202-13). Here, he embarked upon a serious study of the Islamic sciences at the renowned Qarawiyyin University at Fez, from where he graduated as an '*alim* (scholar) and was subsequently recognised as Sheikh 'Abdullah William Quilliam. Upon his return to Britain, Quilliam became an outspoken advocate and campaigner for the Islamic faith. He was a very prolific writer and disseminated much information on Islam through his in-house journals, *The Crescent* and later *The Islamic World*, in addition to numerous booklets and pamphlets. His writings brought him considerable international renown as an Islamic thinker, with some of his works being translated into over thirteen languages and distributed in more than

twenty countries (Clark 1986: 39). Quilliam's diligence and resourcefulness also helped to establish a small semi self-sufficient convert community in Liverpool. This consisted primarily of, *The Liverpool Mosque* which provided religious and social facilities, and *The Muslim Institute* which incorporated a boarding school for boys, a day school for girls, a college for both Muslim and non-Muslim students, a library, reading room, museum, science lab, and printing press. In addition, Quilliam also established *The Medina House*, a home for foundlings, who were brought up as Muslims with their Mothers' consent. Despite enduring much ostracism, Quilliam's efforts resulted in the conversion of hundreds of British men and women to the faith he loved so much. In recognition of his achievements, the Ottoman Caliph, Sultan Abdul Hamid II, appointed Quilliam *Sheikh al-Islam of the British Isles*, whereas the Shah of Persia (representing the Shiites) made him consul in Liverpool, both posts being fully endorsed first by Queen Victoria (Nielsen 1999: 4). However, despite this propitious opening, the movement was ultimately doomed to failure. Quilliam's scathing criticism of the British expedition against Mahdist Sudan, and his unflinching loyalty to the Caliphate of the Ottoman Sultan began to attract so much antagonism that it rendered the continuity of his mission, ultimately untenable. The Liverpool Mosque and Institution were unable to survive Quilliam's forced emigration to Turkey in 1908, and eventually fell into disuse (Siddiq 1934: 14). Quilliam managed to return to Britain sometime during the 1920's under a pseudonym, although his fervent attempts to revive the organisation were largely unsuccessful. Upon his death in 1932, Quilliam was interred with full Muslim rites at Brookwood Cemetery in Woking.<sup>27</sup>

Following Quilliam's exile from Britain, many members of his congregation, reeling from the effects of disbandment, sought solace by joining the fledgling Muslim community in Woking. The Woking Mission, as it later came to be known, was established by the Hungarian Orientalist, Dr. Leitner, who had served as registrar at the University of Punjab. Leitner had originally envisaged a comprehensive Islamic centre, consisting of a Mosque, library, hostel for Indian students, and its own teaching facilities, and which would eventually culminate in the establishment of an Islamic university. However, his death in 1899 meant that

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<sup>27</sup> From a speech given by Patricia Gordon (Quilliams's granddaughter) on the 10/10/1997 at the unveiling of a plaque commemorating the establishment of the Liverpool Mosque and Institute at its former site.

only the Moghulesque Shah Jehan Woking Mosque actually came to fruition. Following Leitner's death, the project remained in a state of abeyance until 1913 when a Lahore barrister, Khwaja Kamal ud-Din, seeking to remove misconceptions about Islam in Britain, resurrected the Woking Mission and launched the journal *Muslim India and Islamic Review* (later renamed *The Islamic Review*) (Siddiq 1934: 19). The Mission first achieved recognition when a prominent Englishman, Lord Headley (or al-Haj al-Farooq, d. 1933), converted to Islam in 1913 (Headley 1933: 109-14). Lord Headley was an outspoken critic of the dogmatic and intolerant beliefs that he felt had entered the Church, believing Islam to be a faith closer to the original teachings of Jesus himself:

*"I consider myself by that very act (of converting to Islam) a far better Christian than I was before, I can only hope that others will follow the example-which I honestly believe is a good one-which will bring happiness to anyone looking upon the step as one in advance rather one any way hostile to true Christianity"* (Headley 1961: 3)

Lord Headley felt that the rigidity of church doctrine and its failure to appeal to one's reason were the main causes for growing atheistic tendencies in Britain, and attempted to convince others that there were real alternatives to abandoning God altogether. In addition, he was convinced that many individuals had already heeded the Muslim call, but fearing social opprobrium, had stopped short of full conversion:

*"There are thousands of men-and women, too, I believe-who are at heart Muslims, but convention, fear of adverse comments, and desire to avoid any worry or change, conspire to keep them from openly admitting the fact"* (Headley 1961: 3).

In 1914, Lord Headley, in collaboration with another distinguished convert, a Prof. Haroun Marcel Mustafa Leon, founded *The British Muslim Society* which aimed to work alongside the Woking Mission in propagating Islam in Britain (Sheldrake 1915: 4). The Society and Mission were successful in attracting new members, particularly from the middle class and aristocracy, including the likes of Sir Abdullah Archibald Hamilton and Sir Jalauddin Lauder Brunton (both statesmen and baronets), Deputy Inspector General Charles William Buchanan Hamilton (nephew to James Buchanan, President of the U.S. in 1856), Lady Evelyn Zeinab Cobbold, Sir Omar Stewart Rankin, Major Abdullah Battersby and many others.

Although part of the movement's longevity can be attributed to its high-profile constituency, much of its success was also due to its apolitical stance,<sup>28</sup> and

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<sup>28</sup> Particularly after witnessing the dire consequences of Quilliam's earlier unsuccessful challenge to the Establishment.

the employment of a very subtle missionary strategy. Following World War II, the Mission was greatly diminished in size and popularity following increased recognition of its links with the heterodox Ahmadiyya movement,<sup>29</sup> and the Mission's further marginalization by the establishment of the Central London Mosque.

One final convert worthy of mention is the renowned English translator of the Quran, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (d. 1936). Shortly after his conversion in 1917, Pickthall was appointed as the imam of the Notting Hill Gate Mosque in West London and devoted much of his time to writing on issues pertaining to Islam, publishing a journal to this end entitled *Muslim Outlook* (Clark 1986: 40). Sometime later, around 1927, the *Western Islamic Association* was also established in Notting Hill and probably shared much of its congregation with the mosque.

It appears that prior to the Second World War, the vast majority of British converts were associated in some way with one of these three organisations; the *Liverpool Mosque and Institute*, the *Woking Mission/British Muslim Society*, or the *Notting Hill Mosque/Western Islamic Association*. It is difficult to establish the number of converts that existed at this time, although the *Islamic Review* in 1924 estimated this figure to be about a 1,000 individuals, around ten per cent of the British Muslim population at the time (cited in Kose 1996: 17).

### **1.2.3 Conversion Today**

The demography of the Muslim population in Britain underwent quite considerable change in the post-war period. In the wake of the Second World War, large numbers of Muslim men from the Indian sub-continent, many of whom had served as soldiers in the British army, migrated to Britain in search of employment. Most arrived seeking to take advantage of the economic boom of the fifties combined with the severe labour shortages, whilst others attempted to flee the turmoil that swept through post-colonial India and Pakistan. The vast majority had no intention of setting up permanent residence in a foreign land separated from their families, but rather had hoped to earn enough money to lead more comfortable lives back home, in what came to be regarded as the ‘myth of return’ (Nielsen 1999: x). Migration to

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<sup>29</sup> The founder, Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, and subsequent Imams all belonged to the Ahmadiyyah sect of Islam.

Britain from all over the Muslim world continued in significant numbers up until the 1960's, when new legislation, aimed at preventing non-white foreigners from settling in Britain, restricted entry almost entirely to those attempting to reunite their families or those seeking political asylum. In the following decades, significant numbers of Muslims continued to arrive in Britain, however, these were primarily the dependents of the migrant workers already stationed here, or Muslims seeking haven in Britain from oppressive regimes and political ferment.

Today Muslims make up its largest ‘minority religious group’ in Britain (Ansari 2002), however, until recently the lack of accurate and reliable statistics on religious affiliation in the UK had given rise to varying estimates on the actual size of this community. These ranged from conservative estimates of 1.2 million to higher figures, often put forward by Islamic organisations, of 3 million, whilst there appeared to have been some consensus of late on figures of between 1.5 and 1.8 million (Runnymede Trust 1997; Guthrie 2002). With such a high degree of uncertainty over the size of this group, these estimates remained speculative until the publication of the results of the 2001 UK Census, which also included a question on religious affiliation for the first time. The definitive size of the UK’s Muslim population according to the UK 2001 Census was placed at 1,588,900 (ONS 2003a). A survey by The Pew Research Center (2010) estimated that the number of Muslims in the UK has risen by 2010 to 2,869,000.

The contemporary Muslim community in Britain is very ethnically diverse, with Muslims originating from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Turkey, Malaysia, the Middle East, North and East Africa, and Eastern Europe amongst other places, and also incorporates a significant and growing number of native British Muslim converts. As Peach (2006: 368) argues “there is not a single community but a community of communities”. This rich diversity is often ignored or neglected, which Poole (2002: 187) argues is largely a consequence of inaccurate or deliberately skewed media coverage, such that the Press “have come to represent a fairly homogenous Islam to the British public.”

Determining the size of this native British convert population has proven even more problematic than estimating the size of the Muslim population as a whole. Census data on ethnicity cannot be used in the same way as for the Pakistani or Turkish communities, and neither is it feasible to collect information at a local level as converts do not appear to be concentrated in certain localities in the same way that

many immigrant Muslims are (Kose 1996b: 19). In addition, becoming a Muslim in Britain does not demand recognition by or registration with any legal body or religious institution, in the same way that, for example, conversion to Judaism may. The inherent problems with assessing the size of the convert population are further compounded by the fact that many converts often have no desire to make their conversions widely known. This reticence on the convert's part is often founded on fears of familial and social opprobrium, particularly in light of the antipathy often displayed by sections of the media and the general public towards Muslims and Islam in general (Poole 2002; Runnymede Trust 1999). This antipathy is apparently so well ingrained that Asad (2002: 209) states, "I take it for granted that in Europe today Muslims are often misrepresented in the media and discriminated against by non-Muslims."

In spite of all of these problems, many have attempted to estimate the number of converts in Britain, although these tend to vary enormously with few authors citing any evidence for their figures; estimates range from 5,000 (Kose 1996: 19) to between 50,000 and 80,000 (Winters 1997; Owen 1998), to over 250,000.<sup>30</sup> Recent newspaper articles report the number of British converts to be anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000, although once again the figures are not supported by any hard statistical evidence (Guthrie 2002; Petre 2001; Berrington 1993). Despite the incongruity of these estimates on the number of converts in Britain, most commentators are in general agreement over the fact that the phenomenon is growing, not only in Britain but across Europe,<sup>31</sup> and the United States too.<sup>32</sup>

It is possible to propose a new estimate for the number of converts to Islam for England and Wales using the religion and ethnicity data from the 2001 Census. Although there are significant problems inherent within such a process, the proposed figure will certainly be a more accurate reflection than the highly divergent estimates proposed thus far. From amongst the Muslim population, the following ethnic groups

<sup>30</sup> Figures of this magnitude are most often quoted by Islamic organisations, see for example 'The Call to Islam in the United Kingdom' at <http://www.themodernreligion.com/convert/> Accessed: 21/02/2002

<sup>31</sup> A number of European states have also seen significant rises in the number of annual conversions; a report prepared at the request of the German Interior Ministry revealed that 5,000 Germans converted to Islam between July 2004 and June 2005, a figure that was claimed to be four times higher than that of the previous year (Beck 2007). Similarly, *Le Parisien* newspaper, citing Union des organisations islamiques de France estimates, said there were 4,000 converts to Islam in the year 2006 (cited in Reuters 2007).

<sup>32</sup> Surveys conducted by the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) estimated that around 20,000 people convert to Islam in the United States every year (Haddad *et al.*, 2006: 42).

have been denominated as putative converts; Black Caribbean (4,477), White British (63,042), White Irish (890), Mixed White & Black Caribbean (1,385) giving a total figure of 69,794. However, these evaluations are hampered by a number of factors that must be taken into account when assessing the data. As has been illustrated in the previous section, converts to Islam have a rich and established history in the British Isles, and we must therefore proceed under the assumption that a number of individuals who are assumed to be converts due to their ethnic groupings will in fact be the descendants of converts, who have simply retained the Islamic faith of their progenitors. Nevertheless, the effects of this particular factor are mitigated in some way by the Islamic emphasis on racial integration and the overwhelming desire of many converts to assimilate into the wider Muslim community, which in turn facilitates interracial marriages. The resulting offspring of such unions will be more likely to identify their own ethnicities as ‘Mixed’ as opposed to those already identified. Conversely, and perhaps of more concern, is the fact that the calculations are unable to accommodate converts from amongst any of the other Muslim-ethnic groupings, particularly ‘White Other’ (115,841), ‘Black African’ (96,136), and ‘Other Ethnic’ (56,429). Whilst the effects of the former factor, may in part, nullify the effects of the latter, it is likely our final proposed estimate of 69,794 is an under-representation of the true figure. A recent report by Brice (2010) conducted for the civic group *Faith Matters*, employed a similar methodology using the 2001 Census figures to arrive at a figure of 60,669 (ONS 2003a).<sup>33</sup> The report also extrapolated from this figure and other estimates to suggest that the total number of converts may have risen to 100,000 by 2010.

By all accounts, the convert community in Britain is a highly disparate group of individuals, although preliminary studies suggest that it may be possible to discern some tentative patterns. A number of anecdotal sources suggest that the vast majority of converts are women, outnumbering men by a ratio of between 2:1 and 4:1 (Berrington 1993; Haddad 2006).<sup>34</sup> These figures were partially supported by results from this study which found a clear preponderance of female to male converts, both

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<sup>33</sup> The difference in figures between the report by Brice (2010) and my estimations stem from the fact that Brice (2010) also employed data from the Scottish 2001 census, which contained an additional question asking respondents their religion at birth, in addition to their religion at the time of the survey. Using the data on ethnicity in the same way that I have above, the report then extrapolated these figures for the UK as a whole.

<sup>34</sup> Kose’s (1996) study did not support these figures, although he did concede that his position as a male researcher may have adversely affected his opportunity to speak to female converts.

within the sample of Internet narratives [M:109/301=36%; F:192/301=64%], and within the main interview sample [F: 86/143=60%; M: 57/143=40%], and which both gave a remarkably similar female to male ratio of around 3:2.

Most studies conducted thus far suggest that converts (over 60%) fall within the 23-45 age group, with a significant proportion (over 25%) in the 17-22 age group (Kose 1996: 47; Berrington 1993), representing an average conversion age of between 25 and 30 years (Poston 1992: 166; Kose 1996: 47; Roald 2004: 109; Zebiri 2008: 42). The current study reported similar findings, with the average age at conversion calculated to be 27.0 years [M: 24.7; F: 28.6], and the average age of conversion at the time of interview to be 31.2 years [M: 28.3; F: 33.1]. The average age within the Internet sample was estimated to be slightly lower at 23.0 years [M: 23.7; F: 22.6] which perhaps reflected the younger age demographic of Internet users more generally (Office for National Statistics 2010). These figures partially corroborate recent studies of religious conversion which view changes in religious affiliation taking place around early to mid-adulthood, but present a marked deviation from earlier psychological studies which viewed conversion as an adolescent phenomenon related to problematic identity formulation (Francis 1984: 69; Ullman 1989: 110; Christensen 1963).

Previous studies have found British converts to be generally affluent, privileged, and highly educated individuals (Kose 1996: 80). Kose (1996b) suggests that around two-thirds of his sample identified themselves with the middle class, whilst a similar proportion held at least a bachelor's degree, with a further 20% of these having undertaken some level of post-graduate study. However, whilst citing Kose's figures, it should be borne in mind that these statistics are garnered exclusively from studies based upon non-representative samples of white British converts. The most glaring error in such studies is the complete absence of converts of Afro-Caribbean origin, a significant point considering that black converts, excluding those affiliated with the heterodox *Nation of Islam* movement, are alleged to constitute around 70% of the convert population in the United States. (Bagby *et al* 2001: 22) Furthermore, new Muslims within prison populations and converts joining radical Islamic movements have also been excluded, further diminishing the value of the studies' findings. In light of these issues, I have attempted to avoid the elitism of research studies which consciously select the most articulate or eloquent material, or

the most striking and profound examples for study,<sup>35</sup> and instead democratise the research sample considerably by drawing upon the voices of a range of converts with, admittedly, varying levels of success.

The social profile of converts from within this study generally supported the figures above, but also showed some clear divergences too. Analysis of my sample suggested significantly higher than average educational attainment and upward social mobility; 53% of the sample held at least an undergraduate degree,<sup>36</sup> whereas a significant proportion of these held higher degrees or qualification within their fields of work too. A significant proportion of my sample described themselves as professionally employed (61%), whereas 69% felt they were financially comfortable.<sup>37</sup> The racial profile of my sample also differed significantly from previous studies, with only 57% of participants identifying as White. The remainder of the sample was composed of, 22% Black or Afro-Caribbean, 11% Asian, and 10% as Mixed or Other. As a further point of departure from earlier studies, Muslim converts were also found to display disproportionately higher representation in the prison population than average,<sup>38</sup> and amongst individuals implicated in violence and terrorism (Awan forthcoming).

Most converts do not appear to have been particularly religious prior to conversion. Many were either disillusioned with their previous faiths and considered their religious adherence to be nominal, or had adopted an agnostic or atheistic outlook. Only a small minority claim to have practised their former religion with any real conviction (Kose 1996: 68). Almost a third had experimented with other faiths, particularly Buddhism and New Religious Movements, prior to their conversion to Islam. The proportions of converts drawn from various religious denominations tends to reflect the sizes of these communities in Britain, with the largest group (over 75%) coming from Protestant upbringings (Kose 1996: 67), although this is strongly contested by some commentators who claim that the vast majority of converts are drawn from Catholicism (Petre 2000; Winters 1997). However, this is where the

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<sup>35</sup> In the field of religious conversion, this practice was pioneered by James (1902) who was quite unapologetic over his deliberate selection of the material in this way.

<sup>36</sup> The graduation rate from first university degrees in the UK in 2001 was placed at 37% (Office for National Statistics 2003c).

<sup>37</sup> Although this is not an absolute measure and participants responses may have been influenced by a desire to appear ‘grateful for God’s bounty’, or reflected Sufic ascetic inclinations.

<sup>38</sup> This is based upon anecdotal evidence and observation, although this assertion is supported by the recent HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2010) report.

generalisations end. It is virtually impossible to say anything beyond this about the convert community as a whole, as it appears to be comprised of a very diverse group of individuals, seemingly drawn from all walks of life. They include celebrities, academics, professionals, clergy, students, housewives, former criminals and drug addicts. Their reasons for embracing Islam are just as diverse and range from spiritual awakenings to expedient conversions in order to marry a Muslim partner.

A number of organisations now exist which cater specifically for the growing British convert community. The most recent, and certainly most popular, is the *New Muslims Project (NMP)* which was primarily borne out of concerns that not enough was being done to identify needs, address concerns, and provide support for those interested in and new to Islam. Established in 1993 by The Islamic Foundation in Leicester, the NMP is run by Batool al-Toma, and has grown significantly over the years to now have a number of semi-autonomous local chapters operating in various British cities. The NMP provides a range of services, which aim to meet the social and educational needs of new converts to Islam, including various Arabic and Islamic courses, and organises an annual Hajj and Umrah trip. In addition, the NMP publishes a monthly newsletter, *Meeting Point*, which contains various articles pertaining to the Islamic faith as well as advice on practical matters likely to be encountered by converts. The publication also contains a monthly list of new converts, with the aim of putting them in touch with mentors and friends in their vicinity.

The oldest extant Muslim organisation set up by converts is the *Association for British Muslims (ABM)*, initially known as the *Western Islamic Association* in Notting Hill Gate in the 1920's, which traced its lineage back to Quilliam's association in Liverpool. The first *Emir*, Khalid Sheldrake, had also previously held the post of *Emir* of Kashghar in Eastern Turkestan, and this lent the movement an air of authority in speaking for the British Muslim community. However, following the Second World War, the ABM went into gradual decline, and there were several unsuccessful attempts to revive the waning movement. There appears to have been considerable opposition to these revival efforts from immigrant Muslims and other converts, who accused the association of congregating on an ethnic basis, which they argued did not have a precedent in Islam. Nevertheless, in 1975 the organisation was finally re-established as the *Association of British Muslims*, with Daoud Rosser-Owen as *Emir*. In 1978, on advice from various individuals and conscious of the

earlier accusations, the organisation was renamed the *Association for British Muslims* with Hajji Abdul Rashid Skinner appointed as *Emir*. This most recent incarnation purports to be a social or cultural body, the membership of which is a cultural and not an ethnic expression. In this respect, the ABM seek to expand upon their traditional ambit and represent the now British descendants of immigrant Muslims in addition to the converts to the faith, referred to as *muhtadiyin* (those guided to Islam). The ABM seeks to define a “British Islam” as an authentic cultural expression of Islam, free from cultural accretions of the past and of foreign cultures, showing that Islam is not ‘alien’ to the British way of life. In this way it is hoped that the faith will spread amongst the British peoples, largely by example and through inter-personal relations. One of the more peculiar aims of the ABM is in its efforts towards the appointment of a new incumbent to the position of *Shaykh al-Islam of the British Isles*,<sup>39</sup> which the organisation contends can be reinstated at any time through the doctrine of residuary sovereignty. The ABM’s regular activities include introductory classes on Islam for converts, the conducting of Islamic marriages and burials, providing Islamic instruction to non-Muslim schools in Britain, providing a counselling and advice service for Muslims, and the publication of various articles, fact-sheets and a regular bulletin.

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<sup>39</sup> This office was established by HM Queen Victoria in 1890 with Quilliam as the first appointee, in a post somewhat akin to the *Chief Rabbi* in Britain.

## **1.4 Literature on Religious Conversion**

### **1.4.1 Theories, Models, and Empirical Studies of Conversion**

Up until relatively recently, the concept of conversion, at least in the mind of the West, was inextricably linked to Evangelical Protestantism or affiliation movements within the Church; denominational switching within Christianity. Other forms of conversion, particularly to ‘Eastern religions’ and New Religious Movements, were often dismissed pejoratively as brainwashing and manipulation or generally regarded as constituting deviant behaviour. Moreover, the vast majority of these studies were also primarily attributable to psychiatrists and clinical psychologists, whose limited encounters with, and thus perceptions of conversion, arose solely through contact with mentally ill patients who had also undergone some form of conversion experience. Needless to say, much of this material rests on a severely skewed database and inevitably presents religious conversion as a pathology or deviance (Rambo 1998). The early literature employing this “psychopathological” explanation of religious participation (Stark 1965), followed the assumption that an individual must have experienced some major deprivation or trauma to be at all interested in religion, thus reinforcing the perspective of religion as a “crutch”.

Lofland and Stark’s (1965) seminal ‘world-saver’ model of conversion was one of the first studies to challenge this assumption and is particularly intriguing as it contains an implicit focus on a volitional subject, along with the more traditional deterministic elements, and thus serves to act as a bridge between the traditional psychopathological studies and more recent sociological ones.<sup>40</sup> Lofland & Stark (1965) propose the notion of pre-disposing and situational factors whose presence may incline an individual to undertake religious conversion:

Three background or pre-disposing factors emphasising the deterministic aspect:

- Enduring tensions and deprivations – motivated to pursue change.
- Inclination to adopt a *religious* strategy for dealing with said problems.
- Conventional religion fails to meet needs.

Similarly four situational factors highlighting the volitional aspect:

- Turning point in one’s life – most open to proselytisation.
- Development of affective ties between pre-convert and group members.

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<sup>40</sup> This particular model was based on a participant observer study of Moon’s Unification church.

- Diminishing of affective ties to everything outside the new group.
- Intensive interaction with new group.

Religious conversion research has generally tended to bifurcate along the dichotomies presented in Lofland and Stark's early model. Bainbridge (1992) uses the term 'strain theories' to refer to ideas inclined towards a more deterministic model of conversion, which views the convert as a passive 'object' upon which internal and external forces are exerted. There is some limited support for the 'strain' or 'Religion as crutch' hypothesis. A number of studies have indicated the presence of crises, guilt, stress, trauma, anxiety, neuroticism and personal difficulties prior to conversion. Shinn (1987: 67), studying people who joined the Hare Krishna movement, for example, suggests that almost all converts had experienced a state of psychological crisis prior to affiliation with the Hare Krishna. Ullman's (1989) research is widely cited as one of the few empirical studies that looks at conversion across a range of different religious groups, namely, Orthodox Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Bahai, and Hare Krishna. Ullman suggests that converts experienced greater childhood trauma, unhappier adolescence, and higher levels of stress in the two years prior to conversion and thus the major factors motivating religious conversion were emotional rather than cognitive. Galanter (1989) reinforces this view with findings from his own study of converts to NRM's, in which many converts recalled having symptoms on the Psychological Distress Scale immediately prior to joining. There is also some evidence to suggest that these types of psychopathology are considerably more prevalent in individuals undergoing 'sudden' conversions (Kirkpatrick & Shaver 1990; Spellman *et al.* 1971; Moody 1974).

Conversely, the other major school of thought places considerable emphasis on a volitional and subject-centred model (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). This volitional or active conversion hypothesis has gained favour amongst sociologists and more recently some psychologists, and the field of conversion studies has witnessed a basic paradigm shift moving it far beyond the more psychological and deterministic perspectives prevalent a few decades ago (Long and Hadden 1983). This latter wave of conversion research interpretations, such as those of Dawson (1990), Straus (1979), and Richardson (1985) reveal that converts are usually acting of their own volition, engaged in negotiations and making informed decisions about

participation based on a sometimes quite systematic and thorough analysis of alternatives. Straus (1979) in particular makes a significant contribution to this trend away from viewing conversion as something that *happens to* a person as the result of internal and external forces acting upon the recruit. Instead Straus (1979) suggests should be viewed as a form of ‘personal and collective accomplishment’, achieved by an actively strategizing seeker as part of a process of personal transformation as the result of interaction with religious groups.

Richardson (1985) also provides a useful overview of the shift in perception of the characteristics of religious conversion, by contrasting the ‘old’ with the ‘contemporary’ conversion paradigm succinctly:

#### Old Conversion Paradigm:

- Conversion occurs suddenly
- It is more emotional than rational
- External forces act on a passive agent
- There is a dramatic transformation of self
- Behaviour change follows from belief change
- Conversion occurs once and is permanent
- It typically occurs in adolescence
- The prototype is Paul’s conversion

#### Contemporary Conversion Paradigm:

- Conversion occurs gradually
- It is rational rather emotional
- The convert is an active, seeking agent
- There is self-realization within a humanistic tradition
- Belief change follows from behaviour change
- Conversion is not permanent; it may occur several times
- It typically occurs in early adulthood
- No one experience is prototypical

Glock’s (1964) expansion of sect-church theory considers the elucidation of motives to be of the utmost importance in understanding the phenomena of religious conversion and participation. Glock defines these motives in terms of 5 primary deprivations that account for their presence:

- Economic: if an individual feels they possess less than they ideally should.

- Social: relating to age, race, intelligence etc.
- Organismic: this can relate to either physical or mental illness or incapacity.
- Ethical: when a conflict arises between perceived ideals and reality i.e. society failing to meet standards.
- Psychic: unfulfilled cognitive need for purpose and meaning.

Glock further contends that the feelings of deprivation result when people engage in a social comparison process and detect a negative gap between their own level and the standard set by the comparison group.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the type of group an individual chooses to affiliate themselves with is wholly dependent upon the deprivations experienced prior to conversion or affiliation. Considering its age, Glock's model has fared remarkably well. The suggestion that religious participation is precipitated by deprivations may now seem archaic, however this view is balanced somewhat by the assertion that converts actively seek to overcome such deprivations. Furthermore, the inclusion of 'ethical' and 'psychic' deprivations strays from the purely 'psychopathological' stance and gives credence to an intellectually and morally stimulated conversion.

Lofland and Skonovd (1981) move beyond the initial focus on motives and instead propose the notion of conversion motifs, by which they mean defining experiences or themes which make each type of conversion distinctive. Lofland and Skonovd argue that differing perceptions and descriptions of conversion are not merely the result of diverse theoretical orientations, but are in fact, descriptions of qualities that make conversion experiences substantially different. They identify six motifs:

- Intellectual conversion: the pre-convert actively seeks out and explores alternatives by seeking knowledge on religious or spiritual issues.
- Mystical conversion: a sudden and traumatic burst of insight, induced by visions, voices, or other paranormal experiences.
- Experimental conversion: involves active exploration of religious options - potential converts take nothing on faith but try out the theology, ritual, and organisation for themselves.
- Affectional conversion: stresses interpersonal bonds as an important factor in the conversion process.

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<sup>41</sup> This can often be some abstract internalised standard.

- Revivalism: use of crowd conformity to induce behaviour - individuals are emotionally aroused and new behaviours and beliefs are promoted by the pressures exerted.
- Coercive conversion: the use of brainwashing, coercive persuasion, thought reform, and programming - intense pressure exerted on the person to participate, conform, and confess.

Lofland and Skonovd (1981) suggest that the dimensions of each motif can be assessed by examining the degree of social pressure on the potential convert, the temporal duration of the conversion process, the level of affective arousal, the affective content, and the belief-participation sequence. The notion of motifs is useful in illustrating the existence of a range of conversion types which are able to subsume diverse conversion experiences whilst retaining their uniquely defining elements, and in reinforcing the view that no one conversion type can be considered normative.

In an interesting study which attempts to compare the degree of identity change displayed by converts and alternators,<sup>42</sup> Barker & Currie (1985) suggest that whilst both display similar levels of commitment in terms of time spent praying, giving, studying, and in church attendance, converts inevitably experience identity change to a much greater extent. Curiously however, alternators display a greater level of Church involvement. Whilst the contention that converts experience more pronounced levels of identity transformation may appear unequivocal and is supported by some anecdotal evidence, one must question the use of terms such as ‘identity’ and enquire as to exactly what such a term entails. Even more problematic, however, is the assertion that the transformation taking place within such a complex construction can be measured and compared between individuals.

Batson *et al.*, (1993) suggest that the mental processes involved in conversion are similar to those involved in creative problem-solving. Batson’s model of religious experience and personal transformation as creative analogy is essentially comprised of four distinct stages:

- Existential crisis: attempt to grapple with basic issues of meaning of life.
- Self-surrender: try and fail to resolve issues using current beliefs/worldview.
- New Vision: issues resolved when seen through new belief system.

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<sup>42</sup> Converts being defined as individuals entering a group from the outside, whereas alternators are those raised within the group but have re-birth experiences.

- New Life: change behaviour to be consistent with new life.

Batson maintains that conversion involves adoption of a better fitting schema and this ultimately provides relief and closure from the crisis. Whilst Batson presents the key conversion stages succinctly and within a coherent and original interpretational framework, the approximation of religion as a schema is inaccurate and misleading. Religion typically entails much more than just a schema, including a cognitive framework, set of myths, beliefs and rituals, a life perspective and all-encompassing worldview. In addition, there is no evidence to support the contention that conversions must be precipitated by existential crisis.

Rambo (1993) takes an alternate approach focusing instead on what the conversion process itself entails. He proposes a systemic stage model which identifies various key stages within the process, the relative importance of which varies between individuals, being dependent upon the life stage currently occupied by the pre-convert. The model is comprised of seven distinct stages, namely, context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. The stages often proceed simultaneously, mutually interacting with one another and in the process creating a complex web as opposed to a linear, sequential stage model. Rambo's model is perhaps the most sophisticated model proposed thus far and is both comprehensive and flexible enough to accommodate diverse experiences of religious conversion. However, once again, the absence of empiricism means there is little evidence to suggest these stages actually exist.

Following the contemporary, volitional model of religious conversion, some studies have sought characterise conversion using a 'rational choice' model that views recruits as 'active seekers' who undertake a systematic and in depth analysis and evaluation of the religious alternatives available to them, weighing their relative costs and benefits, and social and cognitive outcomes as part of the 'religious economies framework', before making a rational, informed decisions of whether to convert or not (Richardson 1985; Kilbourne and Richardson 1989; Iannaccone 1997; Young 1997; Stark and Finke 2000; Gartrell and Shannon 1985).

After conducting a comprehensive review of the literature, Paloutzian *et al.*, (1999) inform us that rigorous empirical studies on religious conversion remain scarce. The studies that have been conducted thus far, with a few notable exceptions, focus predominantly on conversions to Christianity and denominational switching. Ultimately, theories and models are simply intellectual constructs that guide research

methods and goals and attempt to provide explanations for phenomena that may otherwise be inexplicable. The vast majority of such theories propounded to interpret religious conversion are not empirically founded and their applicability to diverse traditions and experiences remains tentative. Furthermore, the parochial nature of models predicated upon conversion to a certain sect or group should preclude them from being accepted as universally applicable to all forms of religious experience.

#### **1.4.2 Studies of Conversion to Islam**

Despite maintaining a relatively high level of public and media interest since the early 90's,<sup>43</sup> it is genuinely surprising to note that the topic of conversion to Islam has not aroused a similar level of interest within academia. One of the earliest attempts to address the phenomenon was Poston's *Islamic Da'wah in the West* (1992), which as the title suggests, is not a study of conversion *per se*. Instead the book is an overview of Muslim proselytisation efforts and strategies in the US and Europe, and an attempt to ascertain the level of success that these efforts have met with. Poston also includes a section on 'converts to Islam', as part of this evaluation of Muslim attempts to recruit new adherents to the Islamic faith, however, the methodology employed in this exercise is highly questionable. Poston was only able to contact 12 Muslim converts, and so expanded his sample size to 72 by incorporating the testimonies of a number of 'high-profile' or celebrity converts, which he obtained from Islamic publications (Poston 1992: 78-82). These testimonies are considerably outdated (some date from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and are not representative of the convert population in general; over two-thirds of the converts were male, and many of the testimonies belonged to prominent figures amongst the upper echelons of society. Consequently, this particular section of Poston's study suffers considerably as a result of his unrepresentative sampling and the use of antiquated material. The average conversion age was found to be 31.4 years (Poston 1992: 92). For Poston's subjects, an advocate or a personal

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<sup>43</sup> A plethora of mainstream media articles have attempted to explore conversion to Islam in the West, and which might be taken as an indicator of popular interest in the subject (Berrington 199; Khan 1997; The Times 1999; Petre 2001; Dutter 2001; Wilgoren 2001; Aitken 2001; Baker 2001; McLaurin 2001; Jimenez 2002; Malhotra 2002; Jones 2002; Alleyne 2002; Anant 2002; Whittel 2002; O'Neill 2002; Garavelli 2002; Wazir 2002; Compton 2002; Saunders 2002; Channel 4 2002; Hellen and Morgan 2004; Gordon 2005; The Daily Mail 2007; Reuters 2007; Ananthakrishnan 2009; Taylor and Morrison 2011; Doyle 2011).

relationship with a current adherent to Islam was the chief motivating factor which the overwhelming majority found significant. 75% of the subjects mentioned aspects of the teaching of Islam as being instrumental in their decision to convert, while 60% mentioned specific individuals or groups which had influenced them in their decision (Poston 1992: 98). Poston's study also underscores the hypothesis that emotional and crisis-triggered conversions are not common to Islam. Only 3 of the 72 converts reported an emotional, Pauline-type conversion in which supernatural factors were perceived.

Kose's *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (1996a) is one of the few rigorous empirical studies to be conducted on religious converts outside of the Christian tradition, and undoubtedly the most important study of British converts conducted to date. His thesis focuses on British converts to Islam, and is based upon questionnaires and interviews conducted with 70 British converts to Islam. Kose's thesis provides only limited support for the psychologically-oriented, deterministic or strain theory models of religious conversion. However, Kose's findings do partially corroborate earlier empirical studies, such as those of Ullman (1989), which suggest that conversion is preceded by an adolescence containing trauma, anxiety or stress; 49% of respondents reported emotional distress during the two-year period prior to conversion (Kose 1996a: 58). Kose (1996b) suggests that adolescence is also the stage during which most converts shied away from their religion of birth, or even rejected it outright. He lends support to the view that religious conversion is not an adolescent phenomenon and reports the average conversion age amongst his sample to be 29.7 years. In regard to religious participation during adolescence, 65% of converts came from families where there was no strong identification with any religion. Only 11% considered themselves to have been practising their faith prior to conversion with any real conviction (Kose (1996a: 76). A fifth of the sample indicated that they had embarked upon an active search stage prior to conversion, seeking an alternative to a secular, materialistic society. Both cognitive and emotional factors appear to be highly important precursors to conversion, with 47% of respondents reporting specific concerns of a cognitive or existential nature (Kose (1996a: 93).

Kose's study suffers from a number of methodological issues, which mean that any findings need to be re-evaluated in light of these criticisms. As with Poston's study, Kose's sampling is also not representative. The sample group was

contacted via Islamic organisations and Mosques, meaning that the sample group is essentially comprised of those individuals who are socially and/or politically active, thereby excluding those who are less actively involved in Islamic institutions or those who shun traditional hierarchical structures. Perhaps even more problematic is the disparity in the ratio of male to female respondents (5:2), particularly, as much anecdotal evidence suggests that women converts outnumber men by as much as 4:1 (Berrington 1993; Haddad 2006). However, Kose does concede that his position as a male researcher may have adversely affected his chance of meeting female respondents.<sup>44</sup> Other sub-groupings of converts, including non-White converts, members of radical Islamic groups, and incarcerated individuals are also not represented. The relatively small sample sizes also prove to be problematic, particularly when attempting to evaluate them using a complex, theoretical framework. However, perhaps the greatest criticism levelled at Kose's study is at his 'psychology of religion' framework which relies heavily upon earlier, more deterministic theories of conversion, the majority of which were not empirically based, and certainly not upon Islamic conversion experiences. As a result the application of such theories to Kose's sample often appears forced, often with a given theory being supported tentatively by a particular idiosyncratic participant account. Although Poston (1992) and Kose's (1996) work forms the backdrop for this research study, I have also made recourse to other contributions in the field to help steer my research goals and methods. These include Allievi's (1998) major study of French converts to Islam, and the special issue of the journal *Social Compass* (1999) devoted to conversion to Islam in Europe, which includes contributions from Wohlrab-Sahr, Sultan, and Allievi amongst others.

Since this study commenced in 2001, a number of other researchers have also weighed in on the subject and undertaken contemporary studies of conversion to Islam in West, whose findings I have referred to and drawn upon in order to help illuminate aspects of this study. These include Roald's (2004) study of Scandinavian converts, van Nieuwkerk's (2006) comprehensive edited collection on gender and conversion in the West, McGinty's (2006) study of Swedish and American female

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<sup>44</sup> The only other study to have suggested a preponderance of male to female converts is that of Allievi (1998: 65) who suggests this is the case for converts to Islam in Italy.

converts, Lakhdar et al., (2007) study of French converts to Islam, and Zebiri's (2008) study of British converts.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Dr Kate Zebiri was in fact the academic advisor for this PhD thesis, and thus was familiar with a significant portion of this thesis before undertaking her study in 2005. Consequently, whilst she has attempted to focus differentially on aspects such as British Muslim convert contributions to Islamic thought and literature, the nature of Zebiri's (2008) study has nevertheless produced some degree of inevitable overlap and commonality between her study and this thesis.

## CHAPTER 2. PART I: CONVERSION NARRATIVES ONLINE

### 2.1 The Conversion Narrative Genre

In recent years, the Internet has witnessed a quite rapid proliferation of personal accounts of personal or spiritual transformation and religious conversion belonging loosely to the genre known as the *conversion narrative* or *conversion testimony*. However, the Internet is only the most recent medium to be employed for the purpose of disseminating these conversion narratives, and the genre predates the advent of the Internet by at least two millennia.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst the vast majority of conversion narratives are, as one might expect, principally concerned with religious transformations, others are not. Indeed conversion narratives do not even have to be about changing religious affiliations or switching denominations, but can even be about radically changing one's worldview associated with a range of issues, for example, a number of collections of 'conversion narratives' are principally concerned with radical transformations on perceptions and understandings of race (Hobson 1999), and gender (Stackhouse 2005; Johnson 2010). Our interest here, however, is with the overtly religious conversion narrative, which Hobson (1999: 1) describes as,

*"that oral confession of sins by ordinary men and women, usually delivered before a church congregation, a confession heard and recorded by a minister and which, if the candidate were judged worthy, resulted in 'conversion' and church membership."*

Historically, this literary genre referred to a highly specific form of expression arising in a particular context, namely amongst New England Puritans in the seventeenth century (Hindmarsh 2005), and being defined as one that was,

*"primarily concerned with the question of grace: whether or not the individual has been accepted into divine life, an acceptance signified by psychological and moral changes which the autobiographer comes to discern in his past experience." (Shea 1989: xxvii)*

The Puritan conversion narrative itself is described by Caldwell (1983: 1) as,

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<sup>46</sup> Well known accounts of religious conversion narratives include those of a number of early Christians, including Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, whose 'metanoia' is recorded in the *New Testament* in some detail, particularly in 'Acts of the Apostles' and 'Romans' (McRay 2007). We could also draw attention to the conversion of Augustine of Hippo (387 AD), whose experiences are recorded in great detail in *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (Brown 2000).

*“a testimony of personal religious experience...spoken or read aloud to the entire congregation of a gathered church before admission as evidence of the applicant's visible sainthood.”*

According to Shea (1989), this literary genre came into being primarily as a result of New England Puritans stipulating that church membership could only be conferred upon new members once they had provided a satisfactory account of their experience of *grace*, alongside the usual enunciation of the confession of faith. Thus the conversion narrative or narrative of religious experience was essentially an integral part of a screening process that ensured the presence of faith amongst the constituency of Puritan churches (Morgan 1963: 104).

Consequently, the narratives were unlikely to be autobiographical in nature; instead members were simply reduced to testifying that their experiences conformed to a certain pattern of feeling and behaviour as part of a complex membership ritual (Shea 1989: xxvii). This pattern or morphology of conversion, as related in the conversion narrative, involved stages such as “knowledge, conviction, faith, combat, and true, imperfect assurance” (Morgan 1963: 72). Indeed, there were often rigid formulaic stages which the convert had to adhere to, such as contrition, humiliation, vocation, implantation, exaltation, and possession, before a conversion, and by extension the ensuing narrative, was considered valid (Elliott 1975).

The tradition was continued by 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelical Protestants who employed the conversion narratives to confirm and strengthen the convert's own faith, whilst simultaneously pointing others to experience the same. Indeed, the primary purposes of the narrative were to “teach, edify, persuade and exhort”, and thus by disseminating the news of their conversion and salvation, evangelical Protestants hoped others would be inspired to do the same (Brereton 1991: 3). As with Puritan narratives, accounts of religious conversion from evangelicals were likely to adhere to highly uniform patterns of expression. Brereton (1991: 4), describing the conventions of this literary genre, writes,

*“They typically opened with the convert's early life, went on to describe a period of increasing sense of sinfulness, climaxed with conversion proper, and concluded with an account of the 'fruits' of the experience-usually zealous conduct of evangelical activity.”*

Stromberg's (1993) study of contemporary Evangelical Christian conversion narratives reveals that although the specifics may have changed over time, the general motif and motivations underlying the narrative have remained extant to a

large degree. His studies of converts show that they are often highly eager to engage in frequent recapitulations of the narrative, as these are considered to be a central ritual of their faith, offering an opportunity to both celebrate and reaffirm the dual effect of conversion; the strengthening of their faith and the transformation of their lives (Stromberg 1993: 3). Mary's (2000) study of conversion narratives from African converts to evangelical religions confirms many of these findings and suggests that the narratives often assume a highly stereotypical form, figuring prominently in religious rituals and thereby serve a particular and often specialised purpose. Brereton (1991: 16) adds that evangelical Protestant narratives usually adhere to an archetypal plot and are “impossibly burdened with stock religious language.” Beckford's (1978: 249) study of conversion accounts from Jehovah's Witnesses further illustrates the highly specialised nature of conversion narratives in general, suggesting that such narratives “are typically constructed according to a set of guidelines which reflect the Watchtower movement's changing organizational rationale”.

In contrast, the Islamic conversion narrative potentially holds to a very different paradigm. The absence of a priesthood or other religious hierarchy in Islam (Hefner 2005; Ayoob 2005), obviates the need for special consecration or authorization for the performance of religious functions. Consequently, the convert need not be referred to some religious teacher to be formally received into the religion. Instead, the conversion consists of a simple verbal enunciation of the *shahadah*,<sup>47</sup> (testimony of faith; lit. ‘the witnessing’) often before two witnesses,<sup>48</sup> in which the convert assents to the two fundamental doctrines of Islam; *tawhid* (unity of God) and *risalah* (prophethood through which God's Will is made known to man), as enshrined within the testimony of faith: ‘I bear witness that there is no god but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God’.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Sometimes also called the *shahadatayn* (lit. the dual witnessing) or simply *kalimah* (lit. the words).

<sup>48</sup> Although this is not a formal requisite for the conversion to be valid, see al-Judai, A. Y. ‘Fiqh – What you should know about conversion’ at <http://www.newmuslimsproject.net/islam/shahdah.html> [Accessed: 23/02/2004].

<sup>49</sup> A more thorough description of the commitment undertaken by the convert would also include acceptance of the six ‘articles of faith’, namely, belief in Allah, the angels, the scriptures, the prophets, the Last Day, and the Divine Decree (Quran 2: 285, 60: 6; Sahih Muslim 1-1:4), and possibly an expectation to live in accordance with the *shari'a* (Islamic law) (Ahsan 1989: 14). Nevertheless, the fact remains that were someone to declare the *shahadah* alone, this in itself would constitute entry into Islam and would be sufficient to protect someone in a legal sense from accusations of disbelief (*kufir*).

Consequently, if converts are under no obligation to disclose their conversions to another, it follows *a fortiori* that they also need not validate their conversions or faith before others either. Indeed this fundamental point of departure from the Christian conversion is the very basis for the key differences observed in structure and content between the Islamic and Christian conversion narrative. These differences are reflected in the narratives in a number of ways:

- 1) There is no rigid archetype to which Islamic conversion narratives must hold; consequently they are likely to adopt a wide range of divergent forms and styles.
- 2) The motivations for writing and publishing Islamic narratives are equally diverse, and may be significantly different from the stated aims of many Christian conversion narratives, which are often ritualistic in nature and thus primed towards validating or authenticating the conversion experience.<sup>50</sup>
- 3) Moreover, Islamic narratives tend to be volitional accounts as there is little or no extraneous pressure for constructing the narrative in the first place.<sup>51</sup>
- 4) Islamic narratives *are* actually biographical in nature, and potentially more authentic accounts of the convert's experiences as the convert is not consciously attempting to adhere to any one archetype; converts are not reduced to simply testifying that their experiences conform to a certain pattern of feeling and behaviour.

This finding has very significant implications for their employment in research, as potentially more authentic, biographical accounts of the conversion experience.

## 2.2 The Data Set

Despite the rapid proliferation of the internet, this important new medium remains inaccessible to much of the *developing* world's population and levels of internet

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<sup>50</sup> Although Hermansen (1999: 56) does question the impetus behind this growing genre, asking “is it to edify, inspire, justify, convince, or confess?”

<sup>51</sup> Perhaps it would be better to state that there is no *overt* pressure to create a conversion narrative, as many converts will undoubtedly be aware of the growing genre of the ‘Islamic conversion narrative’, which can increasingly be found in published works that seek to compile autobiographical accounts of conversion (Bushill-Matthews 2008; Anway 1995; Haleem and Bowman 1999; Jameelah 1993; Dirks and Parlove 2003; Shahid 2002; Ball 1987; Bawany 1961; Arafat 1998). Thus the convert may in fact perceive the construction of a conversion narrative to be an integral part of conversion that is performed by most other converts, and therefore constitutes an informal or unstated conversion rite or convention that must be adhered to, in order to gain full membership of the group or community, or indeed ‘pass as a convert’ (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989).

access and availability often display a marked disparity between countries. For example, in 2001,<sup>52</sup> 54.3% of the population of the United States were described as internet users, whereas only 0.04% of the population of Sub-Saharan African or 6.7% of the World's population had access to the internet (United Nations Development Project 2001: 40, 48-51). To take a more recent example, in 2011, 94.4% of Norwegians were considered to be Internet users, whereas only 0.5% of Ethiopians could be classified as the same (International Telecommunications Union 2011).

In addition, this polarity can exist within communities too, where the technological barriers are not geographic but rather economic or racial. This last point is illustrated by the dearth of African-American conversion narratives on the Internet,<sup>53</sup> particularly as black converts to Islam, excluding those affiliated with the heterodox *Nation of Islam* movement, make up around 70% of the convert population in the United States (Bagby *et al.*, 2001: 22). Consequently, the selection process was somewhat skewed and resulted in an overwhelming preponderance of Western or English language accounts [n=301; U.S.=152, U.K.=34, Canada=21, Russia=19, Philippines=15, Australia=12, Ireland=8, France=7, Germany=6, Japan=6, Sweden=4, India=4, Italy=3, New Zealand=3, China=2, Sri-Lanka=2, Norway=1, Ecuador=1, Finland=1]. Suffice it to say that the phenomenon of conversion is not unique to the *developed* world, as can be evinced by the significant growth of the Islamic faith in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South East Asia, and thus, at best, our sample can only claim to be *potentially* representative of the *Internet's* convert population. Nevertheless, the selection process was not restricted to narratives accessible in English only. Considerable efforts were undertaken to include the voices of non-English speaking converts and Babel Fish translation software was used quite extensively to this end.<sup>54</sup>

The length of the narratives varied quite considerably; the shortest was barely a paragraph whilst the longest was a personal journal account spanning an entire site. Naturally, this presented some difficulty when attempting to standardise the sample group, however, the vast majority of converts provided sufficient biographical data

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<sup>52</sup> Many of the conversion narratives studied in this chapter were published around 2001, hence the value of these statistics.

<sup>53</sup> Only 8/152 conversion narratives from the U.S. within our sample, identified their authors as either black or African-Americans.

<sup>54</sup> Babelfish translation software is available commercially or is freely available at sites such as <http://world.altavista.com>.

to allow construction of an individual profile composed of certain key elements including gender, age at conversion, country of origin, previous religious affiliation and various other markers. A number of commentators have remarked upon the apparent preponderance of female to male converts with anecdotal evidence suggesting that the ratio may be as high as 4:1 (Berrington 1993; Haddad 2006).<sup>55</sup> The current sample (although not strictly representative in any quantifiable manner) certainly reflected these findings to some extent, however, the observed gender disparity was not as pronounced as previously suspected and represented a female to male ratio closer to 3:2 [M:109=36%; F:192=64%].

The majority of converts either stated explicitly or made some indirect reference to the age at which they had converted. For the remainder of the sample, it was possible to infer an approximate conversion age by extrapolating from various milestone events and other biographical markers alluded to in the narrative. Consequently, the average age of male converts at the time of conversion was estimated to be around 23.7 years, whereas that of female converts was placed slightly higher at 22.6 years, representing an average conversion age for the entire sample of 23.0 years. This contrasts sharply with much early research that suggested conversion was largely an adolescent phenomenon,<sup>56</sup> but does concur with more recent studies which found conversion to typically occur during early adulthood (Kose 1996b; Poston 1992; Ullman 1989).

### **2.3. Contextual Disjuncture vs. Contextual Continuity**

The study of the Internet conversion narratives revealed that one of the primary aims of converts, in writing their conversion narratives, was to relate the efficacy of the conversion experience to their readers; an attempt to communicate the degree of spiritual transformation and fulfilment. This was virtually impossible however, without recourse to the wider context within which the conversion was situated, as any measure of this *degree of change* would need to be relative to some referential

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<sup>55</sup> Indeed some scholars have suggested the gender disparity may be even higher in certain contexts; a recent study of conversion to Islam in South Africa by Lee (2001), for example, claims that women comprise the overwhelming majority of converts to the Muslim faith, although she tempers this statement by proposing that there may be a generational component to this trend in that it is women of a distinct age category (aged 40 years or older) who make up the bulk of converts, whereas teenage and young adult girls today are less likely to predominate in the same way.

<sup>56</sup> Records of 15,471 conversion cases recorded between 1899 and the 1950's revealed an average conversion age of 15 years; Christensen (1963).

marker, particularly vis-à-vis previous religiosity, and thus a reconstruction of the pre-Islamic context appeared to be almost endemic to this genre.

Virtually all converts were keen to articulate the religious perspective, or at least its absence, within the pre-conversion context.

Around a tenth of the sample [n: 31/301=10%; m: 18/119=15%; f: 13/182=7%] were characterised by an entirely *irreligious* outlook on life, identifying themselves as atheists, agnostics or secular humanists. A number of these individuals were even contemptuous of religion and those that chose to adhere to it, echoing the classic sociological ‘deprivation or need’ paradigm of religious participation (Glock 1964),

*“I was thinking religion is a creature of weak people who can not depend on himself. I was despising those believers, watching them with a sympathizing eye. How weak they are, how miserable and pitiful they are, and how stupid they are. I wanted to be strong and independent and I was trying to be ‘materialistic’, being myself, not to believe in anything else and pursuing the pleasure of the moment.”<sup>57</sup> Rukaiya*

Rukaiya’s disdain for the perceived weakness and dependence of *religious* people led her to seek an alternative worldview that was deemed to be “strong and independent” at the time, but in retrospect is referred to as “materialistic” and self-gratifying. This continual reappraisal of one’s life by applying the filter of conversion onto past events and experiences so that they now take on an Islamic hue, is a common tendency amongst converts. In the absence of a religiously inclined worldview, other converts had also attempted, with varying levels of success, to adopt alternate existential strategies and philosophies:

*“I called myself a communist, but today I wouldn’t say I knew what it means. Over time, I learned real politics and sociology, but when the communist bloc fell, I admitted my error and was no longer a fan of the communist states. I became agnostic, and thought that all human beings are condemned to egotism and to ignorance of some questions, like the existence of God. I learned philosophy. I wanted to avoid doing the same mistakes as in the past, and so I refused all dogmas.”<sup>58</sup> Samir*

Samir’s disillusionment with communism, and by extension all “dogmas”, materialised with the fall of the Communist bloc, leading him to adopt an almost pragmatic agnosticism. “Learning philosophy” was Samir’s way of dealing with his “error” and helped to fill the existential vacuum left in the wake of the receding worldview. In contrast Omar Abdul-Salaam described himself as gradually faltering

<sup>57</sup> <http://thetruereligion.org/modules/xfsection/article.php?articleid=291> [accessed: 25/02/2003].

<sup>58</sup> [http://www.geocities.com/embracing\\_islam/samir.html](http://www.geocities.com/embracing_islam/samir.html) [accessed: 04/02/2003].

from a state of philosophical contemplation to one of existential crisis, in which he wallowed for the remaining period prior to his eventual conversion,

*"My nights of drunken bitter meandering about the philosophical virtues of Jean Paul Satre, Nietzsche and Dostoevesky have brought me to a place of dark anguish and existential hopelessness. This is why I drink, I tell myself. I am convinced that there is no point to birth, life or death beyond this present reality. I cannot see investing effort in something as obviously finite as the human life-span. I can't beat it, so I might as well stumble about in a drunken stupor."*<sup>59</sup> Omar Abdul-Salaam

Indeed, the nature of this *crisis* was so profound that it manifested itself in Omar's life in a number of other, more tangible ways, including alcoholism. By framing the pre-conversion context and crisis in this way, the ensuing conversion to Islam can then be presented as the elixir for the various *ills*, and in particular alcoholism,<sup>60</sup> plaguing his pre-Islamic life.

Other converts did not appear to be completely averse to religion in the same way, although individuals like Ibrahim confessed to have not given the matter sufficient thought or consideration,

*"I had lived my life 25 years without really thinking about the existence of God or anything spiritual what-so-ever; I was the role model of the materialistic man."*<sup>61</sup> Ibrahim Karlsson.

Once again we see the convert invoking the image of the *materialistic* self to characterise the pre-Islamic mindset and to set it in direct opposition to the new *spiritual* self. However, it was not sufficient for Ibrahim to merely refer to himself as being materialistic, but rather he felt he must present himself as embodying the very epitome of materialism. The employment of superlatives and hyperbole as a means of reinforcing the intended *message* or making distinctions more salient is also characteristic of many conversion accounts.

Over 90% of all converts [n: 270/301=90%; m: 102/119=86%; f: 168/182=92%] professed to have had some form of religious affiliation, albeit however negligible, prior to their conversions to Islam.<sup>62</sup> Of these, around half [n: 138/270=51%; m: 48/102=47%; f: 90/168=54%] considered themselves to have been

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<sup>59</sup> <http://www.islamicbulletin.org/issues/aug98/Issue-Aug-98-Embraced.html> [accessed: 19/12/2002].

<sup>60</sup> Studies of alcoholics in the U.S. suggest that religious conversion is often cited as one of the most common reasons for remission of alcohol abuse; Tuchfeld (1981). Undoubtedly, an even more compelling case could be made with Islamic conversions, as Islam explicitly forbids alcohol consumption.

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.islamicweb.com/begin/newMuslims/karlsson.htm> [accessed: 08/09/2002].

<sup>62</sup> Previous religious affiliation: Christians=226, Atheist=22, Agnostic=9, Buddhist=12, Hindu=4, Jewish=20, Native American=1, Bahai=1, unspecified=6.

moderately or very religious, active participants within that particular tradition. A small proportion of these individuals [n: 10/138=7%; m: 7/48=15%; f: 3/90=3%] had even received formal theological training of some form and/or had seriously considered a religious or ministerial career path,

*“My father was an ordained minister, I preached Christianity to anyone who would listen in those days. My wife was a strong believer and we did go to church regularly in those days.”<sup>63</sup> Yusuf Estes*

Often converts associated this devoutness with a staunchly religious upbringing and zealous or authoritarian parents,

*“Growing up, I had no friends because no friend seemed “Catholic” enough. My dad and mum were my only friends because according to me they were good Christians. My parents were very STRICT...they both grew up as STRICT Christians. They would drop me to school and then pick me up. My growing up years were spent in school or the Church.”<sup>64</sup> Anon*

However, of those that identified a religious element in their adolescent or pre-conversion lives, around an eighth [n: 32/270=12%; m: 18/102=18%; f: 10/168=6%] felt that it had played a very minor role during their upbringing, or that their adult religious affiliation was simply the consequence of a sentimental attachment to the religion of their parents and thus constituted little more than a nominal adherence to that particular faith,

*“However, my family never attended church regularly and in everyday life religion was not an issue.”<sup>65</sup> Amina*

For many of these converts, religious beliefs and practices became less significant with age, particularly during adolescence. In most cases there also appears to have been a direct correlation between diminishing parental control and waning religious convictions,

*“As I got older, I could feel myself drifting away from Catholicism and any religious belief in general. I was still attending Mass every Sunday, but it was a burden to go and give even one hour a week.”<sup>66</sup> Abdullah Reda*

Phrases denoting free volition such as “I decided” and “my choice” were recurrent themes throughout many pre-conversion accounts, as the decision to leave the previous faith or worldview could then be counterpoised by the decision to convert to Islam. Both events were often characterised by conviction and certainty, carrying

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<sup>63</sup> [http://www.todayislam.com/answer\\_share.htm](http://www.todayislam.com/answer_share.htm) [accessed: 12/04/2003]

<sup>64</sup> [http://www.islamicweb.com/begin/newMuslims/convert\\_anon.htm](http://www.islamicweb.com/begin/newMuslims/convert_anon.htm) [accessed: 22/09/2002]

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Rhodes/7797/mystory/mystory.htm> [accessed: 14/09/2002]

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.algonet.se/~ulwur/reverts/abdullahreda.htm> [accessed: 12/04/2003]

the implication that the period of time between these two decisive choices was one of confusion and uncertainty.

*"When I was old enough to make choices for myself, I stopped going to church altogether."*<sup>67</sup> Jihad Mujahid Abdul Salam's

Whilst these individuals may not have been practising worshippers or adherents of their particular traditions and were often contemptuous of organised religion, many like Rosemary, still nurtured some small, private belief in God,

*"I hated the lies and hypocrisy of the Church – the way everyone preached one thing and then did something else. Back then, I began to doubt everything but I never doubted in God – thankfully that was something I never lost."*<sup>68</sup> Rosemary

For many individuals, their conversions to Islam represented the culmination of a much longer spiritual journey, which may have included temporary dalliances with other belief systems. Indeed, the convert may already have undergone a series of religious conversions before finally settling on the Islamic faith. Richardson (1978) coined the term 'conversion career' to describe these types of cases, claiming that they represented serial patterns of religious conversion, or I would suggest, multiple repeated acts of affiliation and disaffiliation. It is difficult to say whether or not these individuals did exhibit some sort of compulsive 'need' for conversion, and would thus potentially renege on the Islamic faith in the future too, or if the conversion to Islam was in fact the final destination in an otherwise peripatetic, and even turbulent, religious past. In some cases at least, the invocation of a well-travelled spiritual journey was perhaps deemed by the convert to provide evidence of an objective and measured eventual decision to convert to Islam.

Around a third of all converts professed to have experimented with at least one other faith [n: 100/301=33%; m: 34/119=29%; f: 66/182=35%], more than half of whom had been involved with two or more faiths for any significant period of time [n: 64/100=64%; m: 20/34=59%; f: 44/66=67%]. Most often, converts had simply switched to a different Church or denomination as this was least likely to invoke parental or social opprobrium whilst concomitantly fulfilling their need for religious transformation and change. However, other converts appeared to be dissatisfied with the change of emphasis that denominational switching entails and had explored a wider gamut of religious options with Buddhism, Hinduism and various New Age movements cited most often.

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<sup>67</sup> <http://thetruereligion.org/modules/xfsection/article.php?articleid=331> [accessed: 13/01/2003]

<sup>68</sup> [http://www.geocities.com/dv/RM32/about\\_me/reversion.htm](http://www.geocities.com/dv/RM32/about_me/reversion.htm) [accessed: 14/02/2002]

*“In my search, which lasted over 10 years (and probably longer on a subconscious level), I experimented with many different faiths, and approached them with curiosity and an open mind, staying with each for a while before moving on. A bit like a blind wine-tasting.”<sup>69</sup> Jenna*

In some cases at least, it appears that the description of a much longer, protracted spiritual journey involving encounters with other religious traditions, which are ultimately superseded by the Islamic faith, held two broader purposes. First, it allowed the convert to display the ‘inherent superiority’ of Islam over its ‘competitors’,<sup>70</sup> perhaps providing some degree of reinforcement for other converts and adherents of the faith. Second, it presented the convert as a rational, objective being who had weighed the pros and cons of various other faiths, before making a balanced and considered choice in converting to Islam.

It was generally possible to identify some broad patterns of engagement with the pre-conversion context. Indeed, conversion narratives were found to typically describe their pre-conversion lives in one of two ways:

1) The first paradigm accounted for only a small proportion of the narratives [83/301=27.6%]. Using the conversion as the pivotal point in the narrative, converts displaying this motif attempted to construct a harsh dichotomy between the pre and post conversion lives, a process I refer to as *contextual bifurcation* (Awan 2007b: 210). Moreover, the *past life* and all that it entailed was now diametrically opposed to the *present life*. Indeed, the more severe the distinction between the two phases, the more likely the convert considered the change wrought by conversion to be genuine and meaningful. Often the individual’s recollection of pre-conversion life was marked by confusion and crisis which is then seemingly resolved through acceptance of a totalitarian vision of Islam; a system of unflinching moral absolutes. Indeed, anything which failed to conform to this perceived moral clarity (including other Islamic viewpoints) was to be shunned and condemned. Moreover, the convert engaged in an almost Manichean separation of reality into *good* and *evil*, represented by the Islamic concepts of *halal* and *haram* respectively. This view was also typically characterised by the severing (or at least weakening) of familial and social networks, which also signified a ‘break’ with the past. In addition, there were often seemingly exaggerated accounts of pre-conversion life immersed in drugs, sex and a

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<sup>69</sup> <http://www.islamicweb.com/begin/newMuslims/jenna.htm> [accessed: 28/09/2002].

<sup>70</sup> I use the term ‘competitors’ in the sense of ‘religious economies’ framework (Young 1997; Stark and Finke 2000; Gartrell and Shannon 1985).

generally hedonistic lifestyle. Heirich (1977: 658) suggests that this is often deliberate as converts are then able to present themselves as ‘serious sinners’, thus rendering salvation that much more powerful.

2) Conversely, the second paradigm, which typically accounted for the vast majority of conversion narratives [218/301=72.4%], engaged in no such polarisation between the two phases of life; such narratives maintained *contextual continuity* (Awan 2007b: 210). Indeed, converts adopting this viewpoint, often failed to differentiate between pre and post conversion lives, choosing instead to view both as belonging to a continuum in which events transpired without fundamentally fracturing the overall *life story*. Converts displaying this motif usually presented themselves as ordinary people, often going to great lengths to show the *normalcy* of their lives, both prior and subsequent to conversion,

*“Now, I am not one of those stories of brothers who you hear were in gangs, addicted to crack, or worshiped devils at stone altars. I come from quite a typical background. I have two sisters; a brother; and both my parents are still married. My father is an engineer; while my mother is a housewife (or domestic engineer, as she likes to say) and we are as middle-class as you can get.”<sup>71</sup> Sa’ad Laws*

The aim in part appeared to be to counter the perceived public contention that they have converted to a *foreign* faith which in turn has ‘brainwashed’ or radically altered their persona in some way. Instead (and quite irrespective of whether the conversion was regarded as a complete spiritual transformation or a simple change of focus), converts considered themselves to be essentially the same people (albeit now spiritually enlightened ones), who had retained their own cultural specificity despite accepting a new creed. Indeed, the motif was characterised in part by the converts’ unequivocal assertion that the Islamic faith could indeed be reconciled with their innate identity. In stark contrast to Heirich’s suggestion above, rather than trying to highlight past discomfiting experiences, many converts employing this motif instead attempted to gloss over these ‘transgressions and sins’ preferring not to draw attention to a previously hedonistic lifestyle, as this was deemed unworthy of the new self and now of little consequence. This may in part be due to Islamic doctrine asserting that when an individual converts to Islam, all past sins are forgiven as they are returning (reverting) to the original sinless state of *fitrah* (Mohamed 1996).

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<sup>71</sup> <http://www.islamfortoday.com/saadlaws.htm> [accessed: 24/08/2003].

## 2.4. Adoption of Host Rhetoric

A number of studies have pointed to the critical importance of language use in understanding the conversion process (Snow and Machalek 1983, 1984; Staples and Mauss 1987; Beckford 1978). Snow and Machalek (1983: 266-78), studying the culturally transplanted *Nichiren Shoshu* Buddhist movement as well as accounts from other proselytizers and converts, suggest the convert should be viewed primarily as a social type with four key attributes, discernible from the talk and reasoning of converts. These are: biographical reconstruction; adoption of a master attribution scheme; suspension of analogical reasoning; and embracement of the convert role. They conclude that it is the convert's rhetoric rather than institutional context or ideological content that denotes the convert as a social type.

Staples and Mauss (1987: 133) found similar results whilst studying Christian evangelicals. They confirmed the existence of the four indicators characterised by Snow and Machalek (1983) among their small sample of Christians, but crucially found that 'biographical reconstruction,' was only unique to the Christians who had claimed a conversion experience. Conversely, the other three indicators were equally common to lifelong Christians and self-professed converts, suggesting that they were in fact indicators of religious commitment, rather than conversion specifically. Staples and Mauss (1987: 133) also suggest that language and rhetorical devices should be understood as "actively chosen tools and methods in converts' own efforts at self-transformation, rather than as indicators of what has already happened to them". Rambo (1993: 137) similarly suggests that language may in fact be a "powerful tool for the transformation of one's consciousness and perception of the world".

Following Staples and Mauss (1987), I suggest that one of the primary functions of the conversion narrative in Islam, is to serve as an early device for appropriating the religio-canonic language of the host faith, and thus aid efforts at self-transformation. Indeed, a convert's inculcation with the linguistic and symbolic framework of their newly acquired identity may be evinced from their use of Islamic language, phrases, and terminology within the narrative.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> For more on conversion identity and language, see Rambo (1993: 137) and van Nieuwkerk (2006: 10).

By far the most common and explicit ways in which converts assume an Islamic nomenclature within the narrative, lies in the description of the act itself. Often the terms *convert* and *conversion* are supplanted by *revert* and *reversion* respectively, in acknowledgment of the innate disposition of humankind and its parallel in Islam, as propounded by the Islamic doctrine of *fitrah*. Islam is sometimes referred to within traditional Islamic thought as *din al-fitrah* (the religion of human nature), as its laws and its teachings are considered by Muslims to be in full harmony with the natural inclination of the human spirit (Mohamed 1996). This pure, sinless, natural state, predisposed to belief in one God is held to be inherent within every child and remains so until the individual consciously acknowledges his or her particular belief system (Quran 7: 172-3; Sahih Bukhari 2-23: 440).

*"I would like to share with you my story on how I reverted to Islam. I used the word "reverted" because we were all born with the truth of Islam, it is somewhere after that when we lose sight of our path of truth."*<sup>73</sup> Melanie – Inaya

Consequently, through the use of the term reversion, converts like Melanie and Themise (below) are able to access new modes of interpretation for the change that has transpired, as well as providing an alternate expression for the motivations that underlie such a change. Indeed, some converts even suggested that this concept of reversion was now the only plausible way in which they could understand their own conversions. For others, it simply provided a convenient sound-bite response to the oft repeated question of when or why they converted to Islam.

*"If anyone were to ask me when I became Muslim, I guess the only feasible answer would be that I was born Muslim, but just wasn't aware of it. We are all born into a state of Islam, but what is unfortunate is that many people never recognize this fact, and live lost in other circles of religion and lifestyles."*<sup>74</sup> Themise Cruz

Both narratives also illustrate the common use of phrases synonymous with ‘being lost’, ‘going astray’ or of being diverted from ‘the straight path’, when referring to life prior to conversion. These are powerful metaphors that invoke images of salvation and guidance and offer the reader a stark contrast between the old life, characterised by uncertainty, suffering and futility, and the new life, characterised by direction, meaning and fulfilment. In addition, the phrases mirror a popular Muslim

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<sup>73</sup> <http://www.angelfire.com/in/4season/story.html> [accessed: 11/04/2002].

<sup>74</sup> [www.haneen.com.eg/islam/BecomingMuslim/Themise.shtm](http://www.haneen.com.eg/islam/BecomingMuslim/Themise.shtm) [accessed: 12/02/2002].

invocation found in the first chapter of the Quran and so also help to illustrate the converts' complete immersion into the new linguistic framework.<sup>75</sup>

Chua Gim San goes further and is able to appropriate the twin concepts of *fitra* and reversion to overcome burgeoning feelings of guilt and shame over pre-Islamic beliefs and lifestyles by transferring culpability to his parents and upbringing, whilst simultaneously presenting himself as an unwitting pawn in pre-conversion life. He substantiates these convictions with textual authority by employing the use of a well-known *hadith*,

*"According to a hadith, when a child is born, he or she is like a white cloth, it is the parents that will colour the white cloth to be red, blue, green or yellow. Like everyone, I was born a Muslim, but my parents are Buddhist, therefore through no fault of my own, I was brought up as one since my birth too."*<sup>76</sup> Chua Gim San

This excerpt once again serves to illustrate the proficiency with which converts will readily adopt new authority structures and linguistic or referential frameworks, particularly when attempting to wrestle with conflicting worldviews.

A corollary to the concept of *fitrah* is the Islamic belief that a *reversion* to Islam marks the return to an earlier sinless state, in the process, cleansing the convert of all previous sins and transgressions. Naturally, adopting such a tenet is conducive to authoring a revisionist life history and thus serves as a powerful motivating factor for severing ties with a past that may now be considered embarrassing or which the convert simply wishes to forget.

Often the narrative is also interspersed or punctuated with common Islamic or Arabic phrases. These serve a dual purpose; first and foremost, they portray the convert's proficiency and familiarity in using the new linguistic framework. In addition, many of these phrases also encompass more profound concepts; for example, although the phrase *inshallah* literally means 'if God wills', it also embodies the Islamic concepts of predetermination, and complete and utter reliance upon God (*tawakkal*). Consequently, through the use of such terms, the convert is shown to be a Muslim not just in speech or action, but in thought also, and this conscious attempt to engender a 'Muslim way of thinking' appears to be crucial to a lasting conversion.

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<sup>75</sup> The verses read "Show us the straight path, The path of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace, those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray" [Quran 1: 6-7].

<sup>76</sup> [http://www.islamicweb.com/begin/newMuslims/convert\\_chua.htm](http://www.islamicweb.com/begin/newMuslims/convert_chua.htm) [accessed: 18/06/2002].

## 2.5 Conversion in Cyberspace

It is now well recognised, that not only has the Internet increasingly been employed by existing traditional religious groups and organisations, who seek to diversify the means through which they operate, practice their faith and disseminate their teachings, but has also given rise to myriad new religious communities and groups who really only exist within this virtual sphere (Campbell 2010; Dawson and Cowan 2004; Bunt 2000; Clark *et al.*, 2004; Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005). Indeed, the Internet has witnessed an exponential rise in the number of people using this medium and the technologies it offers, to meet their religious and spiritual needs, and in the process, is redefining how and what people understand as religion and spirituality (Brasher 2004). As Dawson (2005: 15) suggests,

*[On the Internet] one can read about religion, talk about religion, download religious texts and documents, buy religious books and artefacts, search scriptures with electronic indexes, take virtual tours of galleries of religious art or the interiors of religious buildings, locate churches and religious centres, vote on organizational propositions, see images of religious leaders, watch religious services, listen to religious music, sermons, prayer, testimonials, and discourses, throw cyber-runes, and take virtual pilgrimages.”*

The Islamic faith has been right at the forefront of this growth in virtual religiosity (Bunt 2001; Mandaville 2001), with much of the impetus for this growth stemming from diasporic Muslim communities in the Western world, who have embraced Internet technologies as offering solutions to the problem posed by modernity and dislocation from the Muslim homelands (Awan 2007b). We might offer a number of examples to illustrate this unrivalled growth in ‘Islamicity’ online; a number of Islamic websites offer online fatwa (juristic opinion) databases and the provision of fatwa Q&A sessions.<sup>77</sup> The highly popular website askimam.org, which fields questions from visitors on a very diverse range of topics, presents its raison d’être as:

*“to provide Muslims and non-Muslims with Islamic teachings through internet applications (Quran Search Engine, Matrimonials Services, Ask the Imam, Muslim Housing and classifieds), hosting, Muslim search index, articles, and mail lists.”<sup>78</sup>*

Other examples of Islamic virtual religiosity are numerous. Fink (2010), for example, shows how online Friday sermon (*khutbah*) databases are being

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, [www.islam-qa.com](http://www.islam-qa.com) and [www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net) [Accessed 27 February 2006]; See also Bunt (2003) for a detailed discussion of websites catering to the ‘e-fatwa’ genre.

<sup>78</sup> <http://www.askimam.org/about.php> [Accessed 27 February 2006]

increasingly employed by mosques and Muslims living in Muslim minority contexts. Often these individuals do not have convenient access to religious leaders and mosque facilities, and thus can employ these online sermons with authority for local religious services, simultaneously linking the local into the wider global religious sphere.

Another example of the nexus between Islam and the virtual sphere, and the one with which I am most familiar having written extensively on the subject, is the virtual Jihad or virtual ‘holy war’ (Awan *et al.* 2011; Awan 2010; Awan and Al-Lami 2009; Awan 2009; Awan 2008; Awan 2007a; Awan 2007c).<sup>79</sup> Violent fundamentalist religious groups such as al-Qaeda, and their various audiences and supporters, have shifted much of their activity, supporting and legitimising ‘the global Jihad’, online, particularly in the wake of 9/11 and the Global War on Terror. Numerous other examples abound of the use of online spaces for overtly *Islamic* purposes which we could not reasonably cover in the space provided here, but Gary Bunt who has extensively studied ‘Islam in the Digital Age’ and ‘Cyber Islamic Environments’, provides excellent detailed descriptions of many of these phenomena (Bunt 2000, 2003, 2009).

Considering the overwhelming employment of virtual spaces by Muslims for ostensibly religious purposes, it should come as no surprise that the Internet has also featured heavily in recent proselytization efforts. Audio and video recordings featuring Muslim apologists and ‘celebrity’ *da’is* (lit. ‘callers to Islam’), such as Zakir Naik and Ahmed Deedat,<sup>80</sup> engaging in (often polemical) comparative religious debate with representatives of other faiths, are widely available on many Muslim websites, as well as mainstream file sharing portals like *Youtube.com*.<sup>81</sup> In some cases, well-known Muslim converts themselves take on the mantle of

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<sup>79</sup> I am acutely aware of the problems in categorising Jihadist activity as pertaining to the religious sphere, and have myself argued that this misappropriation of religious labels by Jihadist ideologues and leaders is deliberate and designed to mobilise support for, and divert criticism from, what are in effect, highly political goals (Awan 2009). However, these are rendered moot points, for whatever the distorted theological justification behind Jihadist acts, it remains an indelible sociological fact that these individuals considered themselves to be Muslim, and indeed Islam provided (at least in their minds) the *raison d'être* for their acts of violence and terror (Awan 2007b: 208).

<sup>80</sup> Westerlund (2003) provides a useful overview of Ahmed Deedat’s style and extensive career.

<sup>81</sup> Indeed, a number of Muslim conversion narratives online have specifically mentioned their authors converting to Islam after viewing videos of Ahmed Deedat; see for example, Anonymous, *American Christian converted to Islam after watching Ahmad Deedat's debate*, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-3VFDQ7bvA> [Accessed 23/02/2008]

proselytizer, particularly as they can potentially engage with non-Muslim audiences, and address potential convert concerns, with greater authenticity.<sup>82</sup>

A large number of Muslim missionary or *da'wah* websites have also emerged in recent years, appearing to cater specifically for new, existing, and potential converts, as well as non-Muslim visitors with concerns and questions about Islam. The most popular of these include;<sup>83</sup> *Islamreligion.com*, *Muslimconverts.com*, *Islamfortoday.com*, *Chatislamonline.org*, *Muslimsin.com*, *ConvertstoIslam.com*, *ConvertstoIslam.org*, *DiscoveringIslam.org*, *Islamtomorrow.com*, *Islam.thetruecall.com*, *Discover.Islamway.com*, and *Welcome-back.org*. Almost all of these websites are created around similar core themes, and organised in fairly generic ways. Most websites for example, prominently feature the following sections: explaining Muslim beliefs and practices; comparing Islam (favourably) to other faiths; providing evidence of Islam's claim to truth; addressing common misconceptions about Islam; providing step-by-step instructions on how to convert; providing practical advice on life as a new Muslim; and compiling lists of Islamic conversion narratives.

*Chatislamonline.org* is one of the most prominent websites in this category and is run by the Saudi based da'wah organisation, World Wide Association for Introducing Islam. As a result, the website is able to present a highly polished and professional image, and claims to be staffed by "80 qualified students of Islamic Sciences from more than 20 nationalities," most of whom are converts, and is also available in fifteen languages.<sup>84</sup> The website displays the following welcome message and mission statement on its homepage:

*"Welcome to Chat Islam Online, where we have a team of Muslims who are more than happy to answer any question you have about Islam. Our aim is to answer any questions asked by non Muslims or new Muslims. We want to portray our beautiful religion to as many people as we can. We also help people that want to convert to Islam, by helping them take the shahada, sending them free Quran and books also teaching them how to take the first steps of practicing Islam in the correct manner. So try it out, any question you have about Islam, the Quran, and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), we are more than happy to answer. At Chat Islam Online, we are at your*

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<sup>82</sup> Well known examples of convert *dai's* operating in Britain include Yusuf Estes, Abdul Raheem Greene and Hamza Andreas Tzortzis. I have differentiated here between Muslim converts whose primary sphere of activity appears to be *da'wah*, from other converts who are more conventional trained Islamic scholars, but may nevertheless, be involved with *da'wah* activities (e.g., Siraj Wahhaj, Bilal Philips, Hamza Yusuf Hanson, Suhaib Webb, and Abdul Hakim Murad Winters)

<sup>83</sup> Website popularity was based upon web traffic and other statistics garnered from Alexa.com.

<sup>84</sup> <http://www.chatislamonline.org/chat/Page.aspx?lang=2&id=10> [Accessed 27 March 2006].

*service! Investigating truth is better than living in doubt.*<sup>85</sup>

Chatislamonline.org, as the name might imply, seeks to guide would be converts through the declaration of their shahadah, through one-on-one personal live-chat session with their staff members, in any language of the individual's choice. Whilst Chatislamonline.org shares many similarities to a number of the websites mentioned above, it is unlikely to be representative of the genre as a whole, principally because of its high profile real world connections and significant resource availability. In addition, it is remarkable in its particularly strong advocation of a wholly virtual conversion, whereas the vast majority of other websites within this genre, generally present *online* conversions as a viable option only if the individual is unable to seek out a local mosque or other Muslims. The UK-based website *IslamicConvert.com*, for example, which contains a prominent "Take Shahadha Online" option, nevertheless directs the viewer to an online questionnaire that requests personal details and gives the following options for type of conversion required: "Take the Shahadah in a mosque"; "Take the Shahadah in front of a Muslim"; and "Take the Shahadah over the phone".<sup>86</sup> Clearly none of these options actually constitute a wholly online experience.

Thus the idea that an individual can convert wholly online is not entirely unproblematic, and there appears to be some debate amongst religious scholars and authorities on the validity of converting to Islam online. For example, the following exchange was posted on a traditional Deobandi 'fatwa' website,<sup>87</sup>

*"Question: Saalamu Alaikum Sheikh what is the ruling regarding Shahadah, are two witnesses necessary? And what is the ruling regarding Shahadah's over the Internet example (Paltalk, Yahoo) I was curious about these matters*

*Answer: The ruling differs from case to case. However, in normal cases, such as Nikaah two witnesses are necessary. As for the Shahadah over the internet, it is not valid in Shariah."*

These Deobandi Ulama, well known for adhering to a rigid, puritanical and austere form of Islam (Zaman 2002), reject what they perceive to be innovative and unorthodox practices, potentially considering the idea of a shahadah online to constitute *bidah* (reprehensible religious innovation). Moreover, in contrast to the methodology of the plethora of other 'e-fatwa websites' online, the response here

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<sup>85</sup> <http://www.chatislamonline.org/chat/> [Accessed 27 March 2006].

<sup>86</sup> <http://www.islamicconvert.com> [Accessed 25 February 2006]

<sup>87</sup> The website belongs to the *Jaamia Hamidia lil Uloomil Islaamiyyah* based in South Africa and is available at <http://jaamiahamedia.wordpress.com/ask-mufti-online/> [Accessed 27 March 2006]

does not provide any real evidence for the position adopted and is therefore unlikely to be heeded by any but the staunchest adherents of this particular school. Thus, whilst many ‘e-fatwas’, and ‘lay’ opinions in discussion forums appear to be supportive of virtual shahadahs, there is nevertheless some ambiguity surrounding the permissibility of conversion online, which understandably results in the question being posed on a regular basis on various Muslim platforms online.<sup>88</sup>

Despite the proliferation of these missionary style da’wah websites, whose very raison d’être is to encourage and aid conversion to Islam, a great many Islamic conversions online actually take place outside of these fora.<sup>89</sup> Conversions may be enacted in a range of online settings that host virtual Islamic communities, including social networking sites, discussion forums and bulletin boards, Internet relay chat-rooms, and even personal blogs. My observation of a range of Islamic chat forums during the course of this study, led to the documenting of a number of conversions to Islam online over a relatively short space of time, providing some evidence of the growth of the entirely virtual religious conversion experience. I will provide a brief recounting of one such instance here.

In August of 2007, a 28 year old American woman frequented the *icq.com* Islam chatroom for three successive nights,<sup>90</sup> during which time she expressed interest in some of the beliefs and practices of Islam. In a brief biographical introduction, she identified herself as a “searcher” and someone who “takes the truth from wherever I find it”. Some of the other participants, recognising her Western screen name, enquired as to whether or not she was a Muslim. She responded by replying “not yet”, which naturally prompted a host of other questions and statements of support from intrigued fellow participants. These responses ranged from queries about, her knowledge of Islam, what was impeding her conversion, her current beliefs, and the basis of her interest in the faith. This individual was fairly forthcoming in her responses, but also posed a whole raft of questions in return on a

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<sup>88</sup> See for example, <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?88658-shahada>, <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20110624090444AAfRg3g>, <http://forums.islamicawakening.com/f20/shahada-online-48908/>, <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090606160422AACyQrm> [Accessed 25 February 2009]

<sup>89</sup> Although in such cases it is difficult to ascertain whether or not the individuals deliberately eschew the organised da’wah websites.

<sup>90</sup> I have resisted employing the actual screen name of this individual as it may enable identification. Clearly, information disclosed in an environment with clear boundaries (which a chat forum obviously is, considering that one needs to submit a screen name and password to gain access to it), is quite different to a conversion narrative posted on a publicly accessible website.

wide range of topics clearly attempting to gain greater understanding of Islamic beliefs and practices as they were ‘lived’ by actual Muslims. She returned for two successive nights, and on the final night, stated that she had, after a long night of reflection, decided she was ready to become a Muslim. A senior member from the forum then asked if she was ready to declare her shahadah now, and when she replied in the affirmative, the senior member invited her into a private chat session within the chat room. Around twenty minutes later, the pair re-emerged into the main chat room, and the individual was introduced to the other participants as “our new sister x”. This pronouncement was met with effusive exclamations of joy and elation from other participants using a standardised religio-canonic language, including stock phrases such as *alhamdulillah* (praise be to God), *masha ’Allah* (whatever God wills), and *Allahu Akbar* (God is great).<sup>91</sup> There were also numerous offers of help and assistance from fellow participants, and the new convert seemed genuinely overwhelmed by the experience and subsequent celebratory atmosphere of the chat room.

Whilst the description of a conversion online above appears to reinforce the role of the virtual sphere, we must temper this discussion of the characteristics of religious conversion online by the observation that the act of conversion itself will in fact most likely remain relegated to the offline world. Essentially what I mean by this, is that if we understand conversion to Islam to primarily entail enunciation of the testimony of faith (shahadah), then the words of this witnessing of faith, ‘There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his messenger’, must be spoken aloud in person. Of course, the shahadah may be recited sitting before a computer screen, in front of virtual witnesses, or an online audience, but it is nevertheless an offline act that takes place in the real world.

Increasingly, however, it is making less and less sense to speak of an ephemeral offline/online divide, whose boundaries are constantly shifting with both advents in web technologies, and advances in web users’ proficiency with these emerging platforms. Moreover, the virtual world itself is problematic if postulated as some kind of monolithic entity. Rather, the virtual world is in fact composed of a

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<sup>91</sup> I have written elsewhere on the conspicuous religious saturation of identifying markers on Muslim forums (in the form of avatars and usernames), and the highly fraternal and strikingly religio-canonic vernacular of these environments, which can sometimes appear to be forced and even ritualised, suggesting that membership of these forums engender conformity through strictly regulated modes of interaction (Awan *et al.*, 2011: 30).

multiplicity of spheres, where, as Manovich (2001: 42) contends, “every citizen can construct her own custom lifestyle and select her ideology from a large number of choices”. Consequently, it makes little sense to consider the role of conversion in the virtual world *per se*, rather, we must examine religious conversion as it occurs within a multiplicity of spaces within this rapidly proliferating virtual world (Awan *et al.*, 2011: 45).

One further noteworthy aspect of virtual shahadahs, is the fact that the convert may have undertaken a religious conversion without ever having come into contact with members of the new group from the real world, or indeed from the online world either. Consequently, many virtual religious conversions (at least to the Islamic faith) can prove to be highly socially isolated experiences. This finding is intriguing precisely because a number of well-known sociological theories of religion, and of religious conversion in particular, posit an overwhelming social basis for religious group membership (Long and Hadden 1985; Lofland and Stark 1965; Glock and Stark 1966; Snow and Philips 1980; Snow and Machalek 1984; Start and Finke 2000; Seggar and Kunz 1972; Clarke 1987). However, these theories appear to be proving increasingly inadequate when attempting to conceptualise the online conversion experience, particularly as the nature of the online sphere itself and the types of relationships it engenders, have proven so difficult to characterise. Indeed, the Internet has radically transformed our understandings of what it is that we mean by our social circle. Social networking online, for example, has significantly expanded our circle of friends to incorporate people who we have only ever ‘met’ online (Rheingold 2000: xviii). What, for example, can be ascertained about an individual’s social circle if they ostensibly have hundreds of ‘friends’ through Facebook?

Numerous studies have also shown online relationships to differ in both form and substance from offline relationships. Cummings *et al.*, (2002) show, for example, that online relationships are significantly less valuable than offline ones, and indeed, their net benefit depends on whether they supplement or substitute for offline social relationships. Similarly Subrahmanyam *et al.*, (2008: 420) contend that social networking sites have become commonly used tools for reinforcing or reconnecting with offline friendships and family relationships, as they allow users to engage in online social interaction and conversation. That is not to imply that individuals cannot cultivate deep and meaningful social relationships online with

strangers, as can be evinced by the ubiquitous and rapid uptake of social networking sites in the last few years.<sup>92</sup> Rather, the perennial debate on the social role of the Internet over the last few years has focused on whether the virtual world will tend to isolate or connect individuals, and thus undermine or reinforce social ties (Di Gennaroa and Dutton 2007), and it appears this debate will not disappear anytime soon.

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<sup>92</sup> At least five out of the top ten websites as of December 2010 were characterised as representing social media or social networking websites as reported by *Alexa.com* (the remainder being search engines), see <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>

## CHAPTER 3. PART II: PRE-CONVERSION CONTEXT

We turn now to the second and major part of this study, which is based on a large dataset of 143 largely unstructured interviews conducted with Muslim converts in Britain, and which should be thought of as oral narratives or testimonies, analogous in many ways to the Internet conversion narratives encountered in the first part of the study. The resulting narratives were analysed using the modified Grounded Theory method enumerated earlier, in which a selective or focused coding method which typically analyses larger units of meaning was employed (Charmaz 1995; Glaser 1978).

Analysis began with a meticulous scrutiny of these individual units of meaning using a constant comparative method which led to the inductive emergence of conceptual categories. As each new unit of meaning was selected for analysis, it was compared to all other units of meaning and subsequently grouped with those that were similar to it. If there were no similar units of meaning, a new category was formed. The goal of this initial step was to identify a large array of potentially important ideas, experiences, concepts, and themes in the data. As the analysis proceeded, conceptual categories and their relationships became progressively more refined, so that the more salient concepts emerge as a matter of course. The data collection and analysis was emergent and sequential, as subsequent sampling was focused on conceptually fruitful avenues and dependent upon emergent concepts.

The categories enumerated throughout part II of the study and which form the subheadings of many chapters were thus all inductively derived from the dataset using the Grounded Theory method. I have, however, also employed selected excerpts from the narratives to illustrate and provide depth to many of these categories. These excerpts do not always correspond to the ‘units of meaning’ used during the Grounded Theory analysis, but are often longer, fuller and less-fractured accounts, but which nevertheless still contain the original ‘unit of meaning’ within the excerpt.

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It is extremely difficult, nigh on impossible, to attempt an understanding of the conversion experience without first locating this experience within some broader

pre-conversion context that also takes into account the social, cultural, religious and even political milieus within which the convert was, and often remains, situated. Rambo (1993: 20) characterises the context as encompassing “a vast panorama of conflicting, confluent, and dialectical factors that both facilitate and repress the process of conversion.” He delineates this context into macro-context, which constitutes elements of the wider environment; and the micro-context, which incorporates the “family, friends, ethnic group, religious community, and neighbourhood” (Rambo 1993: 22).

Indeed, most converts themselves acknowledge the importance of the pre-conversion context. For them it is absolutely crucial that they contextualise their conversion experiences, as communicated in their narratives, by harking back to some former predicament vis-à-vis religion and society, particularly if such a reflection helps to validate the efficacy of the conversion experience (Heirich 1977; Beckford 1978; Richardson *et al.*, 1978; Miller 1997; Tipton 1982; Taylor 1976). However, as researchers, our attempts to generate an accurate reflection of this phase are made problematic as conversion narratives invariably view their pre-conversion lives through a highly-refracted post-conversion lens. Moreover, of the various stages of conversion, the pre-conversion context is the most likely to be subject to alteration and embellishment during these retrospective reconstructions, precisely because conversional efficacy in many ways rests upon it. Nevertheless, we are compelled to take these accounts seriously and at face value, for we have little else with which to reconstruct that which existed prior to conversion. Moreover, the convert’s post-conversion life and worldview is inextricably linked to, and indeed predicated upon, what they perceived (or reconstructed) the previous worldview to be, and thus merits our sustained focus.

Whilst virtually all converts made some reference to their pre-conversion context, the degree to which past lives were invoked varied enormously between individuals. Converts often dictated which elements were disclosed, and at what point during the narrative, with some converts even refusing to answer directed questions about certain aspects of life prior to conversion. Most converts did not voluntarily bring up aspects of their pre-conversion lives which appeared to have little or no bearing on the later conversion experience, or in any way detracted from the overall coherency of the narrative. Analysis of the narratives resulted in the emergence of three salient themes falling within the purview of the pre-conversion

context: religiosity, milieu tension, and social embedment. These themes were found to be of considerable importance to most converts in the overall framing of their narrative, although not all converts invoked each individual theme. Moreover, many converts did not delineate these themes into discrete elements of the narrative (as they have been represented here) and indeed there was inevitably a great deal of overlap between them in many of the narratives.

### **3.1 Religiosity**

Whilst I have opted to follow Glock and Stark's (1965) definition and use of the term *religiosity* here, as referring to the importance of religion in a person's life, it is clear that the term is not entirely unproblematic. A study by Pargament et al., (1995) for example, found that students and clergy from the same religious college attached differing meanings to what constituted religiosity or 'religiousness', with interpretations ranging from church attendance, to adherence to church dogma, and 'closeness with God' amongst many others. Nevertheless, this diffuseness of meaning is not necessarily problematic for this study as we are primarily interested in participants' self-evaluations of their religiosity, as opposed to demarcating the contours of that religiosity in any way. I have followed 'religious self-identification' and self-evaluation principles throughout this study (Hackett and Lindsay 2008; Smith et al., 1998), which avoid the problems of constructing theoretical categories and placing participants into these pre-conceived constructs or typologies, ensuring that participants themselves are comfortable with their positions vis-à-vis measures such as religious affiliation and individual religiosity.

Almost every participant felt it necessary to reference their pre-conversion state vis-à-vis religion in some manner, *even* if they had not been particularly religious in outlook, or indeed of a secular persuasion, during this period. This referential marker appeared to be important as it would ostensibly allow the audience to establish how far (or how little) the convert had travelled as a result of embracing the Islamic faith. Moreover, converts implicitly assumed that audiences might expect *religious* conversion narratives to have an attendant religious framework with

particular reference to religious antecedents, if they were to avoid misinterpreting or misrepresenting the reasons behind conversion.<sup>93</sup>

Analysis of our sample indicated that there were essentially three central aspects to describing one's own pre-conversion religiosity; i) religious affiliation or background, ii) level or intensity of belief or praxis, and iii) relationship with institutional forms of religion, which we will now deal with in turn.

**1) Religious affiliation/background:** An obvious starting point for most converts was their identification (or just as importantly, a lack of identification) with a religious tradition. This identification was most commonly with their natal religion, and crucially was cited irrespective of levels of personal praxis or belief.

In a small number of cases, however, individuals indicated that their religious affiliation differed from that of their parents or family members, particularly if they had experimented with other religious options prior to their engagement with the Islamic faith. For these individuals, their conversions' to Islam represented the culmination of a longer religious search that had included temporary dalliances with or even more permanent conversions to one or more other faiths too. Of course, for many converts, there was no identification with a previous religious tradition and these individuals identified themselves as varyingly atheists, agnostics or secular humanists. The sample group displayed virtually the entire spectrum of religious affiliations (including none) prior to their conversion, with most major religious denominations in the UK represented, and very loosely reflecting the patterns of religious affiliation in the UK as measured in the 2001 Census (ONS 2003d).<sup>94</sup>

**2) Level or intensity of belief/praxis:** As a corollary to identification with a religious tradition, individuals would often elaborate by signifying the strength of attachment to this belief system by referring to the level or intensity of belief and concomitant level of praxis. Terms employed by converts included *disillusioned*, *nominal*, *practising*, *committed*, and *fundamentalist* amongst others. Although this descriptor generally only applied to those who saw themselves as belonging to a

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<sup>93</sup> A number of converts spoke of suspicion of Academia and the Media in representing religious conversion accurately and sincerely, and in particular were wary of the external imposition of 'the real' reasons behind conversion, e.g. marriage, rebellion, etc (for more on this, see chapter 5).

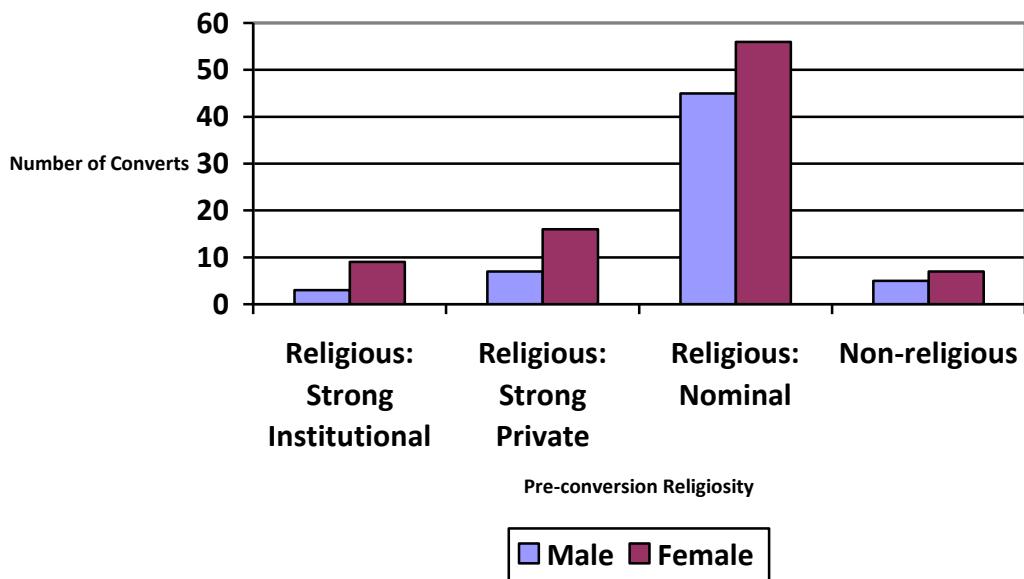
<sup>94</sup> The 2001 UK Census was the first UK Census to include a voluntary question on religious affiliation. Just over three-quarters of the UK population reported having a religion (77.1 per cent), with 71.8 per cent of the population self-identifying as Christians. After Christianity, Islam was the most common faith with 2.8 per cent describing their religion as Muslim. 15.1 per cent of the population claimed to have 'No religion', 7.8 per cent did not state their religion (ONS 2003d).

religious tradition, some atheists also felt compelled to describe the intensity of their aversion to religion with one individual describing himself as a ‘secular fundamentalist’.

**3) Relationship with institutional forms of religion:** This final aspect was not mentioned by all converts, but displayed some degree of overlap with the previous category, in that many individuals’ descriptions of their levels of belief and praxis were closely correlated with, or even dependent upon, their relationship with more formal, organised forms of religion. For example, converts describing only a nominal link to their religious tradition often accounted for this with reference to disillusionment with the Church and/or religious leaders, or dogmatic interpretations of scripture.

Having identified and collated the self-descriptions of pre-conversion religiosity, or its absence thereof, we can identify five prominent categories within which virtually all converts might be located, which we will now deal with in turn.

**Figure 1: Pre-conversion Religiosity**



### 3.1.1 Religious – Strong Institutional

[N: 12/143=8% F: 9/86=10%; M: 3/57=5%] This category contained the least number of individuals and was essentially comprised of those who held strong religious beliefs, but crucially, within some organised institutional context. By that we mean that these individuals were not only faithful adherents of a specific religion

or religious denomination, but were also active members of a church, group, organisation or other religious body.

*"My brothers and me were raised as good Sikh boys – we went to the gurdwara [Sikh temple] so we had a good solid start in life. I think it's because of that, that we took pride in our Sikh heritage and traditions as we grew older and that sense of izzat [respect, honour] for yourself, your heritage, your elders, your religious traditions and respect for the spiritual side stayed with us and kept us grounded and we always felt it gave us success in life generally, in jobs and careers and marriage etc...it kept us on 'the straight path' as it were. Well obviously I 'strayed' I suppose because I found Islam [laughter], but you know, erm up until then I was a good observant Sikh and you know...my brothers are all still very devout and everything" Gurminder*

Gurminder was raised as a devout Sikh and maintained a strict religious observance of his own volition late into adulthood - in fact right up until his conversion. His account displays quite clearly the importance ascribed to formal religious institutions by narratives within this category. In Gurminder's example these institutions are represented by the Gurdwara, the 'elders', and the orthodox Sikh faith, and for him they provide structure, meaning and guidance within his life. In fact Gurminder had largely attributed material and worldly success in the past to his strong faith and religious observance. Gurminder's example is somewhat different to the others in this category in the sense that Sikhism can be characterised as both a religion and an ethnicity,<sup>95</sup> and thus questions about religiosity are inevitably bound to be intimately and inextricably tied up with issues of belonging, and 'innate' identity, rendering the task of categorising religiosity that much more difficult. Moreover, Gurminder's conversion to the Islamic faith also represents the potentially hazardous traversing of other markers of identity, particularly as the originating community from which he stems are more likely to also interpret this ostensibly religious change as a betrayal of ethnic identity.

The other major defining feature inherent within this category was the importance ascribed by individuals to maintaining orthodoxy, and significantly, orthopraxy within their respective traditions. This view is illustrated aptly by Stephen's example,

*"I was a very devout Catholic – attended mass, followed the Scriptures....and I did sincerely believe.[pause] I was a believer. " Stephen*

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<sup>95</sup> For example, in the UK, Sikhs (along with Jews) are protected by Race Relations legislation whereas Muslims and other religious constituencies are not (Modood 2005).

### **3.1.2 Religious – Strong Private**

[N: 18/143=13%; F: 14/86=16%; M: 4/57=7%] This category subsumed those individuals who held strong personal religious beliefs, but significantly, were not affiliated with any organised form of religion.<sup>96</sup> The reasons behind this individualistic approach to religion were varied, but the recurring motif within this category was a degree of disillusionment with the *establishment religion*,

*"I stopped going to church a long time ago when I realised that those in power were the same ones who'd been abusing kids, and were the same ones who were complete hypocrites and said one thing and did the other. I never gave up my faith because it wasn't God, but men who pushed me away from the Church"* Jenny

Jenny pointed to contemporary controversies within the Catholic Church, and particularly a number of child abuse scandals involving Catholic priests, as being instrumental in her gradual disillusionment with the Church. Unable to reconcile the actions of those she saw as the hierarchical representatives and custodians of the faith, with the precepts of her own internally idealised faith, Jenny experienced a profound disconnect between the two. Crucially however, she was able to extricate and attribute the causes of this disconnect to *men*, who bore the brunt of her frustration and anger, thus largely vindicating God and the faith more broadly. Moreover, the faith itself was not necessarily weakened by the actions of the Church's representatives, but rather the public abandonment of "past grounding assumptions" weakened the authority of these previously respected leaders (Heirich 1977: 674). Consequently, she was able to subsequently claim that her 'faith' had never waned and that she had continued to nurture a very strong private belief in God.

Whilst a number of participants had attributed their disillusionment with organised forms of religion to the pejorative actions of individuals placed in positions of responsibility who had cast a particularly bad light on their respective tradition, the majority of participants within this category had in fact experienced disenchantment for entirely different reasons altogether. Indeed the most common reason for disenchantment stemmed from the perception of a gradual weakening and 'dilution' of the fundamental rules, precepts and commands of the faith as interpreted by the official 'gatekeepers' (Becker 1970) of the established faith. These

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<sup>96</sup> This category holds some parallels with one of the typologies from Voas and Crockett's (2005) recent survey of British religiosity, as 'belief without belonging.'

individuals often viewed the gradual changes that many traditions in the modern world have undergone, less as progress, adaptation or evolution in response to the challenges posed by secular modernity,<sup>97</sup> but more as weakness and insecurity in a world increasingly hostile to *faith* and in which religion was offering itself as any other market commodity.<sup>98</sup> This tension between tradition and modernity, or continuity and change is keenly felt in Dennis' account,

*"I guess I'm quite old-fash, quite erm traditional in my views. I don't agree with homosexuality...don't get me wrong – I'm not against gay rights and all that, but the Bible is crystal-clear on the subject. There's no discussion on it. Period. So when I saw the Church losing its way on issues like this, I was left feeling angry, confused and unsure of what their point was if they couldn't guide us on what was right and what was wrong." Dennis*

Dennis' excerpt is highly revealing, particularly in its judicious selection of words. His views on homosexuality for example, which might be considered archaic by modern standards and sensibilities, are offered tentatively and by invoking the legitimising rubric of *tradition*. Moreover, he is wary of appearing intolerant and tempers his statement by protesting that he is “not against gay rights and all that, but the Bible is crystal-clear on the subject”, clearly highlighting the internal conflict between his scripturally-founded belief, and contemporary thinking on the issue. Leaving aside the highly problematic issue of whether or not the Bible is ‘crystal clear’ on the issue, the Anglican Church’s perceived prevarication and uncertainty over homosexuality and other issues pertaining to gender or sexuality,<sup>99</sup> led Dennis to question the very legitimacy of the Church as an institution that sought to provide moral guidance over aspects of his life. Indeed in protest, Dennis rejected the Church outright, but crucially without ever rejecting his personal Christian beliefs.<sup>100</sup> Many individuals within this category underwent similar experiences, in which the perceived ambiguity of their religious institution on certain issues, or indeed its

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<sup>97</sup> There are strong parallels here with the antecedents for the rise of Fundamentalisms too (Almond et al., 2003; Appleby and Marty 2002).

<sup>98</sup> Curiously, this is essentially what the ‘religious economies’ or ‘Free market’ approach to religious affiliation posits (Young 1997; Stark and Finke 2000; Gartrell and Shannon 1985).

<sup>99</sup> The Anglican Church’s protracted and highly visible internal conflict over issues such as the ordainment of female ministers, or same sex marriage have clearly had a strong impact on the unity and coherency of its constituency and the Union has experienced considerable social and political fallout as a result.

<sup>100</sup> One might wonder why he did not simply adopt another Christian denomination more ‘conducive’ to his beliefs, a practice often referred to as denominational switching.

adoption of positions that appeared to contradict authoritative religious texts, ultimately rendered its role as moral arbiter untenable.

A small number of participants within this category did not explicitly reference a process of disillusionment with organised forms of religion or religious leaders, but rather appeared to have always pursued a more independent or non-conformist approach on issues of religiosity.

*"I've always very much been my own person when it came to God. To me, religion is a very private, personal thing. If my idea of God is somehow different to someone else's, then who's to say which one's in the right? Live and let live right?"*

*"I'm not saying that religion has no place in the public sphere - I think if you want to do all that showy 'hey look at me, look at how good a Christian I am' thing then fine. That's your choice – horses for courses. But it's not my scene." Ian*

Ian adopts a fairly pluralistic and tolerant outlook towards the beliefs of others his 'live and let live' attitude helping to validate his own heterodox religiosity, although this is tempered somewhat by his condescending attitude towards those who might engage in more public forms of religiosity, which he dismisses as 'showing off'.

### **3.1.3 Religious – Nominal**

[N: 101/143=71%; F: 56/86=65%; M: 45/57=79%] This category constituted the largest group of individuals and represented a weak or intermittent religious affiliation that was not generally borne of conviction or 'faith' but rather was based around familiarity, honouring cultural or familial traditions, or adherence to social norms. Curiously, when questioned about their pre-conversion contexts, most such converts did not, at least in the first instance, elaborate upon their religious status immediately prior to conversion, but rather harked back to a much earlier period during their childhood or adolescence, leaving the impression that the issue of religion had not been engaged with in any meaningful way during adulthood, but rather had been consigned to some sort of state of limbo. In many cases, it may be useful to consider this stage of *religious limbo* as analogous to Erikson's (1968) 'moratorium' from his work on youth identity crises, and which he suggests is a period during which wider society makes implicit allowances for youth in a state of identity confusion to explore various identities or 'find themselves'.<sup>101</sup>

*"I grew up in a pretty normal household. I wouldn't say religion was an important part*

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<sup>101</sup> See also Poston (1992: 166) for more on the 'moratorium period' or length of time observed between rejection of the faith converts were brought up in, and the age at which they converted.

*of our lives growing up but it was always there in the background rearing its head every now and again – wedding, funerals, Christmas, that sort of thing. To be honest, there was very little substance to any of it and I suppose we were really only Christian in name or because it was what was expected” Louis*

The example of Louis above is illustrative of many converts within this category and their stance towards religion (in this case Christianity), in which the engagement with religion is primarily through the commemoration of key milestones or the celebration of festivals, and crucially, in a largely perfunctory manner. Louis even suggests that this token acknowledgement of religion is fairly commonplace and in fact conforms to wider societal norms. Moreover, he also alludes to what is a recurring theme throughout many of the narratives: the notion that both an individual's religiosity, and relationship with religion more broadly (whether it be strong or weak), are predicated in large part upon established societal, and more importantly, familial expectations and norms. This is perhaps unsurprising considering that much research has shown the family to be the primary agent of religious socialization (Hyde 1990), and parents to be the most important source of religious influence (Ozorak 1989; Aldous 1983). As Gazer (1997) suggests, religious traits often represent the cultural traits most keenly transmitted by parents and family members.<sup>102</sup> This intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs and practices occurs primarily through modelling of parents' behaviours and beliefs (Dudley and Dudley 1986; Cornwall 1988), and reinforcing supportive parent-child relationships (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990). Thus, although Louis concedes that he was “really only Christian in name”, it is not clear from his account whether this was attributable to any conscious decision on his part, or a product of familial, and more generally socio-cultural, mores.

Conversely, others in this category had been raised in fairly religious households, where religious beliefs, morals, and traditions had played an important part in their upbringing, however, over time these individuals had inadvertently drifted away from religion. Nevertheless, crucially, there had been no conscious disavowal of their natal faith. Rather, in many cases, religious praxis and

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<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, an early study by Roberts (1965) found that those who embraced their natal faith in adulthood were significantly more neurotic than those who converted to a dissimilar faith, which appears to go against much early research. Roberts attributed this observation to the fact that the second group had undergone a successful integrative process that was attributable to strong personal convictions and the ability to make a conscious and deliberate choice. He placed this in stark contrast to the first group who he argued may have felt unduly pressured to conform to their parent's wishes, thereby stunting maturity.

commitments had simply become too onerous amongst the rigours of busy, modern, secular lifestyles; or more often (as in the case of Elton), were considered embarrassing in a largely secularised society, and had thus been relegated to this trivial position.

*“I gradually became less and less religious as I got older. I mean, who has time for religion nowadays anyway. In fact, I’d go so far as saying that in today’s society, to say you’re religious is actually a bit embarrassing – a bit backward!” Elton*

Reinforcing the earlier notion that religiosity is likely to conform to societal mores, Elton considered religion to be an impediment in modern societies, describing it as “embarrassing” and “backward”.

### **3.1.4 Non-religious – Agnostic/Atheist**

[N: 12/143=8%; F: 7/86=8%; M: 5/57=9%] The final category, which encompassed individuals who felt unable or unwilling to identify with any religious tradition prior to their conversions, was then further delineated into atheists and agnostics. This is a fairly diffuse category, but I have followed Voas and Crockett (2005) who refer to such individuals as those who simply lack belief. The only real discernible difference between these two non-religious categories lay in the certainty of their disbelief (in God or religion), with agnostics being able to at least entertain the possibility that some higher entity could exist. Aside from this difference, they were in fact very similar, displaying equally diverse life trajectories and with both categories just as likely to have undergone either a religious or secular upbringing. In stark contrast to the *nominally religious* group, most atheists and agnostics who had been raised in religious households had at some point deliberately and consciously distanced themselves from the prevailing religious tradition. Some had gone further than mere disavowals of their natal faith, such as Ben who had instead vehemently repudiated his Christian upbringing,

*“Once I was old enough to start making my own decisions, I decided that Church wasn’t for me anymore. The sermons, the hypocrisy, the scandals.” Ben*

Curiously, Ben’s sentiments were very similar to those expressed by Jenny (*strong private*) but had resulted in surprisingly different outcomes. Whereas Jenny felt institutional religion (as embodied by the Church), was the cause of her disillusionment and had subsequently redirected the focus of her religiosity to a largely private sphere, Ben was far less conciliatory, and his disillusionment with the

Church had resulted in a rejection of religion *in toto*. These two examples illustrate very well the considerable complexity of individual religiosity, in that two very similar life trajectories and formative experiences vis-à-vis religion can nevertheless lead to completely divergent outcomes.

Not all members of this previously non-religious cohort had experienced religious upbringings which they later rejected. Individuals like Jamie for example, had (not unlike many within the religious motif), simply adopted the status quo within their family without any critical scrutiny,

*"My parents, through no fault of their own, were completely materialistic like most people today and God was not allowed to be mentioned in the house. [Can you explain?] Well not literally 'not mentioned', but if you did, you would get an earful. And my Grandma who was a devout Catholic was usually thought of as a bit cuckoo by my Dad when she did anything obviously Catholic, and the message for me and my brother growing up was that religion was only for old senile Grans!" James*

James was raised in a family in which overt religiosity from an older family member was barely tolerated, and mockingly attributed to eccentricity or senility. For others within the family, who could not be excused on such grounds, God was a taboo subject that could not be broached without inviting scathing criticism from authority figures within the family. Once again we see a confabulation of secularism and materialism which mirrors some of the sentiments encountered in Chapter 2, where Rukaiya reappraised her secular lifestyle as "materialistic and self-gratifying", and Ibrahim Karlsson portrayed himself as the "role-model of materialistic man". The dissonance between spirituality and materialism is acutely felt in most religious traditions, and despite Christianity's occasionally ambiguous attitude towards the material world and worldly success,<sup>103</sup> the spiritually corruptive influence of the material world was found to be a recurrent theme amongst many of the conversion narratives. Curiously, some converts found they were unable or unwilling to compete in this materialistic race or environment, and this potentially led in some cases to a perception of what Bainbridge (1997: 85) refers to as 'relative deprivation'; a sense that an individual lacks what others possess, leading to feelings of frustration and injustice. In the context of religious conversion, the suggestion being that churches, sects or religious organisations might help to alleviate the symptoms of relative

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<sup>103</sup> I am thinking here of course of Weber's (1904) classic thesis *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which he identifies the evolution of Capitalism amongst Protestants (and particularly Calvinists) in Northern Europe by establishing linkages between doctrines of economic success and salvation.

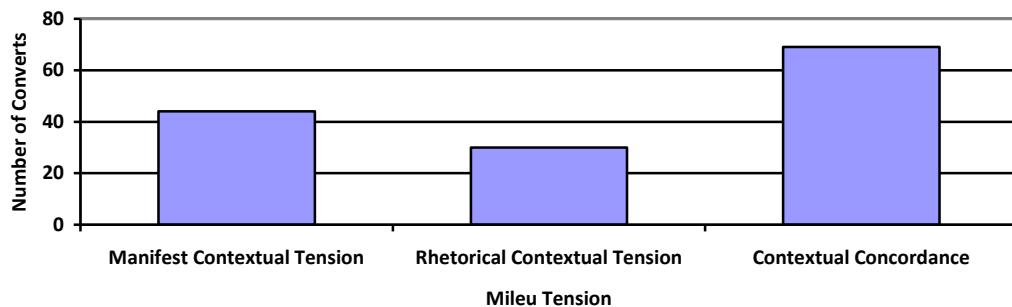
deprivation through psychological compensation or deferred rewards (Bainbridge 1997: 111).

### **3.2 Milieu Tension**

The second major theme pertaining to pre-conversion reflected the convert's relative degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the prevailing context. Following Weberian conceptualisations of conversion, as being critically predicated upon notions of disenchantment and an estrangement with the old way of life, we might reasonably expect all converts to actively engage with issues of discontentment with the pre-conversion context (Weber 1956). In fact, around one third of the sample *did not* make any explicit reference to this issue in their narrative (of course this does not automatically indicate a level of contentment with the prevailing context, but it does question the importance ascribed to dissatisfaction with the previous worldview in the overall narrative for many converts).

The remainder of the sample did articulate their level of (dis)contentment with the pre-conversion period in some tangible manner, with many converts identifying a very diverse range of aspects of the pre-conversion context as being potentially problematic. These included religious, political, social, cultural, sexual and economic aspects, and whilst the multifarious nature of converts' concerns prevented easy classification, the *degree* to which converts invoked discontent with the pre-conversion milieu as a theme within their narrative, their relationship with that milieu whilst situated within it, and the overall effect this had on the (re)construction of the narrative, revealed some clear groupings. Consequently it was possible to identify the existence of three broad modes of engagement with the pre-conversion context; i) manifest contextual tension; iii) rhetorical contextual tension; iii) contextual concordance which we will now deal with in turn.

**Figure 2: Mileu Tension**



### 3.2.1 Manifest Contextual Tension

Narratives articulating this first viewpoint constituted the second largest category [44/143=31%] and were characterised by highly critical denunciations of one or more aspects of the pre-conversion context. Indeed these individuals existed in what is commonly referred to as a state of *tension*,<sup>104</sup> or acute disagreement, with the dominant surrounding culture and social milieu. Lofland and Stark (1965: 864), who first characterised the concept of tension as it relates to religious conversion, defined it as “a felt discrepancy between some imaginary, ideal state of affairs and the circumstances in which these people saw themselves caught up.”<sup>105</sup>

Converts located themselves within this problematic environment, but crucially portrayed themselves as unwitting or passive agents within this milieu who had managed to refrain from active participation in its excesses. Consequently, they were not only able to portray themselves as having not been sullied by the ‘sordid’ and ‘corrupting’ environment around them (and thus having resisted temptation – a classically laudable religious virtue), but could also present themselves as somehow morally concordant with Islamic ethics and values, perhaps attempting a favourable comparison with the *hunafa* (pre-Islamic monotheists) mentioned in the Islamic canon.<sup>106</sup> Graham painted his pre-conversion context as a world of poverty and vice, but crucially, one that did not manage to taint him by association,

“I grew up in a run-down estate in South London and to be honest it wasn’t easy growing up there. There was knives and drugs and crime and loose girls... erm, you

<sup>104</sup> *Tension* is the first stage of Lofland and Stark’s (1965) well-known seven-stage conversion process model, and for which they argue that for conversion to take place, an individual must experience enduring, acutely-felt tensions.

<sup>105</sup> In fact a number of what Bainbridge (1992) refers to as ‘strain’ theories of conversion are predicated on an inherent state of tension with the pre-conversion milieu.

<sup>106</sup> See for example the Quran [3:67] which describes Abraham as neither ‘a Jew, nor a Christian; but he was an upright man (*haneef*) who had surrendered (to Allah), and he was not of the idolaters.’

*name it – it was there back then. Even guns this one time. The company around me wasn't very good and I never fitted in growing up because I didn't do what everyone else was. Thankfully, and I thank Allah mainly for this, I managed to stay away from that scene. It just wasn't me. I think that's why when the Deen [trans. religion] came along, it just made sense to me, like it just fit me, you know?" Graham*

Indeed Graham's detachment from his existing context was precisely what enabled his relatively easy transposition to, and subsequent embedment within, the new host context. We will deal with some of the issues that relate to post-conversion and motivations in subsequent chapters, but it is clear that Graham's account displays *contextual continuity* (Awan 2007b: 210-1). So even though there is a clear disparity between the pre and post conversion contexts, there is no engagement in a bifurcation of the personal narrative and thus there is no polarization between *his* stages of life either side of the conversion. Moreover, although Graham's narrative appears to adhere to a very familiar conversion trope by presenting his spiritual journey from a life of vice to a life of virtue,<sup>107</sup> his personal life journey is in fact marked by constancy and the transformation is far less apparent. Consequently, according to Graham's narrative, it was not his life that altered drastically with conversion, but rather the context or milieu in which he was situated.

Teresa was also highly critical of the prevailing socio-cultural context, but in particular of what she perceived to be the inherent gender inequality in contemporary Western culture 'masquerading' as freedom and liberation,

*"No-one questions why a nun wears her habit or why Jewish women cover their hair but it's exactly the same principle, so why should I suddenly be oppressed because I choose to wear one? Did you know that in every single classical depiction of Mary, she has her head covered? ...you didn't know that did you but she does – go and check for yourself! The hijab elevates women above the poor 'liberated' souls in the posters and the semi-naked car ads and the glamour magazines – it makes men stop and view me first and foremost as a person who has a mind and a personality as opposed to simply a body." Teresa*

Teresa identified herself as a staunch feminist prior to her conversion, and thus both her scathing critique of Western women as having submitted to the lascivious gaze of a voyeuristic male audience, and adoption of the hijab following conversion, could be characterised as representing *contextual continuity*. Indeed, despite the rejection of a contemporary Western secular paradigm, and the acceptance of a

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<sup>107</sup> See for example Miller (1997), Tipton (1982), Beckford (1978), and Heirich (1977).

major gendered sartorial post-conversion change (as represented by the hijab), her viewpoint remains remarkably consistent throughout much of her life. Moreover, this continuity is reinforced by her invocation of veiling practices from her own Judeo-Christian heritage which she attempts to reclaim through her conversion to Islam, and therefore lends an air of credibility to the idea that there is no stark rupture or disjunction between her pre and post-conversion lives.

### **3.2.2 Rhetorical Contextual Tension**

The second category was least represented within the narratives [30/143=21%] and consisted of converts who also evinced considerable dissatisfaction with the pre-conversion context or portrayed this context in highly pejorative terms, but nevertheless crucially located themselves as active participants within that environment. Consequently, not only did they not disassociate themselves from that environment altogether or claim to remain aloof from its ‘perils’, but most did not conceive of the pre-conversion milieu as particularly problematic whilst embedded within it either. Indeed, many who openly narrated stories of hedonism and excess did not recount their experiences as unique in any way or dissimilar to those of their peers or wider society, indicating that they were simply following the prevailing paradigm at the time. Thus it could be argued that their overtly pejorative characterisations of the pre-conversion context *after* the conversion and their accounts of significant tension and discontent were largely rhetorical.

*“I’m ashamed to say this now, but I was very lost for a long time. A long time. I don’t know what would have happened to me if I hadn’t mended my ways. I drank, I smoked pot, I had no respect for women, I lived for the moment – I didn’t really think about right from wrong...but it was normal among my friends. I just did what everyone else was doing.” Pierre*

Pierre was deeply embedded within the prevailing context, and expressed remorse and shame over his ready assimilation into that pre-conversion milieu. He described himself as “very lost” within what he now perceived to be a morally corrupt and hedonistic milieu, but which he did not attempt to interrogate or critique whilst situated within it. Consequently whilst Pierre’s assessment of the pre-conversion context does not differ significantly from those in the previous category, his relationship with that milieu is markedly different; at best, it depicts Pierre as weak

and having easily submitted to ‘temptation’, and at worst, as somehow complicit in his own embedment within this corruptive *enabling environment*.

The idea of an enabling environment that encourages or rewards immorality and hedonism and thus facilitates the path to ‘vice’ is fairly common in many narratives. Indeed, in some accounts the enabling environment was deemed to be so threatening, that following conversion, some individuals even undertook their own real or imagined *hijra* (emigration) in response.<sup>108</sup> Whilst a number of converts mentioned moving to largely Muslim areas in Britain in order to benefit more fully from host community engagement and participation,<sup>109</sup> only a very small number of converts conceived of this relocation as a retreat to, and ‘cocooning’ within, a more culturally homogenous Muslim environment that shielded the neophyte from the ‘corrupting’ external environment. Curiously, Jamal who joined the radical Islamist organisation *Hizb ut-Tahrir* following his conversion,<sup>110</sup> also undertook a perceived *hijra* of sorts, however, in his case the highly insular group framework surrogated for the hermetic protective environment offered by the ‘Muslim enclave’.

*“Before I became Muslim I lived a full but erm empty life, if you see what I mean. I did everything I could and lived life to the fullest...I experimented with a lot of things - to me, that was what being young was about. You know...I’m not proud of it, but no-one said to me “this is wrong” or “you’re screwing up your life”- and plus all of the people I knew were doing it....~*

*Life didn’t really have any meaning or purpose and eventually there was an emptiness growing inside of me and so that helped me escape. But it wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be, and it still had a hold over me and it was only thanks to the brothers, that I managed to escape the fitna [trans. temptation] that was around me back then.”* Jamal

Jamal’s comfortable immersion in the youth culture scene was gradually replaced by a growing sense of disillusionment and despair, although this in itself was not sufficient to break the overbearing ‘hold’ of the enabling environment. Indeed, in an attempt to explain his seeming impotence (or prevarication) in its midst, he recasts the enabling environment in much more ominous form that grants it manifest power

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<sup>108</sup> The Hijrah refers to the emigration of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina around 632 AD in order to escape religious persecution and is thus considered to be of central importance in the Islamic canon. Indeed, the Hijrah is considered such a seminal event that the Islamic or Hijri calendar begins from this date.

<sup>109</sup> As well as any other rewards and compensators conferred by host group membership (Stark and Bainbridge 1987: 27-36).

<sup>110</sup> Hizb ut Tahrir is a radically Islamist organisation that seeks to (re)establish a Caliphate across the Muslim world; for a masterful analysis of the movement’s history and ideology see Taji-Farouki (1996).

over his life. It is then only the group ('the brothers') that is able to negate the overbearing influence of the enabling environment by extricating him completely from its ambit, allowing him to 'escape'. Jamal's secession from the wider social context in order to resist the 'temptation' and 'moral corruption' that surrounded him appears familiar because it in fact has a number of historical parallels in the Muslim world. In particular, Jamal's experiences bear some resemblance to the Egyptian group *Takfir wal hijrah*, who chose to secede from wider Egyptian society during the 1970s in order to preserve their religious integrity and avoid moral and spiritual corruption through association with the *jahiliyya*<sup>111</sup> society around them.<sup>112</sup>

Like Jamal, most converts within this category, who recounted past lives of hedonism and excess within their narratives, sought to contrast this quite clearly with their lives and context following conversion, and thus actively engaged in a process that I have referred to as *contextual bifurcation*; using the conversion as the pivotal point in the narrative, converts attempt to construct a harsh dichotomy between the pre and post conversion lives, presenting a *past life* and all that it entailed as now diametrically opposed to the *present life* (Awan 2007b: 210).

The often stark contrast painted between the pre and post-conversion life has long been recognised in studies of religious conversion; William James' (1902: 177) seminal work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, for example, depicted the phenomena as one in which "a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new." Later studies, whilst recognising the ubiquity of these seemingly exaggerated accounts that starkly juxtapose the 'old life', potentially immersed in drugs, sex and a generally hedonistic lifestyle, with the new reformed life, have questioned the validity and authenticity of such narratives (Heirich 1977; Miller 1997; Tipton 1982). Heirich (1977: 658), for instance, suggests that such accounts are often deliberate as converts can then present themselves as 'serious sinners' who have been 'saved' through conversion.

What bearing then do these findings have on our present study? As suggested earlier, most existing studies of conversion narratives have been based upon

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<sup>111</sup> The term *Jahiliyya* literally means the age of ignorance and traditionally refers to the pagan pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula, however, the term was redeployed by Sayyid Qutb during the 1960s to critique contemporary Egyptian society as having regressed to the level of pagan society, and it is this usage that is employed by *Takfir wal hijrah* (Calvert, 2010).

<sup>112</sup> Indeed, the *Takfir wal hijra* group founded by Shukri Mustafa was viewed by most contemporary Egyptians as a secretive religious cult that converted and brainwashed Egyptian youth, forcing them to withdraw from society and disassociate from their families (Kepel 1985).

conversion narratives to Christianity, or within Christianity i.e. denominational switching (Paloutzian *et al.*, 1999). These Christian narratives represent a highly specialised literary form and adhere to certain conventions (Hindmarsh 2005; Beckford 1978; Stromberg 1993; Mary 2000), and thus their findings cannot be easily extrapolated to the majority of Islamic conversion narratives which often hold to a very different paradigm (see chapter 2). However, with this qualification firmly stated, we can nevertheless recognise that the small number of Islamic conversion narratives that exhibit *rhetorical tension* may display strong parallels with the archetypal Christian conversion narrative discussed earlier, particularly with respect to presenting a stark and highly stylized contrast between the pre and post-conversion stages of life, in order to demonstrate salvific efficacy. Indeed, the more severe the distinction made between the two phases, the more likely the convert will be to present the change precipitated by conversion to be genuine and meaningful.

Whilst it is immensely difficult to attempt to positively ascribe motivations and causes for the practice of articulating contextual disjunction, we can nevertheless tentatively postulate that at least some (if not all) converts within this category may have felt a certain degree of pressure from their putative audiences, to provide some rationale or justification for the changing of their worldview. Moreover, whilst there is no obvious archetype for Islamic conversion narratives, many converts will no doubt be aware of the proliferation of Islamic (and indeed other religious) conversion narratives on the Internet (van Nieuwkerk 2006), published convert biographies (Bushill-Matthews 2008; Anway 1995; Jameelah 1993), and ‘missionary literature’ (Dirks and Parlove 2003; Haleem and Bowman 1999; Shahid 2002; Ball 1987; Bawany 1961;), which not only provide established frameworks for the conversion narrative, but also evince clear motivations for production.<sup>113</sup>

As we stated earlier, there is often an implicit, but incorrect assumption amongst researchers in general, and sociologists of religion in particular, that individuals almost universally “possess a relatively coherent, overarching, and articulated...‘world-view’” (Bainbridge and Stark 1981: 1). Instead, as Denzin and Lincoln (1994:12) argue, they “are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they did and why.” For converts who do not necessarily have coherent and cogent accounts of

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<sup>113</sup> As Hermansen (1999: 56), deliberating on the purpose of conversion narratives, ponders “is it to edify, inspire, justify, convince, or confess?”

their religious experiences and conversion, or at least are unable to articulate them in a convincing and effective manner, the temptation to simply problematize the pre-conversion context, or draw attention to its failings, as a means of ‘explaining’ the conversion, may be overwhelming. The aim may not necessarily have been to provide a portrayal of conversion that rendered salvation that much more powerful or efficacious, but rather to provide greater depth and profundity to, what is otherwise an intensely personal event in their lives, and one that is perhaps difficult to capture in written form. Moreover, if the convert perceives the penning of a conversion narrative to be an intrinsic ‘ritual’ act associated with conversion to Islam, then the convert may engage in this ritual simply in order to adhere to conventions and gain full membership of the group or community. The community or group in this instance may be the transnational global Muslim community or Ummah (Mandaville 2001), a virtual community (Bunt 2000),<sup>114</sup> the local Muslim community, or indeed the community of converts itself.<sup>115</sup> Each of these group stratifications may be perceived by the convert as an intensely scrutinising audience, before whom certain implicit initiation rites and rituals must be performed;<sup>116</sup> in other words, as Kilbourne and Richardson (1989) suggest, to pass as a convert, the individual needs to know how to talk like a convert, behave like a convert, and indeed, look like a convert.

### 3.2.3 Contextual Concordance

The final category incorporated the largest number of narratives [69/143=48%] and was characterised by a minimal focus on the problematic aspects of the pre-conversion context. This is not to imply that converts articulating this viewpoint did not evince any form of dissatisfaction with aspects of their lives prior to conversion. Rather, it was the nature of this discontent that differed markedly from the previous

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<sup>114</sup> The various virtual fora used by Muslim converts are particularly geared towards the production of conversion narratives. Due to the inherent anonymity provided by blogs, discussion forums, bulletin boards and Internet relay chat (IRC) channels, and attendant problems with the attribution of social trust on the Internet (Awan, 2007a), many virtual fora will ask guests and new members to provide an introduction or brief biography before conferring full rights and privileges of the online community; see also Chapter 2.

<sup>115</sup> A number of organisations now exist which cater specifically for the growing British convert community, such as the *New Muslims Project (NMP)*, and provide a range of social and educational services. The NMP’s newsletter (*Meeting Point*), contains a monthly list of new converts, with the aim of putting them in touch with convert mentors and friends in their vicinity, and thus actively engenders a convert community ethos. In addition, various Islamic mosques and organisations such as the Association for British Muslims (ABM) often provide ‘hubs’, religious classes or social gatherings exclusively for converts.

<sup>116</sup> These perceived initiation rites and rituals may be entirely a construct of the convert’s mind, but they are nevertheless rendered very real to the convert as a result.

category and thus tension did not appear to feature as a prominent theme within the narrative.

Many converts within this category did not seek to disparage or problematize their pre-conversion context, or attempt to portray themselves as active seekers as a result of discontentment with the existing milieu,

*"I was a regular everyday guy – happy in my own way like 99% of people are. I wasn't missing anything as such – I've heard other converts talk about their life being empty and them having no purpose in life etc. – I'd be lying if I tried to pretend to you that somehow applied to me. The truth is that my life was absolutely fine. Ok, there wasn't any spirituality or anything deeper there - which I know now – which I now can appreciate was missing, but at the time it wasn't something I was aware of. I-uh...I didn't go out looking for answers because I somehow felt that my life was shit –oops! Sorry! –but you get what I mean."*

*Cameron*

Cameron now recognises the absence of any form of spirituality or religious sentiment from his earlier life, but crucially defies the easy tendency to superimpose his current ‘enlightened’ understanding onto his previous frame of mind. Instead, he readily concedes that his life back then was “absolutely fine”, and that there was no impetus for undertaking any sort of profound spiritual search. Interestingly, Cameron reveals that he is keenly aware of the existence of other conversion narratives, and in particular, the presence of common conversion tropes that starkly dichotomise the conversion experience and thus fall into one of the previous categories displaying either real or imagined tension. Despite this cognizance, he does not in any way attempt to rewrite the narrative in order that it might better adhere to conversion narrative conventions more broadly. Consequently there is no conscious effort to ‘explain’ the conversion, in order to make it more engaging for audiences, or indeed the researcher.

Some converts were less likely to exhibit contextual disjuncture, as they did not necessarily view their conversions as ‘spiritual transformations’, but rather as a far less drastic form of positive spiritual growth. Thus the conversion was often downplayed, such that it was presented as only one amongst the many important milestones in an individual’s life, and certainly did not represent the sole locus of the biography. Naturally, in many of these cases (and in stark contrast to the previous category), there was no attempt to highlight past discomfiting experiences either, with the convert instead attempting to gloss over potential ‘transgressions and sins’ opting not to preferring not to draw attention to a previously hedonistic lifestyle, as it

was now deemed unworthy of new self. This may in part be due to Islamic doctrine asserting that when an individual converts to Islam, all past sins are forgiven as they are returning (reverting) to the original sinless state of *fitrah* (Mohamed 1996).

There are also interesting parallels between Cameron and Pierre's accounts which represent very different categories. Both narratives attempt to portray their authors as 'regular, everyday' people, indicating that they were simply following the prevailing paradigm at the time. Indeed, both draw attention to the apparent *normalcy* of their lives prior to conversion, but with entirely different motivations. Pierre, recounting a past of hedonism and excess, casts himself as not being unique in any way or dissimilar to his peers or wider society, characterising this state as "very lost". Whilst Cameron also draws attention to the regularity of his existence, describing his experiences as commensurate with the vast majority of his peers, he characterises this as "happy in my own way", suggesting a content existence but clearly one that was oblivious to spirituality.

### 3.3 Social Embedment

The final prominent theme was primarily concerned with the level of social embedment within the pre-conversion context, and which displayed some degree of overlap with the previous category, in that many individuals' descriptions of their levels of social embedment were also closely correlated with, or in some cases even dependent upon, their degree of dissatisfaction or tension with the pre-conversion milieu. Broadly speaking, converts characterised their positioning vis-à-vis their pre-conversion social matrix, or their mode of social embedment, as either socially integrated or socially isolated. Naturally, these states present two diametrically opposed and idealised positions that are unlikely to account for the range of any individual's social interactions in their entirety. Thus, we should not consider social isolation and social integration to represent any sort of fixed dichotomy, but rather, two possible manifestations of social embedment that exist as part of a much broader and continuous spectrum. Moreover, it was rarely possible to identify a single mode of engagement with the pre-conversion context for each convert, which could then somehow be interpreted as representing the sum of a given convert's social interactions, but rather each convert displayed a range of social embedment positions

which were dependent upon a more nuanced stratification of the social matrix. This stratification of the social matrix can be conceived of as representing three progressively more distant concentric circles with the convert at their very centre, and being comprised of i) the primary sphere, which incorporates close friends and family; spouses, parents, children, and siblings, who are all considered to be integral actors in the convert's social matrix; ii) the secondary sphere, which includes colleagues, associates and other friends who interact with the individual on a regular basis, but not necessarily in an intimately personal capacity; and iii) the tertiary sphere, which encompasses elements of the wider society whose interaction with the individual is occasional and remote, and consequently exerts the smallest degree of influence over the convert.

Broadly speaking, those individuals who had espoused *manifest contextual tension* and had managed to refrain from active participation in what they perceived to be an immoral, hedonistic or materialistic enabling environment, often viewed the social component of that enabling environment as equally problematic. Graham, who we encountered earlier for example, had consciously abstained from participation within the pre-conversion milieu. However, this rejection of, or tension with, the pre-existing social context and all that it entailed, meant that Graham was equally uncomfortable socializing with his peers and immediate social circle, who were most likely deeply immersed in that very same environment,

*“The company around me wasn’t very good and I never fitted in growing up because I didn’t do what everyone else was. Thankfully, and I thank Allah mainly for this, I managed to stay away from that scene. It just wasn’t me.” Graham*

Indeed many of these individuals who went on to demonstrate tension with the pre-conversion context, were prone to view themselves as social outcasts or pariahs from their families or communities, due to the minority views they held, even prior to their conversions to Islam. In these sorts of cases, it proved relatively easy to characterise the mode of social embedment; many converts exhibiting tension, discontentment or contextual disjuncture, clearly identified themselves, within most or all spheres, as socially isolated prior to their conversions,

*“Growing up I always struggled to fit in – I’m not just talking about the awkward teenager stage – but even throughout my early adult life, I always felt like I was different to people around me, as if I didn’t belong. The only person who I felt understood me and who I could talk to was my Nana, and she used to joke that it must mean I was a couple of generations older than I looked! I remember it was really*

*devastating for me when she passed – I felt like I'd lost my only friend in the world.*

*Aside from Nana, I remember I always felt closer to my animals than I did to people around me – that's still true to an extent today, but less so since I became Muslim.”*

*Emily*

Emily provides a clear example of an individual experiencing social isolation in her pre-conversion context, describing the experience poignantly as a feeling of not belonging and of being different to others. This mode of social embedment appears to span the entire social stratification within her narrative and thus, with the death of her ‘Nana’, there is little remaining to anchor her to the existing social sphere.

Based upon this characterisation of her social attachments prior to conversion, one could perhaps suggest that Emily is an ideal candidate for a number of sociological theories of religious conversion, that seek to find linkages between inadequate or limited social attachment during the formative years,<sup>117</sup> and religious change (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990;<sup>118</sup> Granqvist 2003). These models are based in part upon theories that posit an overwhelming social basis for religious group membership (Long and Hadden 1985; Lofland and Stark 1965; Glock and Stark 1966; Snow and Philips 1980; Snow and Machalek 1984; Start and Finke 2000;). Lofland and Stark’s (1965) classic model of religious conversion, for example, contends that if young religious seekers encounter a group or cult and begin to develop social and emotional bonds with group members which are somehow stronger than the emotional bonds with non-group members (such as parents, siblings or peers), then they will most likely convert to the new group. Conversely, if the emotional bonds with non-group members are stronger, conversion is less likely to occur. Similarly, Glock and Stark (1966) introduce the concept of ‘social encapsulation’ for religious groups, which describes and explains the existence of a much higher proportion of friendships or other social relationships with fellow

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<sup>117</sup> Much of this work is based upon Bowlbys (1969, 1979) classic social ‘attachment theory’, who described the concept of attachment as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (Bowlby 1969: 194), and argued that early experiences and styles of attachment in childhood (particularly with parents and caregivers), had important influences on development and later adult behaviour later in life.

<sup>118</sup> Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) suggest that certain aspects of adult religiosity, particularly beliefs about God and having a personal relationship with God, might be predictable from a combination of the type of childhood social attachment and level of parental religiosity. Individuals reporting insecure patterns of childhood attachment with either parent were more likely to be religious as adults, or were more likely to undergo sudden religious conversion during adolescence or adulthood, than those who had reported secure types of attachment. As a result, the authors suggest that God and religion may function in a compensatory role for people with a history of avoidant attachment, or put differently, God may serve as a substitute attachment figure.

members of the group than with non-members and outsiders. (Clarke 1987: 7) reinforces this view by suggesting that in fact “personal contact between the evangelizer and the potential recruit accounts for a majority of the conversions in the case of many new religions”.

Based on all of the above, we might postulate, in the absence of other pertinent biographical details, that Emily’s pre-conversion mode of social embedment crucially underlies her later religious transformation. Although we might also choose to temper this suggestion with the observation that her social isolationism is not entirely eliminated following her conversion to Islam, which might suggest that her religious change was not entirely, or even primarily, based upon her desire for social belonging.

In the same way that Emily’s case above reflects the archetypal characterisation of social isolation, then a number of individuals who recounted a strong degree of contentment with the pre-conversion context or displayed a complete absence of tension, and thus displayed overwhelming contextual continuity, clearly exhibited a highly integrationist mode of social embedment within the pre-conversion context.

*“The hardest thing for me when I was converting was having to leave behind a lot of people that I cared about or loved. I’m not saying I had to abandon them because my new religion forbade me to meet them or anything, but deep down I knew that if I made this choice, then things could never be the same again – they just couldn’t. My friends would see me differently, and even if they didn’t say anything directly to me, I knew they would feel differently – and actually I turned out to be right about that. Out of my old circle, I barely still see two people on a semi-regular basis, and some of the others I’ll exchange Christmas and Birthday cards with, but that’s about it.” Gail*

Gail who describes herself elsewhere as a “bubbly, outgoing kind of person,” possessed a rich and diverse social sphere and was highly active in a number of social circles prior to her conversion. Consequently, Gail exhibited a highly integrated mode of social embedment. In fact the social networks around her were deemed to be of such importance in her life, that potentially altering this social circle was felt to be the most difficult obstacle facing her impending conversion to Islam. In fact, Gail’s case appears to run contrary to the assumed linkage between inadequate social attachment and religious conversion propounded by the various studies above (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990; Granqvist 2003). Moreover, the presence of strong affective bonds with many individuals from within the pre-

conversion social matrix, and conversely, as of yet only inchoate relationships with individuals from the faith to which one is converting,<sup>119</sup> appears to contest the social basis for religious group membership propounded by other studies (Long and Hadden 1985; Lofland and Stark 1965; Glock and Stark 1966; Snow and Philips 1980; Snow and Machalek 1984; Start and Finke 2000; Seggar and Kunz 1972).

I mentioned in chapter 1 my concerns and frustrations at the common practice of attempting to distil, compartmentalize and force highly individualistic and personal conversion narratives onto pre-existing conversion theories (which may not be empirically based, and will likely be based on very different and highly specific religious datasets). Emily and Gail's narratives above aptly illustrate this point; that the richness and complexity of individual narratives will often defy easy classification or compartmentalisation, and thus cannot, simply and unproblematically, be mapped to existing theories of religious conversion. Indeed, Emily and Gail's narratives present before us two disparate cases that, respectively, confirm and deny a number a number of well-established theories of the social aspects of religious conversion. In this case, we may be able to account for the differences observed and thus partially reconcile these findings by following Granqvist (2003) in applying Bowlby's (1969, 1979) attachment theory to the two 'paradigms' of religious conversion described by Richardson (1985). According to him, these are, the classic, passive, or 'sick' paradigm,<sup>120</sup> which, being a deterministic or psychological model, portrays conversion as occurring during distress, as being sudden and intense, and as highly self-transforming; and conversely, the contemporary, active or 'healthy' paradigm, which portrays conversion as gradual, and less-transforming and involving an active meaning-seeking subject who exercises volition in deciding to convert to a new religion (Richardson 1985: 163). Granqvist (2003: 172) postulates that the conversion characteristics of the classic sick paradigm are true specifically for individuals with insecure social attachment characteristics, whilst those of the contemporary healthy paradigm hold true for those with secure social attachment characteristics. Therefore, following Granqvist (2003), we might propose that Emily's conversion perhaps conforms to the classic, passive and deterministic paradigm in which the conversion is sudden and occurs as a result of enduring tensions and other extrinsic factors

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<sup>119</sup> So in effect, a reverse social encapsulation (Glock and Stark 1966).

<sup>120</sup> It was James (1902) who first coined the idea of conversions of the "sick soul".

(Emily's conversion is in fact very gradual, unfolding over the course of at least two years). On the other hand, Gail's conversion could potentially fit well within the 'contemporary', active-seeker paradigm, which presents her conversion as completely volitional and healthy.

Other narratives proved even more problematic, particularly as the range of modes of engagement with various spheres of the social matrix made it much more difficult to characterise the individual's social embedment as a whole,

*"I grew up in a nice part of London. Being an only child, my parents doted on me and I've always been very close to them – especially my mum. I had a very open-minded and liberal upbringing and they'd taught to me to think independently. Their initial reaction to my conversion was surprise, I have to admit, but after that they were supportive of my choices and respected them – I mean how could they not? ~ I've been happily married for 9 years now. I have a doting wife (who also became Muslim last year Alhamdulillah) and two gorgeous kids – I couldn't ask for more. ~ Before I converted I really struggled to see any worth in British society – it seemed to be going down the drain and from what I could see, was becoming worse and worse by the day. I can't say I was ever comfortable with mainstream culture – you know yobbish behaviour, celebrity culture, obsession with sex and shallow materialism and I struggled to have anything in common with it really." Rick*

An analysis of Rick's narrative reveals a range of modes of engagement with the social matrix, for example, prior to his conversion, he appeared to be happily married with children, having had a perfectly happy and content upbringing and by extension, held strong bonds with parents and extended family, and thus appeared to be comfortably socially integrated within the primary sphere. Concomitantly, he also railed against aspects of his wider secondary and tertiary social spheres and appeared profoundly socially isolated from both. This state of tension undoubtedly played a significant role in his conversion, particularly as his idealised conceptualisation of the society and social structure of his future faith, provided a ready solution to his perceived social isolation. However conversely, Rick's deep and meaningful integration and embedment within his primary sphere should, according to numerous models of conversion (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990; Granqvist 2003; Glock and Stark 1966; Snow and Machalek 1984; Start and Finke 2000; Seggar and Kunz 1972), preclude religious conversion. To summarise, whilst we may be able to confidently characterise an individual's range of modes of social embedment across a putative social stratification, the utility of doing so remains tentative and inconsistent.

## CHAPTER 4. PART II: CONVERSION PROCESSES

### 4.1 Decision

The point at which a decision is undertaken to convert to Islam is undoubtedly *the* central, defining moment in the conversion story thus far and perhaps even within the framework of the story itself. Up until this point, the experiences of Muslim converts have not been unique or exclusive to converts to Islam alone. Rather, they have shared common experiences with many others who do not necessarily go on to become Muslim. No doubt there are many such people who experience crises, seek consolation or guidance in other religious traditions, discover or encounter alternate faiths outside of their own, embark upon spiritual journeys and transformations, undertake serious study of Islam, or engage in a myriad other experiences prevalent amongst Muslim converts. However, despite the ubiquity of such mutual experiences, ultimately only a small proportion of these individuals cross that fundamental threshold and make the decision of converting to Islam.

The word *decision* itself is vague and undefined, and characteristic of a research area already fraught with ambiguous or value-laden terms, for in its ambiguity, decision connotes choice, judgement, resolution and conclusion as well as a host of other secondary meanings. In the context of this study, and more importantly based upon our grounded theory analysis, the *decision* phase should be thought of as essentially embodying two equally enigmatic conceptual stages of *conviction* and *commitment* and by corollary, their intervening period; the intra-decision moratorium period, during which the individual may actively explore social and religious alternatives. This term is developed from Erikson's (1968) 'moratorium' period and later adapted by Poston (1992) to refer to the length of time observed between rejection of the convert's natal faith and conversion.

In some cases, the decision phase simply ensues immediately after the rejection of the previous faith or context, and the two phases may thus be considered contiguous. In such cases, one phase is simply a natural and (in the convert's mind) logical progression from the other and thus the transition is difficult to discern fully. However conversely, in other cases a moratorium period may be present which separates the two stages, demarcating their contours more clearly and thus rendering

them wholly discrete. The moratorium period may range from being relatively short to considerably protracted and can occur for a variety of reasons which shall be addressed below.

#### 4.1.1 Conviction

Conviction, in the context of religious conversion and particularly when pertaining to the sacred, denotes a recognition and acceptance (albeit sometimes uncomfortable) that a given path constitutes authoritative or objective *truth*, or perhaps more correctly, as with Steve's pragmatic assertion, a significant element of *truth* and certainly more so than other paths may promise,

*"I felt that if God was like the pebble dropped into a pond, and the ripples caused were various ways of knowing God, then although Islam might not be perfect but at least it was the closest ripple to that common God"* Steve

Conviction is often thought of in rigid or absolute terms and whilst it certainly can adopt this form (albeit in a somewhat oxymoronic way; absolute only in relative terms to the convert), it is eminently more preferable to think of conviction as a frame of mind that is brought about gradually, and the intensity of which can fluctuate over time. Jason's experience illustrates this point well and highlights the cumulative manner in which conviction can progressively build to an apparent crescendo before the convert becomes fully aware of its existence,

*"I think the understanding that all this was real came in fits and bursts...what I mean is it took time for me to realise what was happening, but slowly my mind was being won over by this philosophy until it got to a point that I couldn't argue with it anymore and when that final realisation came that this was it - I was completely blown away"*  
Jason

Jason's experience also points to the fact that conviction is rarely easy, and often underlies a complex internal struggle in which the self attempts to shy away from and even rebel against acceptance. This is hardly surprising considering that conviction can often be thought of as an implicit, yet damning critique of the previous worldview; to concede that one's life up until this point has been lived in error or founded upon a false premise and ideology is monumental and can shake the very foundations upon which the individual's existence is predicated. In some ways, the moratorium period observed is indicative of the convert's perturbed mind-set,

often still reeling from this realisation and attempting to come to terms with its ramifications.

#### 4.1.2 Commitment

Commitment is best understood as a tacit pledge of allegiance that is both preparatory to conversion, and also acts to validate and augment the burgeoning yet tentative sentiments of conviction. Whereas conviction relates primarily to accepting (often selectively) the legitimacy of the authoritative texts, myths and symbols of *the other* worldview, commitment conveys the pre-convert's yearning to accept it as *my own* worldview. Up until this point, the pre-convert's experiences are likely to have been relatively insular with thoughts, beliefs and feelings remaining private and largely unchallenged.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, thus far the pre-convert has been at liberty to dictate the pace and degree to which they are willing to assimilate (or be assimilated by) the new worldview. However, with impending commitment, the potential encounter with orthodoxy, the wider host community, and conformity in both belief and praxis beckon. In the process, the pre-convert is in effect implicitly delegating authority partially to the group to which he or she is converting, and thus relinquishing part of the freedom to think and act in a way that may contradict the same, for example by holding an eclectic belief system. However conversely, the multifarious nature of Islamic thought and the general unwillingness to pronounce *takfir* on an individual,<sup>122</sup> combined with the lack of a formal religious hierarchy in Islam and the absence of a catechism both real or imagined, are all factors that act to mitigate this. Consequently, despite the stated homogenising aims and influences of worldviews professing exclusivity (of which Islam is certainly one), both converts and born Muslims can and will often hold syncretistic beliefs and allegiances, and thus it is the perception that commitment curtails this freedom that converts invoke as opposed to any real infringement.

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<sup>121</sup> This is of course dependent upon whether or not the pre-convert has had significant contact with or exposure to members of the group or faith to which they are converting, prior to commitment.

<sup>122</sup> Literally pronouncing disbelief on a person, thus effectively removing them from the fold of Islam. As indicated in chapter 1, this is generally frowned upon on the basis of *ahadith* which maintain that a Muslim's status vis-à-vis their faith, as well as their motives for professing said faith should not be questioned by another, as this remains the sole prerogative of God; *Sahih Muslim*, Book 1, Chapter 27: 116/117.

In many cases, pre-converts have only engaged with Islam on a purely intellectual or emotional basis prior to commitment, and have neither had the opportunity nor shown the inclination to address the social dynamic of conversion. Consequently, commitment can also be the convert's first tentative steps in the complex process of embedment within this new social matrix.<sup>123</sup> As a result commitment can also mean integration or assimilation into the new host community, and therefore is often the convert's earliest encounter with, what Stark and Bainbridge (1987) refer to, as the potential rewards and compensators associated with membership of the new community or group.<sup>124</sup>

Commitment can be an obvious corollary to conviction, for it is easy to presume that one does not exist without the other; the assumption being that one cannot hold conviction without following this through to its logical conclusion of commitment, or conversely that commitment cannot materialise without first holding conviction. This is precisely what occurs in most scenarios, as in Gerard's case who considers conviction without commitment to be a question of a lack of personal integrity, thus effectively removing the volitional aspect from his decision to *commit*,

*"I decided that if I was going to stay true to my thoughts and what I felt in my heart then I had no choice but to do it [become Muslim]. It wasn't a massive leap of faith or anything...rather just the next logical step for me." Gerard*

However, this is not necessarily always the case, for conviction may not materialise fully until subsequent to commitment,<sup>125</sup>

*"I'm not sure if I believed in it [Islam] 100% at that time – I mean I was ok with the Allah part but Muhammad was still a stumbling block for me – I felt I would be rejecting and replacing Jesus which I couldn't bring myself to do - of course I know now that's not what becoming Muslim was about! Anyway, to cut a long story short, I felt I wanted to believe – I needed to believe, so I went ahead with my shahadah and Alhamdulillah [trans. praise be to God] true iman [trans. faith] entered my heart much later." Jessica*

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<sup>123</sup> Although this is once again a generalisation as many converts can form strong affective bonds with group members long before the issue of conversion even arises, but even for these individuals commitment signifies a vital strengthening of these ties.

<sup>124</sup> Stark & Bainbridge (1987: 27, 36) define rewards and compensators as: 'Rewards are anything humans will incur costs to obtain', and 'Compensators are postulations of reward according to explanations that are not readily susceptible to unambiguous evaluation'.

<sup>125</sup> There are Quranic precedents for converting to Islam whilst not holding conviction or faith, and whilst this state of affairs is not considered ideal, it is neither frowned upon; "*The desert Arabs say, 'We believe.' Say (O Muhammad), 'Ye have no faith; but rather (only) say, 'We have submitted', For not yet has Faith entered your hearts. But if ye obey Allah and His Messenger, He will not belittle aught of your deeds: for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.*" Quran, 49: 14; "*Among those who say 'We believe' with their lips but whose hearts have no faith,*" Quran, 5: 41;

Jessica's conviction is partial and hinges primarily upon her unwillingness to accept a central Islamic tenet, which she feels conflicts with remnants of her belief system from the receding worldview and to which she still clings. This type of nostalgic angst is not entirely uncommon amongst converts, and whilst not a major obstacle to commitment in itself, when compounded, can lead to a scenario of confused and conflicting allegiances. However, for Jessica, ultimately her professed *need* for commitment is such that it offsets any misgivings she may have possessed and she is able to move beyond a reconciliation.

Perhaps even more perplexing are scenarios in which either stage may appear independently of the other. A very small number of cases of commitment *sans* conviction were present, however, these were exclusively confined to conversions associated with predominantly Sufic motifs.

*"I don't know if I should say this - but I don't know if I'm a Muslim inside yet – I mean don't get me wrong - I am a Muslim. I love attending the circles and the dhikr [trans. remembrance gatherings] and prayer and listening to the Sheikh but I think there's something missing from inside of me yet. Actually you know, I was worried about this and I told Sheikh Laban [his Sufi teacher] this and I thought he would be upset because of all the time and effort he had put into me, but he was really cool about it... just told me not worry and concentrate on my prayer and stuff, and everything would come in time, and that if I didn't then that was ok too." Jason*

Jason obviously has some compunctions over his seemingly incongruous absence of faith even after conversion, and his inconsistent and seemingly contradictory statements about his status vis-à-vis Islam, at times referring to himself as a Muslim and at others not, are particularly revealing. Interestingly, much of his anxiety stems from a fear of disappointing the host group's leader, which is rationalised to some degree as guilt over the perceived time and effort invested in him. However, the reassurance from the group leader is critical as it allows him to commit on a seemingly experimental basis whilst retaining the option of egress should he so require it, as there is no compulsion to remain a Muslim.

Converts within this category might reasonably be viewed as 'free-riders'; individuals who somehow enjoy the benefits that may accrue from host group membership (in terms of both rewards and compensators, in Jason's case, the things he enjoys about the Sufi circles, e.g. dhikr, contact with the charismatic spiritual leader, and other social activities within the group), without necessarily committing on a religious basis (Iannaccone 1994). Often religious organisations may devise

mechanisms for dealing with the ‘free-rider problem’ by imposing sanctions on non-religious forms of consumption, however, this is more likely to occur in strict sects and groups. Iannaccone (1988, 1992a, 1994, 1995b), who has written widely on the free-rider problem, views ‘strictness’ as ‘the degree to which a group limits and thereby increases the cost of non-group activities’ (Iannaccone 1994: 1182).<sup>126</sup> It would appear that Jason’s Sufi group is therefore lower on the strictness scale and thus imposes fewer sanctions on ‘non-religious’ enjoyment of rewards and benefits. The scarcity of individuals espousing commitment without conviction does not corroborate studies such as those of Shupe and Bromley (1994), which suggest that recruitment to a group (i.e. commitment) usually precedes belief in the case of many cults. However, our findings do support some earlier studies, such as Lofland and Stark’s (1965) motivational model, which assumes that conversion only follows after new beliefs have already been adopted.

As the study was based on Muslim converts only (as opposed to potential or would-be converts), naturally no instances of conviction without commitment were found. This of course does not in any way imply their absence; the presence of protracted intra-decision moratorium periods in a number of our sample presents the very real possibility that individuals espousing conviction may never move on to commitment.

#### **4.1.3 Decision Motifs**

The *decision* phase can adopt a variety of guises, and as one would expect, the way in which an individual approaches the decision is in fact dependent upon what has led the convert to this stage thus far. Factors such as the presence of crises, the contours of the pre-conversion context, the nature of conviction and commitment phases, and relationships with both the host group and old social network are all fundamental to the experience. As suggested earlier, in the same way that every conversion experience is unique to every convert, every decision phase is also likely to be unique to every conversion. Nevertheless, despite the apparent heterogeneity it is still possible to discern common threads throughout the various accounts which suggest the decision phase is likely to be approached in one of two primary ways,

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<sup>126</sup> The Strict Church Theory posits that ‘strict’ churches will inevitably be stronger because they greatly reduce the problem of ‘free-riding’ and therefore will tend to retain members and maintain continuing commitment, whereas less ‘strict’ churches will struggle to maintain levels of commitment and potentially lose members (Iannaccone 1994; Kelley 1972).

although of course these are not in any way diametrically opposed to one another and indeed a continuum of experiences should be expected between the two.

#### **4.1.3.1 Espousal**

Converts displaying the first decision motif, which we shall refer to as *espousal*, have a marked tendency to approach the decision with a great deal of enthusiasm and optimism. Indeed these features, alongside a quite remarkable absence of anxiety, are the defining characteristics of this particular motif. Moreover, the entire process seems greatly condensed to its constituent parts, with the moratorium period between stages often absent or at the very least severely truncated. To outside observers, the experience may verge on minimalism, perhaps even appearing hurried in many ways. This is not to divest the experience of any intrinsic value, particularly by contrasting it with other conversion experiences in which the decision appears more measured, but rather to simply highlight salient characteristics of each type. In conversions exhibiting this decision motif, the onset of conviction is often precipitated by the presence of some form of crisis, which goes some way towards explaining why a speedy resolution, which conversion can invariably provide, is often sought. Conversions employing this motif may rapidly move from context or crisis to conviction and commitment in a relatively short space of time, constantly gaining momentum throughout. In such cases commitment may often be geared towards providing immediate emotional gratification and/or crisis resolution.

The presence of a supportive, often charismatic, member or community from the host group can provide guidance and encouragement, helping to cast doubts and misgivings from the individual's mind, all the while reaffirming and spurring the individual towards commitment and conversion,

*"The time between when I first met Arif to the day I sat in the mosque and said my Shahadah was about 3 weeks...I was never afraid of what I was doing because I didn't have anything to be afraid of – he [Arif] was a guiding light for me and the way he explained his beautiful, simple religion to me made me want to become Muslim straightaway – I mean at the time I couldn't wait! Funnily enough, he was the one who held me back – he said I needed to be sure of what I was doing, but I was sure, and when I became too impatient with him I just went ahead and said my Shahadah anyway." Eve*

In Eve's case, the complete conversion is enacted within the space of three weeks through the catalysis of a charismatic group member in the form of Arif,<sup>127</sup> who is described in glowing terms as a "guiding light". His central importance in her decision-making process cannot be understated and very effectively highlights the role pedagogues, proselytisers and other group members can play in shaping the conversion experience. Her account also underscores the importance of the mode of proselytisation employed by the group,<sup>128</sup> and its effect on the potential proselyte's decision to convert. In rare cases, overzealous group members can sometimes even impel individuals towards precipitous conversions, prompting what converts later recount as somewhat rash decisions. Ironically, Eve's conversion is not brought about by extraneous pressure emanating from the group member, but instead by her choice to go against Arif's well-intentioned cautions against haste, which she felt acted as a hindrance to her. Her experience illustrates very effectively, that even in cases where group members appear to wield considerable power over convert's lives, ultimately the decision may be the convert's sole prerogative.

In other conversions displaying this decision motif, the host group can feature much less prominently, but is replaced in part by an infatuation with the culture, worship, or rituals associated with the faith,

*"In those days, I would sometimes - just for the fun of it - go to the market or the library wearing my scarf wrapped in a Muslim way – I imagined people looking at me and thinking I was one of them and I loved the feeling. ~*

*"When I was living in halls I'd sometimes fast or practice praying – I didn't know the words or anything but just putting my head to the ground was reassuring and made me long to be able to do it properly." Susan*

For converts like Susan who engage in this experimental approach to the new faith, becoming wholly submerged in an Islamic ambience is essential and engenders a Muslim way of thinking and acting, and it is then often only a matter of time before they decide to commit fully, rendering the *shahadah* a mere formality.

#### **4.1.3.2 Surrender**

The other major decision motif, which accounts for the majority of conversions and which will be referred to as *surrender*, is a much more measured and protracted

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<sup>127</sup> Despite using the term "group member" the proselytiser in question (Arif) did not appear to hold any group allegiances and by all accounts was acting on an individual impulse.

<sup>128</sup> Meaning that the manner in which the *message* is presented can be as important as the message itself.

affair.<sup>129</sup> In order to fully understand the defining characteristics of this motif, we must first return to the prior pre-conversion context. In spite of the fact that converts often evince clear discontent with their former or current contextual predicaments through rejection, and are ostensibly seeking viable alternatives, for some converts this moratorium period can itself become (at least temporarily) a comfortable way station that increasingly surrogates for that which was initially its *raison d'être*,

*"Life was pretty grim back then – I had problems with money, family, work – I did really long hours and absolutely hated it. On top of that I was living by myself and had almost nothing to look forward to, but I'd go home and start surfing the web and learning something new everyday – not just about Islam but lots of different things. Even at work I'd be thinking about what I was gonna look up today or what I was gonna finish reading – I just began to look forward to it – y'know...became part of my routine. Probably sounds silly to you - heh." James*

For James, the moratorium period in which he seeks religious alternatives, almost serves as a form of escapism from the drudging monotony of his daily life and is thus elevated far beyond a simple means to an end. This is perhaps understandable considering that this stage of active seekership within the moratorium period can often become a reassuringly familiar and stable bulwark in an otherwise turbulent juncture in the convert's life. Perhaps more importantly, it requires no firm commitment whilst concomitantly fulfilling many of the aims and criteria of its intended objective; namely by providing a means of articulating one's dissatisfaction with the current contextual predicament. Conversely, with impending conversion, commitment and the unfamiliar beckon and although it is not unusual for converts to approach the *decision* phase with a certain degree of anxiety and trepidation, in such cases this appears to be heightened quite considerably. Consequently a state of consternation can ensue, in which converts often appear to be suffering from an aboulia of sorts that renders them incapable of taking their *shahadah* or committing themselves firmly to the Islamic faith. Paul colourfully recalls this as almost like being stuck in a "time-warp", although without any of the negative connotations normally associated with the suspending of the normal passage of time,

*"I was almost stuck in a time-warp...I was happy to keep learning more about what the Quran had to say on different issues and what I had to do when I became Muslim and I was sure that it was what I wanted but still something was holding me back. Now that I*

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<sup>129</sup> The difference in duration between the two motifs is stark with *surrender* typically being anywhere between 10 and 100 times longer than *espousal*.

*think back at it, I really don't know what I was afraid of – [I] suppose just not knowing if a regular white guy could really be a Muslim - ignorant I know! Lol - ...[I] suppose also what my friends and family would say. Sounds silly to me now but back then what people thought of me did matter.” Paul*

Interestingly he says *when* rather than *if* “I became Muslim”, echoing a common sentiment amongst converts when asked to reflect upon their conversion, suggesting that converts reminiscing upon the *decision* are in fact recalling a much later period when the decision had already been taken (perhaps even on a subconscious level) and all that remained was, as one convert suggested, “to clear the obstacles from my path”. The obstacles in question may constitute anything from grappling with lofty theological issues to more practical concerns such as in Paul’s case; whether or not his ethnicity and culture would conflict with his chosen faith and how others around him would react.

*“It took me the best part of 20 years to finally draw up the courage to become Muslim. Of course I believed it was the truth, of course I did – otherwise I wouldn’t have stuck with it for so long...but I acted a damn fool and a coward – I would constantly fret ‘what will they say’, ‘what will they think’, ‘how can I become one of them?’”*

*Jonathan*

Jonathan presents one of the longest *decision* phases in the sample, his apparent procrastination lasting almost two decades. Curiously he insists that during this period, his belief in Islam did not waver – rather it was his ingrained prejudices, and once again a fear of social castigation that acted as the real stumbling block. However, a later excerpt from him proves more revealing,

*“I read widely back then and would look to many things for inspiration. Some things I stuck with and others fell by the wayside – I think in the back of my mind, maybe on some subconscious level, I was using what I had learnt of Islam as the yardstick...you see, I didn’t realise it back then but I was constantly testing Islam to see if something better came along...I’m almost ashamed to admit that part of me almost wanted it to fail – had it failed, everything would’ve been so much easier.” Jonathan*

Here he concedes to a lingering scepticism on his part during this period, which rendered him unable to commit to the Islamic faith. Instead, he continued to actively pursue other religious options as distinct possibilities (although curiously Islam is still the criterion by which he appraises these alternatives). He is surprisingly candid in his admission that this apparent procrastination was not motivated so much by a lack of conviction as it was by a fervent desire to find a genuine means of renegeing on his burgeoning commitments to Islam. The implicit assumption being that

despite whatever claims to truth the Islamic faith may hold for an individual, for some the prospect of becoming Muslim is neither welcomed nor socially desirable. This suggestion does go some way towards explaining the sometimes inordinate and often inexplicable length of time elapsed between putative states of *conviction* and *commitment*. Converts can sometimes continue to wallow in this state of apparent torpor for months or even years, vacillating between commitment and rejection. What ultimately compels the convert to resolve this dilemma and move beyond this somewhat ambivalent stance towards a commitment is difficult to say, as each decision is undoubtedly unique to each conversion, and is the focus of the next section. However, what all converts displaying this decision motif do have in common is the eventual concession that they no longer have any valid, cogent arguments for not converting and are thus finally compelled, often by their consciences, to surrender or submit themselves to the Islamic faith.

#### **4.1.4 Antecedents of Commitment**

It is possible to identify certain common elements within the various accounts, which clearly helped to allay fears and mitigate anxiety on their author's part, and thus it appears their presence is often instrumental in helping to facilitate the decision to convert. These factors are equally applicable to both varieties of decision motif:

- i) An extensive and active seekership within the moratorium period that allows both the time and opportunity for the pre-convert to explore and experience other viable religious and non-religious options.<sup>130</sup> This can instil a certain confidence in the individual that they have indeed made a rational, measured choice after having considered the various alternatives available to them.
- ii) An intensive study and interaction phase that enables the pre-convert to become increasingly more familiar with the requirements and demands of the receiving faith, and to become better acclimated to Islamic social, cultural and religious norms. Often, one of the most pressing concerns for converts is the prospect of dealing with change and the unfamiliar, however, these can be alleviated in large part if the pre-convert has already immersed themselves within some of the ritual and worship of the receiving faith as well as generally becoming better acquainted with "life potentially as a Muslim".

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<sup>130</sup> Needless to say, terms like *extensive* or *intensive* are relative and denote the manner in which they can appear within the convert's perception as opposed to any absolute.

- iii) The allowance of sufficient time for a potential, and occasionally attempted (but ultimately ill-fated), reconciliation with the convert's host faith. This is often motivated by guilt, particularly from having abandoned the faith of one's parents or upbringing, and thus usually considered purely as a conciliatory gesture towards the convert's immediate family.
- iv) The promise of swift resolution to an existing crisis. As discussed in the previous section, the role of crisis as an instigator for rejection of the previous social or religious context is only present in a small proportion of conversions and thus is not a particularly prominent factor in most decision phases.
- v) The option of keeping the conversion hidden (at least initially). This presents converts with the opportunity of becoming more firmly established in their newfound faith without having to simultaneously contend with the social ramifications of conversion.
- vi) The absence of fear of familial and social opprobrium and castigation alongside other negative repercussions of disclosing one's new faith.
- vii) The presence of support, guidance and encouragement from the host group.

Although these factors are often instrumental in quelling many of the concerns of potential converts and thus help to present conversion as a more viable option, they usually cannot in themselves precipitate conversion. What then are the immediate antecedents of commitment?

As suggested earlier, the *decision* phase can ostensibly be delayed indefinitely by many individuals who find the moratorium period presents a comfortable state of stasis that is neither discomfiting nor taxing in its demands. However, given enough time this state is eventually bound to be displaced by one of inertia or even stagnation, and consequently can give rise to feelings of depression and angst. Moreover, there is often considerable unease and guilt amongst these individuals who feel they have attained a certain degree of conviction but cannot yet fully articulate this in any sort of meaningful commitment. In the face of conflicting emotions and allegiances, and the tedium of procrastination, individuals can sometimes attempt to force a resolution by assigning themselves a seemingly arbitrary timeframe, after which they will be obliged to either accept or reject the new faith,

*"I thought to myself that I was ready to convert, but just to be sure I would give myself 1 year from the day and if after a year's time I still felt the same way I would go ahead*

*[with it]. As it turned out, one year turned into six! lol” Elaine*

Elaine does not set herself a particularly ambitious goal; rather she feels that if she can at the very least maintain her present level of conviction after a year has elapsed, then she *should* in principle be able to move towards commitment. The fact that the initial timeframe of a year is drawn out to six should not necessarily be mistaken for indolence. Although the proverbial goalposts may have moved in absolute temporal terms, the monumental task of *maintaining conviction* is precarious at best and Elaine is unwilling to move towards a final resolution until she feels she has attained a certainty in her conviction. Moreover, the additional time is also warranted as numerous new issues constantly arise throughout this period and which demand resolution before she can undertake commitment.

Similarly, the successful resolution of problematic issues that previously hindered conversion is often a key determinant of commitment and hence conversion. Moreover, arguments, obstacles, questions, or issues vis-à-vis the Islamic faith are either eventually resolved satisfactorily or dismissed as unimportant, leading to a situation where conversion almost becomes an inevitability. Many converts speak of a time before their *shahadah* when they knew that they would convert, and once this realisation materialised, their “whole being acquiesced”. Indeed for some individuals, this process was like “arriving at an invisible threshold” where converts finally felt like they were conceding that they have no valid, cogent arguments for not converting,

*“To be untrue to others is bad enough, but to be untrue to yourself is inexcusable – otherwise you live a lie...I couldn’t continue to secretly believe in Islam and not accept it outwardly” Deborah*

Deborah’s suggestion of being “true to one’s self”, also expressed by Gerard earlier, points to the possession (real or imagined) of a dual-self; a *private self* which holds all such intimate thoughts, feelings and convictions, and a *social self* which must contend with the lived reality of being embedded in a complex social matrix. The two selves are not necessarily diametrically opposed to, or even discrete from one another. Rather there will be considerable overlap between the two, and the degree to which they intersect is largely contingent upon the individual’s immediate socio-cultural context. Regardless of whether it is made explicit or left unstated, the premise of a dual-self remains a useful means of articulating one’s inability to undertake commitment as a consequence of societal pressures.

Returning to the intriguing issue of the resolution of problematic issues acting as a catalyst for commitment, converts like Emma account for this by pointing to God's uncanny ability to resolve every obstacle erected (often by the convert herself) to impede the progress of conversion,

*"I feel so foolish now – I would make so many silly little excuses and worry about this and that and every other silly little thing. But they were just excuses and God through His infinite mercy knocked down all my straw men." Emma*

This concept of providence and divine intervention; specifically and directly being guided to Islam by some transcendental force, is frequently invoked and appears to follow Islamic teachings (suggesting the internalisation of host group rhetoric as an explanatory framework for reframing the narrative).<sup>131</sup> Occasionally, converts even go so far as to refer to themselves as unwitting pawns in the conversion, implying that their individual human choices count for nothing against the weight of an inexorable, overwhelming force, identified as divine guidance. This is not without a certain sense of irony, for the removal of a completely volitional aspect to the conversion harks back to older psychological studies of conversion, (often criticised by sociologists and anthropologists) in which the convert is considered a passive agent. Converts occasionally invoke signs and miracles as the means by which this transcendent deity communicates 'His will' to the individual. These *signs* can be supernatural or paranormal in nature but are rarely so. Instead, individuals are more likely to discern the 'hand of God' through dreams, answered prayers and indirect messages through the medium of scripture,

*"For many years I lacked the courage to become a Muslim...One evening I sat down with the Quran and opened it at random, like I often did, and my finger rested on this verse ~ [at this point, Hamish quoted some verses of the Quran verbatim].<sup>132</sup> I mean after that I knew what I had to do – wouldn't you? He showed me the straight path. I realized that God had heard my plea for help and Alhamdulilah gave me the strength to fulfil my fard [trans. obligation]. This was the final guidance and at the same time a warning to me from God to accept the truth!" Hamish*

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<sup>131</sup> See for example Quran, (28: 56), "Verily, you (O Muhammad) guide not whom you like, but Allah guides whom He wills. And He knows best those who are the guided."

<sup>132</sup> The verses recited by Hamish read: 'And when they listen to the revelation received by the Messenger, thou wilt see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognize the truth: They pray: "Our Lord! We believe; write us down among the witnesses. What cause can we have not to believe in Allah and the truth which has come to us, seeing as we long for our Lord to admit us to the company of the righteous?" And for this their prayer hath Allah rewarded them with Gardens, with rivers flowing underneath - their eternal Home. Such is the recompense of those who do good. But those who reject Faith and belie our Signs, - they shall be companions of the Hell-fire.' Quran 5: 83-6.

Converts interpreting these types of events, as evidence that God communicates His will to individuals directly, can be both immensely frightening and empowering at the same time. Converts often speak of being granted the strength or courage to become a Muslim but simultaneously, are acutely aware of the punitive consequences of rejecting this direct message. Janet recounted a similar experience, in which she argued the command was even more explicit,

*"Well, at this point I was totally unsure of what I wanted, and I would pray for guidance from God to make it easy for me to do what was right and best for me. I think the turning point for me was when I read a verse of the holy Quran which seems even now as if it was written for me, and even now brings tears to my eyes 'This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion'.<sup>133</sup>" Janet*

Curiously, this was not the first time Janet encountered this verse. Indeed it is not unreasonable to assume that during her six year study and interaction phase she had probably read this particular verse numerous times,<sup>134</sup> which begs the question of what was so peculiar, so fundamentally different, about this final reading? Certainly experiences like this do point towards a predisposition in some individuals towards certain interpretations over and above the mundane. However, the intriguing point here surely is the monumental importance ascribed by individuals teetering on the brink of commitment to what is perhaps normally a relatively insignificant event. Consequently, the conjunction of an apposite time, setting, and stage of the convert's life can have the power to transform a relatively ordinary experience into a defining moment or "turning point" in the conversion.

In some instances, events contemporaneous with the *decision* phase present individuals with the opportunity to *test* the power of the divine. The "answered prayer" presents the most familiar scenario, in which commitment will be conditionally predicated upon the fulfilment of some personal supplication,

*"If I think back to the time when I was really considering becoming a Muslim but hadn't yet done so, there was something very specific that made me take my shahadah. About 6 years ago my brother was diagnosed with cancer – back then he was young, had a beautiful family, a great career – you know he was the perfect guy and this obviously disturbed me a lot because I couldn't understand why it should happen to someone like him. I prayed so hard for him and I promised God that if he made him better I would accept Islam as the truth. Well he did get better – and I simply lived up*

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<sup>133</sup> Quran, 5:3.

<sup>134</sup> By her own admission this period included a detailed study of and thus familiarity with the Quran.

*to my promise. I mean he's still living with cancer, but at least he's still with us. "*

*Janet*

Janet identifies the direct intervention of God in her brother's convalescence and once again the idea of commitment impelled by one's conscience is invoked, in this case, the desire to uphold a pledge made during a time of need.

In a similar vein, thoughts of mortality and accountability can often be prominent in the convert's mind, particularly if recent events have involved sickness or bereavement,

*"The thought kept coming back to me again and again – what will happen if I die tomorrow without becoming Muslim – will it be enough that I wanted to?" James*

This is indeed a pressing concern for some converts wishing to fully explore the possibility of becoming Muslim without engaging in prior commitment, whilst concomitantly being acutely aware of the rapid passage of time. The encounter with one's own mortality, albeit experienced vicariously through the loss of a friend or family member, can bring this issue to the fore, uprooting the individual from a relative comfort zone and placing them instead at this critical juncture where a decision is inescapable. In James' case, the issue was never one of whether to convert to Islam or not, but rather of *when* to convert. The sudden preoccupation with mortality and accountability simply acted to expedite the decision-making process.

The direct antecedents of commitment then are diverse and complex. Whatever the means of arriving at this point, once a commitment has been undertaken to become a Muslim, the convert's subsequent task is to impute meaning and validity to the sentiments expressed in commitment, partially through the ritual act of conversion which is the subject of the next chapter.

## **4.2 Act of Conversion**

Until relatively recently the phenomenon of religious conversion, at least in the United States and Western Europe, was inextricably bound to Evangelical Protestantism or affiliation movements within Christianity. Consequently, a century of verities pertaining to the charismatic depiction of the archetypal Pauline conversion as instantaneous, complete and radical have lingered (Rambo 2003: 213). The more recent multi-disciplinary focus (including contributions from sociology,

anthropology, psychology, theology, and missiology) of conversion studies and a diversification of research areas to include non-western religious traditions and New Religious Movements has witnessed a basic paradigm shift towards a view of conversion as gradual, ambiguous and partial (Buckser and Glazier 2003; Rambo 1993; Richardson 1985), even within Evangelical or Pentecostal ‘charismatic conversions’ (Flinn 1999).<sup>135</sup> Nevertheless, the earlier preoccupation with an instantaneous (and often ritualised) *act of conversion* has been difficult to dispel completely.

This view poses serious conceptual problems for our study as conversion to Islam is rarely sudden or confined to a singular space-time event and far less likely to be distilled into the ritual conversion act alone. Moreover, the conversion act is a relatively simple and solemn affair, entailing little more than an enunciation of the shahadah (testimony of faith),<sup>136</sup> and thus curiously devoid of pomp, liturgy, sacrament, initiation rites, and other ceremonial paraphernalia associated with conversion to many other religious traditions.<sup>137</sup> Indeed this can sometimes be a disappointment for converts expecting a more ‘grandiose’ ceremony. Often two Muslim witnesses are sought to bear witness to the shahadah, however, this is not a requisite for the conversion *per se*. Abdullah Yusuf al-Judai, a prominent member of the European Council for Fatwa and Research writes,

*“Making the choice to accept Islam and make Shahadah is an independent one in which no person should be coerced or manipulated. It is a contract between you and Allah - not between you and the people - therefore it is not necessary to have witnesses present. The intention to accept Islam, like the intention made before commencing with the Prayer for the sake of Allah, is made in the heart and Allah, being well aware of everything, records His new servants covenant.”*<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Flinn (1999: 58) contends that even Charismatic conversions should not be viewed as wholly instantaneous events as the suspension or indecision prior to the event considerably prolongs the entire conversion experience.

<sup>136</sup> The literal translation of *Shahadah* is ‘witnessing’ and signifies the act of bearing witness to the two fundamental precepts of the Islamic faith, namely, ‘There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his messenger’.

<sup>137</sup> The degree to which certain formal prerequisites must be met and the substantive form of the ritual and associated ceremonial paraphernalia vary enormously between traditions. For example, conversion to Judaism demands motivational integrity and adequate knowledge of Jewish law, custom, and practice, both of which are scrutinised by the *Beth Din*, in addition to the performance of a series of rituals according to *Halacha*, including the immersion in *Mikveh*, circumcision, and sacrificial offering (Epstein 1994: 55-68).

<sup>138</sup> al-Judai, A. Y. ‘Fiqh – What you should know about conversion’ at <http://www.newmuslimsproject.net/islam/shahdah.html> [accessed: 23/02/2004]

The custom of testifying before two witnesses stems instead from the requirement that the convert be fully recognised and treated as a member of the Muslim community upon conversion, particularly in civic and personal matters.<sup>139</sup> The convert is often instructed to take a bath or shower (*ghusl*) following conversion,<sup>140</sup> however once again this is not a requirement for the conversion to be considered valid, but rather is obligatory for the performance of the *salat* (prescribed prayer) or handling of the Quran, as it symbolically cleanses the individual from ritual impurity.<sup>141</sup> Often male circumcision is also considered to be a naturally corollary to conversion,<sup>142</sup> however once again there is no legal requirement for it. Nevertheless, Islamic doctrine holds circumcision to be a recommended act for men,<sup>143</sup> as it accords with one of the five characteristics of *fitrah* (Sahih Bukhari 7-72: 777), and is thus encouraged amongst converts.<sup>144</sup>

The minimalism of the conversion act and its lack of an elaborate ritual component should not be assumed to automatically divest the *act* of any intrinsic value for converts. Rather the shahadah is often of paramount importance to many new Muslims, as it acts to validate, and thus confer legitimacy upon, what are in essence highly idiosyncratic experiences. Moreover, the shahadah can serve as the explicit demarcating line between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ vis-à-vis the faith, and is fundamental to the process of social embedment initiated earlier during commitment. In many ways, the act of conversion can be thought of as the crucial interface at which the convert’s local, idiosyncratic heterogeneous experience meets the all-

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<sup>139</sup> ad-Darsh, S. M. (1996) ‘A Brief Fiqh Guide for the New Muslims’ at <http://www.iol.ie/~afifi/Articles/mukallaf.htm> [accessed: 17/02/2004]; Sheikh Ahmad Kutty, Fatwa No. 107, 30/09/2001; <http://www.islamonline.net/fatwa/english/FatwaDisplay.asp?hFatwaID=76032> [accessed: 23/02/2004]

<sup>140</sup> This is a general method of cleansing the body from any state of ritual impurity and should not be confused with a baptismal rite as the *ghusl* is not exclusive to converts but rather an integral part of general life as a Muslim. In addition, the individual performs *ghusl* privately in his or her own home – the rite is distinguished from an everyday shower or bath only by the fact that it must be preceded by the correct intention (*niyyah*).

<sup>141</sup> Other states of ritual impurity that require purification through *ghusl* include, following menstruation, childbirth, or sexual emission.

<sup>142</sup> In Java circumcision has even become synonymous with converting to Islam and is referred to as *njelamakeselam* or ‘rendering Muslim’ (Bulliet 1979: 144).

<sup>143</sup> The Sharia classically divides all human actions into five moral categories (as opposed to simply halal and haram): the obligatory (*wajib*), the recommended (*mandub*), the permissible (*mubah*), the offensive (*makruh*), and the unlawful (*haram*).

<sup>144</sup> The sensitive and intimate nature of circumcision often made it an impossible topic to broach with participants, and in many cases, individuals patently refused to discuss the issue. Consequently it is difficult, nigh impossible, to comment upon the frequency of circumcision amongst converted Muslim men in the UK.

encompassing global tradition, its faith fraternity (the *ummah*), and potentially orthodoxy.

#### **4.2.1 Where and How**

The specifics of the conversion act, namely its form, setting, and the invocation of sanction (clerical or other), are largely contingent upon the nature of social interaction and degree of embedment within the host group prior to conversion, although other factors such as the individuals previous religious experiences, and stance towards authority structures vis-à-vis organised and institutional religion may play an important role in determining these contours too. In addition, in some cases the question of how the shahadah is enacted is not really based upon making a conscious informed choice but rather one predicated upon chance and circumstance.

##### **4.2.1.1 The Eremitic Shahadah**

The *eremitic shahadah* is the least common of the three types and characterised by a solitary but profoundly personal experience,<sup>145</sup> in which the individual enunciates the shahadah without recourse to witnesses or clerical sanction. The shahadah is predominantly enacted in an intensely *private space*, and is rarely premeditated, but rather more likely to be performed in an impromptu manner. This may appear somewhat incongruous, considering that the presence of two witnesses is one of the only preferences in a relatively simple conversion process, and thus begs the question of why it is eschewed in favour of a more individualistic experience. There appear to be three plausible explanations for this: in some cases the participant has had little or no exposure to a wider host group and is thus unable to draw upon a supportive Muslim individual or community who would perhaps facilitate a more conventional admission into the faith,

*“My Islam came mainly from books and the Quran. I didn’t know any Muslims at the time and even if I had wanted to, it would have been almost impossible in those days as there were hardly any Muslim communities around yet. So when I decided to convert, I*

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<sup>145</sup> Allievi (1998: 120) also recognises the significance of what I refer to as the ‘atomised’ experience within some conversions to Islam.

*did so without ever having seen or spoken to another Muslim.”<sup>146</sup> Oliver*

Oliver converted to Islam in the early 60’s and his experiences are characteristic of a period in which the Islamic presence in Britain was relatively small, insular and associated principally with recent immigration from the Indian subcontinent (Ansari 2002; Anwar 1995; Nielsen 1999). Consequently the absence of a common language and culture with the fledgling community rendered social contact difficult, and thus his reasons were based primarily on pragmatic considerations over anything else. Although the more recent, highly visible presence of fully-fledged functional Muslim communities and their religious institutions throughout Britain certainly does facilitate a much higher degree of social contact and cultural exchange, it should not, *ipso facto*, be considered as evidence to suggest that this mode of conversion has been rendered completely obsolete. Rather, on the contrary, outside of major cities and other traditional enclaves of Muslim immigrants, the experience and journey to Islam can remain a lonely one. Rachel, a 23 year old student from the Orkney Isles who converted to Islam in 2001 reflects on her own hometown,

*“I don’t think living in London you can realise how remote some parts really are... I mean I grew up in Orkney and we were so isolated that you hardly ever saw someone who wasn’t like you - I mean forget about Muslims or ethnic minorities, but we’d be lucky to see someone from Glasgow!” Rachel*

These cases appear to go against the widely held belief amongst many scholars of religious conversion, that conversion must crucially be located within a social sphere,<sup>147</sup> for example Snow and Philips (1980: 444) studying the Buddhist group Nichiren Shoshu in the United States assert that cult affective bonds and intensive interaction are “essential for conversion”, or according to Start and Finke (2000), convert are those “whose interpersonal attachments to members overbalanced their attachments to non-members.” (2000:117).

In other cases the occurrence of a specific momentous event,<sup>148</sup> may lead some individuals to feel compelled to bear witness to the strength of emotion evoked by that event through a ritual enunciation of the shahadah. Consequently, such an experience is not premeditated but rather an impromptu manifestation of the sudden

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<sup>146</sup> This is slightly misleading, as what Oliver intends to say is that he converted without having seen or spoken to another Muslim in the UK, as he had previously encountered Muslims during his travels in Morocco.

<sup>147</sup> See for example, Long and Hadden (1985), Lofland and Stark (1965), Snow and Philips (1980), Start and Finke (2000), Glock and Stark (1966), Clarke (1987), and Seggar and Kunz (1972).

<sup>148</sup> This *event* essentially corresponds with one of the immediate antecedents of commitment as discussed in the previous section.

strength of conviction elicited, and by its very nature must be performed in an *ad hoc* manner if it is to effectively capture and preserve the transient emotions of the moment. However, in other cases still, the individualistic experience is calculated and wholly intentional, and predicated upon a principled repudiation of organised religion *per se*. This antipathy towards conformity and authority structures although not directed primarily at the host faith, but rather at the individual's natal religion, nevertheless leaves some converts inherently apprehensive towards imams, mosques and Islamic organisations.<sup>149</sup> This antipathy towards organised faith amongst the eremitic shahadah is fairly rare however, and this can be partially evinced from the fact that the initial conversion is inevitably superseded by a secondary shahadah bearing one of the other two motifs. *Prima facie*, this may appear to be performed as a perfunctory gesture in order to fulfil the common stipulation that conversion be enacted in the presence of two witnesses. However, the secondary shahadah should not be viewed solely (or even primarily) as a mere placation of the demands of the receiving faith and community, as the individual's conception and understanding of authority and sanction within a religious context are transformed dramatically during these encounters.

*"I don't know if it was a flash of inspiration or what, but I just suddenly felt that I had to make my decision there and then – and I did. At 4am on a Sunday morning I sat on my bed and carefully and slowly recited the words first in Arabic and then in English. I remember breaking down and crying like a baby afterwards – I don't remember why exactly now...I think I was just finally relieved to finally be a Muslim ~*

*I went to the mosque a few weeks later and said my shahadah again before the Imam."*

*Ian*

For Ian the distinction between his first *real* shahadah and the later token version performed before the imam is quite clear. The former constitutes *the* real, defining moment in the process; the point at which the status of 'Muslimhood' is actually conferred upon him. Moreover, the time, date, location, and corresponding emotions are recalled vividly, whereas conversely the secondary shahadah is described in considerably more apathetic terms. When questioned further on what motivated this secondary shahadah, Ian found it difficult to fully rationalise or articulate his decision, simply stating "I suppose it's just the done thing" hinting at a culture of

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<sup>149</sup> The issues that converts often have with organised religion are a recurring theme throughout the narratives and are addressed in Chapter 3.1.1: pre-conversion religiosity and Chapter 6 which deals with the motivations for conversion.

conformity amongst some new converts, who unsure of and often tentative in their new faith, may be apprehensive of violating social customs and norms.

#### **4.2.1.2 The Administered Shahadah**

The *administered shahadah* is the most frequently cited form of conversion and typically entails the enunciation of the profession of faith before an Imam or other religious official within a mosque or other formal setting. In most cases the individual simply approaches the official or institution in an informal manner, making known his or her desire to convert. A religious functionary will then preside over a typically *ad hoc* and unceremonious service. In rare cases the experience is also lent an air of formality by the issuance of a certificate of conversion.<sup>150</sup>

*“Well I decided to take my shahadah at the local masjid (trans. mosque) – I spoke to the Imam after evening prayers and he took me to one side and surprisingly he asked me if I had thought this through properly and if it was what I really wanted to do? I replied in the affirmative. He then explained the 6 articles of faith for me, which I of course already knew, and then asked me to repeat the words [shahadah] after him ~ He then stood and embraced me and said from today you are my brother and if you are in need of anything you must come and ask me, and inshAllah (trans. God willing) if it is in my power to give, I will. That was it – in the space of about 5 minutes I had become a Muslim with no one else in the mosque the wiser and yet I was completely overwhelmed with joy and emotion...maybe more than I’ve ever felt before in my life. This is what I had been waiting for.” James*

James presents the archetypal shahadah in which this typically simple, *ad hoc*, and perhaps even ritually unfulfilling service,<sup>151</sup> nevertheless culminates in an intense and immensely satisfying outcome. Despite whatever reservations he may have possessed prior to or during the shahadah, particularly with reference to the ritual’s substantive form, James is clearly appeased by the transformational efficacy of the experience, as can be evinced from the ‘overwhelming’ emotion subsequently evoked. The fact that James finds the conversion rite particularly gratifying can also be attributed in part to the positive encounter with the host group. Contrary to his

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<sup>150</sup> The London Central mosque will issue a certificate showing the convert’s new religious affiliation for new Muslims that request one. The Certificate is issued with the intention of facilitating future matters pertaining to marriage and travel, particularly Hajj; <http://www.islamicculturalcentre.co.uk/iccnew/Services/EmbracingIslam.asp>

<sup>151</sup> A number of converts commented on being disappointed or at least taken aback by the lack of a formal conversion rite for becoming Muslim.

expectations, he does not encounter overzealous group members hastening to recruit a new member, upon learning of his intent to convert. Instead he finds that not only does the advocate<sup>152</sup> encourage a measured approach, but also asks him to consider and reflect upon the decision before making any sort of commitment. This is crucial as it reinforces James' belief that his own strong cognitive and intellectual bases for becoming Muslim are in fact endemic to the process of converting to Islam. In addition, the extension of hospitality and offer of assistance that accompanies his shahadah is highly reassuring, particularly for an individual who may soon find himself experiencing social exclusion as a consequence of his conversion.<sup>153</sup>

Often the decision to undertake conversion in this manner stems from a fervent desire on the convert's part to mark the occasion with the formality and decorum they feel a change of religious affiliation merits. This feeling that the event warrants a certain level of propriety rarely emanates from the host faith itself, but rather is more likely to be transposed upon the experience from prior expectations and experiences of the natal faith and/or other faiths with which the individual may be better acquainted.<sup>154</sup> Consequently, there can often be a very real feeling that the shahadah has to be administered *to* the convert, within a framework of clerical sanction, if it is to possess the validity and transformational efficacy sought of religious conversion,

*"It [the conversion] had to be done properly. I mean I could've done it myself but how would I have known it wasn't just a passing fad – you know almost like making a New year's resolution to yourself. I mean it doesn't really carry any weight and as my wife will tell you, I've never been any good at sticking to New Year's resolutions! lol"*

*Duncan*

Duncan iterates this concern for propriety but goes further by intimating that had he pursued a more solitary route (which he aptly describes as being more akin to making a New Year's resolution), he may have experienced some difficulty in remaining committed to his new religious affiliation.<sup>155</sup> Consequently, his recourse to an administered shahadah not only facilitates an ostensibly irrevocable commitment to the new faith and community, but also engenders a moral obligation

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<sup>152</sup> Once again a misnomer as the *advocate* in this situation (the Imam) has had no prior contact with the potential convert and consequently has little or no personal investment in James' conversion.

<sup>153</sup> Social exclusion and opprobrium can often be corollaries to religious conversion and shall be dealt with in greater detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>154</sup> The image of baptism by immersion in water under the auspices of a church, organisation or clergy within conversions to Christianity was alluded to most frequently.

<sup>155</sup> One convert described it as being concerned over "remaining true to course".

on Duncan's part to persevere through the many trials and tribulations that may accompany religious conversion. This is not only due to the inadvertent external scrutiny a public profession of faith provokes, but also due in part to an awareness of the host group's investment in him and consequently his *salvation*. Naturally, whilst the convert still remains free to renege on his commitment at some later stage, the social repercussions of such a decision are much more pronounced and can thus serve to motivate increased fidelity on the convert's part.

The administered shahadah can confer other advantages too; often, the convert's existing social circle, particularly the immediate family, may express strong reservations with, or even antipathy towards, the idea of converting to Islam. However, finding themselves unable to exert direct pressure on the pre-convert to induce a change of heart, the existing social circle may instead earnestly hope that the individual simply outgrows, what is in their eyes, "a passing fad". The official nature of a clerically sanctioned conversion can authoritatively silence any such doubts on the validity and longevity of conversion, and thus affirm the strength of the convert's resolve. This does not necessarily make the decision any easier to comprehend or accept for the convert's existing social circle, however, it can silence criticisms at least on the individual's motives in seeking conversion and the putative longevity of the decision.

In a similar vein, the convert's motives for becoming Muslim are less likely to be examined or questioned, and consequently the conversion more likely to be deemed authentic, by host group members if an administered shahadah is undertaken. This is primarily due to the fact that the participation of a prominent group member (such as an Imam, Sufi Sheikh or other religious functionary) can, by virtue of association alone, implicitly vouch for the convert's integrity and extend an unequivocal credibility to the conversion process.<sup>156</sup> The consequence is clearly group affiliation and endorsement, which for many converts is of vital importance, particularly if they wish to be accepted as part of the wider *ummah* (community), and thus be extended the plethora of associated rights and responsibilities that may accrue from membership of the group.

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<sup>156</sup> And this is in spite of the fact that in many cases, the prominent group member may only be acquainted with the individual on a relatively superficial basis.

#### **4.2.1.3 The Social Shahadah**

The social shahadah is best characterised by its somewhat ambivalent stance towards authority structures and the invocation of sanction. Individuals undertaking this mode of conversion are (for various reasons) unwilling to conform entirely to the perceived demands of the receiving faith,<sup>157</sup> by vesting complete authority over the conversion process with an often unfamiliar religious functionary. However, neither are they willing to pursue a wholly individualistic route either, and still desire that their conversion remain firmly embedded within the new social network. Thus an apparent compromise is sought, whereby the convert feels they have not been completely divested of all control over the experience, whilst continuing to elicit some degree of approval from the host group. Consequently, sanction for, and thus validation of the conversion, is still procured from the host group, albeit from a far less formal source,

*“When I decided I was ready to convert, I realised this would be the single most important thing that had happened to me since being born and I wanted to really make a memorable occasion of it. So I threw a wonderful dinner party for my closest friends who had supported me completely during that difficult time – I invited my family too but they decided not to come – must’ve had something more important to do that evening [nervous laughter].” Cheryl*

As with most social shahadahs, Cheryl chooses to perform her conversion rite before the very same social network through which she initially encountered the Islamic faith. This appears to be highly significant for the social shahadah for a number of reasons. Conversion as we have discovered, can be a long and arduous process and by definition, one replete with change and uncertainty. Consequently the host group, which can serve as a beacon of stability and comfort in the face of such change, helps maintain a unifying thread of continuity throughout the narrative; the host group which initially served as the vehicle for her discovery of Islam, now welcomes her into its fold and will later go on to nurture and oversee her growth as a new Muslim.

In contrast to the unfamiliar religious functionary present in the administered shahadah, the host group members in these scenarios, due to the strong affective

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<sup>157</sup> Once again the perceived and actual demands of the host faith may differ substantially, however, this nuance is often rendered academic, as that which is perceived by the convert is inevitably the criteria by which a conversion is undertaken.

bonds formed with the pre-convert, are likely to possess a strong personal investment in the individual's conversion. The individual is often acutely aware of the members' yearnings for salvation and mutual affirmation in this respect, and thus the social shahadah may be performed as much for the sake of the host group as for one's self,<sup>158</sup> for in effect, it announces quite clearly that the convert is willing to effectively cast his or her lot with that of the group. The social shahadah then can be seen in some ways as an attempt to bolster ties with the host group and by extension, with the wider Islamic fraternity, and thus in some respects the motivations for undertaking the social shahadah are not unlike those of the administered shahadah, in that they essentially aspire to group affiliation and endorsement.

Unsurprisingly, the complex social dynamic of religious conversion is most conspicuous within conversions employing the social shahadah. Here the intriguing interplay of *push-pull* forces exerted upon the pre-convert by both the current social group and the new host group are most palpable, and clearly manifest themselves in the manner in which the act of conversion is approached and undertaken. For Cheryl, her family's continued apathy towards what she describes as "the single most important thing that had happened to me since being born" clearly causes her considerable unease and impels her to instead relocate her conversion rite from the familial or private sphere to that of the new host group. Thus her recourse to a social shahadah is borne primarily out of necessity and pragmatic considerations, as it is predicated, at least in part, upon her family's unwillingness to accept and engage in her conversionary process.

*"Well it wasn't easy - when my parents found out I intended to convert they were furious and did everything they could to talk me out of it. When they realised I intended to see it through, my dad pretty much disowned and kicked me out of the house. I still didn't give up with them at that point though and RasulAllah [trans. Messenger of God i.e. Muhammad] did order us to be good and dutiful to our parents and so I still wanted them to be a part of my new life but they refused point blank to even attend my conversion and said many hurtful things. We didn't really speak again after that...I think the next time I spoke to Mum was at my father's funeral ~*

*I took my shahadah with Imran and his mum ~ she was truly wonderful and when my own family turned their back on me, she treated me like a second son, and I can never repay her kindness to me" Bryan*

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<sup>158</sup> This in no way implies that the conversion is only undertaken for the sake of the host group but rather only that the manner in which the conversion is enacted (i.e a social shahadah as opposed to any of the other forms) is contingent in large part upon the social dynamic of conversion.

Bryan's parents go further and communicate their displeasure with his new lifestyle choice by not only refusing to participate in his impending shahadah ceremony, but by also dissociating themselves from him completely. His effective excommunication from the family at this critical juncture of the conversion process drives him to seek solace and support elsewhere, inevitably leading him to forge closer links with the host group, in particular with Imran and his mother. For all intents and purposes they become Bryan's new interim family, and thus go on to inform the contours of his shahadah to a great extent.

Both cases clearly illustrate the way in which host group members can effectively serve as the surrogate family, particularly in the face of apathy or even hostility from the original social and familial network. The social vacuum created in the wake of the receding group allows the host group to occupy the new void and the displacement is facilitated further by the obliging host group who continue to encourage, support and engage with the conversion process. When contrasted with the negative reaction displayed by the original social network, the difference is rendered even more apparent in the convert's mind. Moreover, the convert acknowledges their support and encouragement by making the host group the new locus for the conversion; one of the ways in which this is actualised is through the undertaking of a social shahadah.

This central importance of social networks to religious conversion has long been recognised; Gerlach and Hine (1968) for example noted that religious recruitment usually followed the contours of pre-existing social networks; Stark and Bainbridge (1980) similarly recognised that personal networks were the main source of recruitment; Snow and Philips (1980) argued that cult affective bonds and intensive interaction were necessary for conversion; and Start and Finke (2000) asserted that shifts in interpersonal attachments with members and non-members would ultimately precipitate conversion. Whilst these sorts of findings do support a number of accounts of religious conversion within our sample, including Cheryl above, crucially, they are unable to account for the vast majority of conversion experiences within the dataset.

#### 4.2.2 Ritual Interpretation and Transformative Efficacy

The previous sections examined the specifics of the conversion rite in some detail, focusing in particular upon the form adopted, the social setting, and the question of the invocation of sanction, together with some of the possible reasons for undertaking the shahadah in this manner. However, we have not yet delved into the substantive effect of the shahadah, namely what the act represents to the new convert, and how the act is interpreted (and reconstructed) in the overall narrative. Although virtually all converts make some reference to their shahadah, and indeed most recount the event in some detail, the importance ascribed to the rite varies enormously between individuals and indeed the emotions that accompany it can differ drastically.

The prevailing emotion accompanying the shahadah is one of immense relief and fulfilment. This finding is not entirely unanticipated, as our earlier study of the decision phase revealed that this period is often the source of intense anxiety and stress, particularly towards its latter stages. However, once the decision has been taken, particularly if it is in an outwardly manifest and tangible manner such as through rite of the shahadah, it then follows that the source of anxiety should also be removed in large part.

This is precisely what occurs in Simon's narrative; upon conversion, the various problematic aspects of his pre-conversion life, which principally rested upon his decision of whether to become a Muslim or not, are now consigned to an earlier life,

*"When I first took my shahadah, I felt an incredible feeling of relief and happiness wash over me. The sweat, blood and tears, the sleepless nights, my desperate prayers for guidance, the screaming matches with my parents [laughter] – it was all behind me and I felt free. That's the best way I think I can describe it...that I felt completely free and at peace with myself – in a way that I hadn't felt before." Simon*

This critical disjuncture with the past, through which previously troubling issues cease to exist, or at least no longer hold any real significance,<sup>159</sup> allows Simon to explore his putative transformation, ostensibly unencumbered by the earlier context

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<sup>159</sup> It is important to note here, that the various problematic issues are not necessarily resolved through this process, but simply no longer hold any major significance to the new convert. For example, in Simon's case, the troubles with his parents are not somehow miraculously solved by virtue of his conversion. Rather, once he has embarked upon his chosen course, their sentiments no longer hold the validity they once did.

within which this transformation was situated. For others this newfound freedom is even more vividly described,

*"I'll never forget the feelings I had when I converted – it felt almost as if a huge weight had suddenly been lifted off my chest and I could suddenly breathe again. It was so weird and yet so liberating. Erm, I mean it's almost impossible for you to understand how I felt, and to be honest I don't think even I can put into words exactly what I went through, but imagine all your life you've been a prisoner inside a cell with invisible walls, so you don't even know you're inside and then suddenly someone comes along and shows you how to step outside. And when you're free you look back in and see all your loved ones still there in the same boat, blind to the truth – it's painful you know? That's how I felt. That's how I feel." Andrew*

Despite his protestations at being unable to portray this intensely personal experience to others,<sup>160</sup> Andrew is still able to present a highly compelling and poignant depiction of the conversion act and its immediate aftermath. He finds the rite profoundly liberating, with his experience verging on an almost corporeal level that belies the shahadah's purely liturgical nature. To this end, he employs quite striking and evocative phraseology such as, *being able to breathe again* and *stepping outside a prison cell*, which implies a rebirth of sorts, in which the old self is cast aside and a newly liberated self beckons. Critically, this process signifies a complete break with the past, and is strongly reminiscent of the radical contextual bifurcation encountered in chapter 2. Nevertheless, his figurative emancipation is rendered somewhat bittersweet, as he laments the fact that his friends and family remain in a similar predicament to that which he feels he has now escaped, and consequently he views them with a combination of sadness and condescension. This ability to disengage himself from the social context within which he was previously embedded, such that he can now observe and comment upon the prior social context from a new perceived vantage point, particularly in a critical manner, illustrates one of the important changes that can occur upon conversion; *contextual reference point switching*. Essentially what this means is that an individual's construction of reality is contingent upon how they position themselves, and view their own status, vis-à-vis the wider social context. This self-perception and placement, which is effectively a referential marker from which the individual sees and interacts with the world, can

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<sup>160</sup> Andrew's narrative brings to the fore some of the methodological issues identified in chapter 1 which contested the idea that one *can* begin to understand a profoundly personal and 'life-altering' experience such as religious conversion through another's recollection, reconstruction, and transmission of the said experience.

change radically (switching) between the pre and post conversion mindset and thus underlies these strikingly divergent perceptions of reality. Consequently, this concept can be a useful means of understanding and articulating the quite momentous changes of perception that individuals like Hailey experience, which could otherwise only be described as epiphanies of sorts,

*“Everything was the same but at the same time seemed different. The best way I can think of describing it to you is that it was as if I lived my whole life with my eyes closed and suddenly now that I opened my eyes, the world around me had not changed but suddenly I could see it clearly for what it was” Hailey*

As with Andrew, Hailey experiences a new comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realization brought about by her conversion. Despite this apparent sudden manifestation of the true essence of her life, ostensibly nothing has really changed save for her frame of reference – a point she concedes, and yet articulates remarkably well by employing the powerful metaphor of sight.

This change is similar to observations made by Snow and Machalek (1983: 265), who suggest that it is the convert’s “universe of discourse”,<sup>161</sup> or “broad interpretive framework in terms of which people live and organize experience” that is radically altered following conversion. Moreover, they suggest that this involves the adoption of a ‘master attribution scheme’, which essentially means that “feelings, behavior, and events that were previously inexplicable or accounted for by reference to a number of causal schemes are now interpreted from the standpoint of one pervasive scheme” (Snow and Machalek 1983: 270).

The employment of contextual bifurcation in some narratives, as a strategy for dealing with the conversion, is validated in part by the Islamic doctrine of redemption from sin, particularly as a given corollary to conversion. Indeed, the construction of contextual dichotomies, using the shahadah as the pivotal point, is facilitated greatly by the idea that one is returning to a state of innate sinlessness (*fitrah*) upon conversion. Consequently, the convert imbibes a strong sense of being reborn, of second chances and new beginnings, which act as powerful instigators for a radical disjuncture with one’s past,

*“When I recited my shahadah I felt His rahmah [trans. mercy] flowing over me and with it I felt my sins being washed away – it was like their burden slipping from my shoulders – almost like stepping out of this old filthy skin, and I wept for joy because I*

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<sup>161</sup> For more on the ‘universe of discourse’, see Travisano (1970).

*had been given a chance for jannah [trans. paradise]. That day is fixed in my mind, hopefully until the day I die because I never want to forget what I felt on that day.”*

*Simon*

The idea of salvation through God’s mercy and a cleansing from sin, is intricately woven to Simon’s spiritual transformation. The former self, described as the *old filthy skin*, is purged during the conversion rite, which is in turn contingent upon the *burden of sin* being *washed away*. As a result, Simon is able to access this new theological vocabulary to articulate and convincingly demonstrate (at least to a Muslim audience) the efficacy of the transformative process.

The concept of divine providence is often closely linked to these effusive affirmations of salvation, and indeed most conversion accounts make some allusion to divine guidance. The idea appears to follow Islamic precedents as the Quranic account is replete with verses that point to guidance being God’s prerogative alone,<sup>162</sup> and so it could be argued that in some cases this is simply a perfunctory acknowledgement at best. Nevertheless, for many converts the issue is integral to, perhaps even the *raison d’être* behind, their conversion,

*“Why God had chosen to save a Hell-bound sinner like me I couldn’t tell you...but of all the billions of lost sheep in the world He had chosen me and guided me to the truth and alhamdulillah by becoming Muslim, what I was really did was give myself over to Him, submitting myself to Him and trusting completely in his huda [trans. guidance]. And so when I reverted I was like a newborn baby who’s completely safe and secure in his mother’s arms but also completely reliant on her too – I felt the same security and warmth, but the relief also of being able to put my life and future in God’s hands and not worry about it anymore.” Terence*

Terence’s invocation of divine providence and guidance as a means of articulating his conversion is unequivocal. However, upon conversion, he does question why a “Hell-bound sinner” like himself should have been granted what he considers to be an unmerited reprieve, and unable to answer this, he instead throws himself at the mercy of this benevolent deity evincing immense relief and gratitude. Upon conversion then, Terence articulates feelings of comfort, refuge and tranquillity, which are rationalised by his reversion to this almost infantile state of dependency.

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<sup>162</sup> Many verses of the Quran attribute guidance solely to Allah, see for example; “*Those whom God wills to guide, He opens their breast to Islam*” 125: 6; “*God doth guide whom He will to His Light*” 24: 35; “*Thus have We sent down Clear Signs; and verily God doth guide whom He will!*” 22: 16; “*Say: ‘God - He guides to the truth; and which is worthier to be followed’*” 10: 35. This is a recurring motif and appears in numerous places, see also: 2:142, 2:213; 2:272, 6:88, 10:25, 14:4, 16:93, 24:46, 25:13, 28:56, 29:69, 35:8, 39:23, 74:31.

Whilst relief and fulfilment are almost ubiquitous features of the conversion, many converts recall the shahadah as being generally a quite a sombre affair curiously devoid of histrionics or effusive affirmations of salvation. Moreover, in some cases, converts can be left curiously unmoved by the conversion ritual, experiencing little or no discernible change in themselves or their position vis-à-vis the new faith. Indeed for many of these individuals, a previous (or even subsequent), internally referenced milestone definitively marks the point at which the transition into Muslimhood was made, and thus effectively reduces the shahadah to a mere formality, or as one participant put it, “a rubber stamp”.

*“Before actually taking my shahadah, I lived as a Muslim for about 6 months – and I mean actually lived properly you know...I prayed regularly, read Quran, fast etc...I would even miss dinner when my parents had pork, so when it finally came to taking my shahadah, it wasn’t a big deal cos of course nothing really changed and I didn’t suddenly feel like ‘hey I’m a Muslim now!’” Jerome*

Jerome’s engagement in the experiential approach to the new faith, whereby he becomes wholly embedded in an overtly Islamicised lifestyle over a prolonged period, renders a subsequent, explicit conversion rite redundant. Consequently, his ambivalence vis-à-vis the shahadah is explicable, considering that in his view the transformation has already taken place previously, and ostensibly “nothing really changed” following his shahadah. Scenarios such as this, in which the shahadah loses its centrality to the conversion, do not necessarily throw the conversion process into disarray. Rather, they simply reinforce our assertion that in some cases, the conversion ritual is not necessarily, or perhaps even primarily, the nexus of conversion to Islam, and patently fixed conceptualisations such as Muslim and non-Muslim, which are predicated upon the shahadah being the locus for conversion, are not always entirely unequivocal.

For others such as Sandra, the emotions evinced are very similar, but for altogether different reasons,

*“It [the shahadah] seemed almost anti-climatic – to be honest, I’m not quite sure what I had in mind or expected...I mean I wasn’t expecting a shining light or angels singing, but just that I didn’t really feel very different from before – from inside you know. I mean it could’ve been my fault for wanting too much from it at the time. I realised later that the change had to come from inside of me and not from anywhere else. And that was where I had to look” Sandra*

Sandra's indifference towards the shahadah stems in part from her belief that the ritual component of the conversion rite was in some way lacking. Curiously, she struggles to articulate exactly why this might have been the case, although she is quick to dispel any suggestions of supernatural yearnings or expectations on her own part. Often the feeling that the relatively sombre and simple shahadah, forgoes the pomp and ceremony that many converts expect of, or even feel is warranted by, a change of religious affiliation, can be a point of deep discontent amongst some converts. This conclusion stems from the inevitable comparison drawn with conversion or initiation rites to other faiths in which the putative 'internal' spiritual transformation is mirrored externally by a tangible symbolic rite such as baptism by immersion. As a result, some converts may even feel the need to lend extraneous weight to the occasion, in order to make it more "memorable", as in the earlier case of Cheryl who throws a lavish dinner party to mark the occasion. However, for Sandra, the disappointment does not stem from the lack of a substantive ritual element alone. Rather, the underlying reason she fails to find the rite particularly gratifying, is due to its inability to effect a visible and meaningful change in herself. She does concede however, that this may have been due to her own excessively high expectations of the transformational efficacy of the shahadah, when in reality the change had to originate within herself.

Similarly, for a small number of individuals, teetering on the brink of conversion, and struggling with conviction, commitment, and a host of other immediate concomitants, the shahadah can beckon alluringly as a panacea to all of the problems facing the pre-convert. If the conversion rite then fails to live up to such lofty aspirations, the neophyte will inevitably experience a profound sense of dissatisfaction with the substantive element and transformational efficacy of the shahadah, and consequently this may even extend beyond the conversion rite to the faith itself.

In a very small number of cases, rather than act to relieve the anxieties of new converts, the conversion rite can also give rise to grave concern. This may stem from feelings of inadequacy and fallibility, particularly if the new convert has serious doubts and misgivings over the prospect of living up to the commitments undertaken upon conversion, or even the feasibility of living an *Islamic lifestyle* with all that is entailed therein. Moreover, there may be real fears of renegeing on pledges made and perhaps even of proving a disappointment to the host group, such as in

Jason's narrative earlier. In other cases, the full import of the decision taken, particularly in respect to its immediate consequences, is not considered fully until subsequent to the shahadah, and inevitably leads to uncertainty over what the future may hold,

*"Ironically, I said my shahadah around the time 9/11 happened and funny enough this stuff didn't really bother me while I was thinking of converting, but the day I actually went to the mosque and got it over with, I suddenly felt like 'what the hell have I gotten myself into?' The world was spiralling into madness all around me and I'd jumped straight out of the frying pan and into the fire." Yann*

Yann's concerns stem primarily from the potential socio-political fallout from the terrorist attacks carried out upon the U.S. by a radical Islamist group, and he fears association with them by proxy as a consequence of his faith. It is not unreasonable to suggest that Yann was well informed of these circumstances prior to his conversion, however, the potential ramifications of being linked to these acts by virtue of his new faith alone, is not fully appreciated until he crosses that critical threshold which identifies him as a Muslim. Leona also questions whether she undertook her shahadah with full circumstantial consideration, however, her reservations arise from what she perceives to have been a hasty decision at the time,

*"I always felt that I hadn't really thought it through properly when I converted 3 years ago – I just had the feeling I unnecessarily rushed everything and to be honest it wasn't all in my control so maybe that's part of it – I don't know. It's only gonna happen once in your life and it would have been nice if it was one of those magical memories that I could look back on without regrets. Obviously I'm not saying I regret it now because otherwise I wouldn't be here! lol" Leona*

Leona feels she was unable to exert as much influence over the situation as she may have wished, and there is an unstated implication that the host group may have been the determining factor here. In cases where converts feel they've been compelled to convert by extraneous factors,<sup>163</sup> rather than at their own pace and discretion, it is not uncommon for individuals to consider (at least initially) the conversion was made prematurely or in error. Often these anxieties are short-lived and are assuaged in due course. However conversely, if the feelings of anxiety and lingering doubts fail to

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<sup>163</sup> These extraneous factors are not always limited to the host group, and may include crises, the current social context etc.

dissipate with time, or perhaps even begin to intensify and gain momentum, the convert will ultimately renege on the conversion.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> As the study was based solely on Muslim converts (as opposed to potential or would-be converts), no substantiated instances of reneging were found. However, a number of participants who effectively reneged on their initial conversion and then underwent subsequent secondary or even tertiary conversions validated this conceptual category in large part.

## CHAPTER 5. PART II: Post-Conversion

William James' (1902: 177) seminal work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, describing the consequences of conversion, suggested "a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new." This 'classic' paradigm, which viewed religious conversion as sudden and entailing a dramatic transformation of self, was gradually superseded by the 'contemporary' paradigm, which presented conversion as much more gradual and far less transformative, or at least less able to discern precisely what change had actually transpired (Richardson 1985). Whilst our present study is firmly located within the second paradigm, and despite our reservations over the idea that conversion (and any putative religious or spiritual transformation) can be condensed to a ritual act alone, we must simultaneously concede that for many converts, the shahadah can and does represent an important threshold, which crucially demarcates entry into the new tradition. Once the initial euphoria of this conversion event or act, and the 'closure' that it often represents, begins to subside, the convert is then left to contend with the task of internalising the complex set of rituals, beliefs, and practices that are mandated by the faith, as well as enacting the myriad attendant changes that accompany religious conversion. In the following sections we will examine the nature and impact of the many changes that can occur following the shahadah, from the immediate consequences to the longer-term repercussions of converting to Islam.

### 5.1 Disclosure

Unlike some conversion rites that are often enacted as very public performances, such as those in the Judeo-Christian traditions, the Islamic conversion is predominantly a private act and rarely constitutes a public performance as such.<sup>165</sup> One of the obvious corollaries to this is that many neophytes are then left with the distinct option of choosing whether or not to disclose their new faith to family, friends, and indeed society at large. Inevitably, and for a variety of reasons, most converts simply opt to maintain the status quo, foregoing disclosure of the

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<sup>165</sup> The *shahadah* may be enacted before friends, witnesses or religious functionaries, however, even in these cases the rite is devoid of the *spectacle* of a public religious performance.

conversion in the first instance. As suggested in chapter 3, this option of non-disclosure, effectively keeping the conversion hidden (at least initially), can be one of the potential antecedents of commitment, as it presents converts with the opportunity of becoming more firmly established in their newfound faith without having to simultaneously contend with the social, and potentially negative, ramifications of conversion. Similarly, fears of social and familial opprobrium, adverse social circumstances and repercussions (particularly in terms of career and relationships etc.), and stigmatisation can all contribute to a sense of reticence on the convert's part in making the conversion public,

*"I couldn't bring myself to tell my parents about becoming a Muslim...well at least not at first – I knew they'd be even more upset by it. ~*

*Funnily enough, they took it much better than I could have hoped" Terry*

In Terry's case, the decision is contingent in large part upon the anticipated reaction of his parents. His initial interest in Islam sparked such outrage from his parents that he fears an admission of his conversion at this stage, may irrevocably damage his already frayed relationship with them. Ironically his fears prove largely unfounded and when he finally does inform his parents, they are rather more accepting of his decision than he expected, illustrating once again the role of perception in informing choices. In such cases, if the initial tentative admission to close family members is met with a positive response, then it can lead to an emboldened attitude towards disclosure in general. Of course, the opposite may equally hold true as in the case of Bryan who we encountered earlier, who was effectively excommunicated by his family after disclosing his conversion and consequently became much more reticent vis-à-vis his own religiosity.

Similarly, the imagined response of others to her conversion presents Daniella with serious qualms over the potentially negative repercussions of divulging her new faith,

*"Islam is so badly misrepresented in the media and associated with all these negative stereotypes that really have nothing to do with it, that I was hesitant to tell people I was Muslim, because I knew they wouldn't understand. I know most people will probably say that it's my duty in a way to educate people and like make them understand what Islam is really about and to make them see the good in Islam that I see." Daniella*

Acutely aware of pejorative media representations of Islam and Muslims,<sup>166</sup> she is wary of being identified with the same stereotypes and fears it will lead to incomprehension, and perhaps even suspicion of her motives for conversion by those around her. Ironically, these misgivings are tempered somewhat by her feeling that she is obligated to correct the misrepresentations that placed her in this difficult predicament in the first place, and in some ways compel her to be much more candid about her religious identity. For many new Muslims, conversion may suddenly propel the individual, rather abruptly and unexpectedly, into the limelight. Converts may be expected by the receding group, and wider social sphere, to not only explain their decision to convert, but also aspects of the Muslim faith, and the (sometimes reprehensible) actions of fellow Muslims with which they have no clear linkage. Equally problematic for the new Muslim, is the fact that the host group, welcoming the Westernised name and appearance of the convert, may push the individual to accept a public-facing role, once again becoming something of a spokesperson for the host group. This is a challenge rarely relished by any convert, and certainly not at the tentative and uncertain start of their ‘careers’ as new Muslims.

For some new Muslims, the issue of discretion is not necessarily dictated by fears of potential social castigation, but rather by a belief in the *privatisation* of religiosity,

*“I don’t think I told anyone I was a Muslim at first – I don’t really know why...I mean I don’t think I was really worried about what people might think or might say, but just that it wasn’t really anyone’s business. I was much more comfortable to come out on my terms as and when I was ready... God I almost make it sound gay!” Lewis.*

For Lewis, who perceives religious affiliation to be a wholly private affair, this freedom of disclosure is highly welcome and reinforces his feelings that he is not being divested of control over the process.<sup>167</sup> Curiously, Lewis is seemingly unperturbed by the prospect of being identified as a Muslim and consequently somewhat ambivalent towards the issue of disclosure; whilst he does not choose to voluntarily reveal his new faith to others, there is no conscious attempt at concealment either. However, despite feigning indifference, his use of the aphorism ‘come out’ is particularly revealing, for it illustrates his underlying awareness of the

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<sup>166</sup> A number of studies have looked at the negative media representation of Islam and Muslims, which certainly appear to have become more prolific since 9/11 (Abbas 2000; European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2003; Poole 2002).

<sup>167</sup> A recurring thread in many narratives that also underlies the manner in which the earlier stages of conversion are approached.

taboo nature of religious conversion and that becoming a Muslim may be considered socially reprehensible. One participant was so mortified by the imagined pariah status imposed by becoming Muslim, that he had in fact successfully concealed his conversion from his family and friends for the past six years. Perhaps more surprisingly, during this period he played a highly active role within the host group, quickly becoming a well-known figure in the Muslim community, which meant he was effectively leading a double-life of sorts. However, this is something of an extreme case and it is highly unlikely that converts can maintain an identity façade for any prolonged period of time, particularly when elements of their new lifestyle may be indicative of their new religious affiliation, as William discovered to his dismay,

*"My Mum found out by accident – she kind of clocked on after finding Islamic literature and a musallah (trans. prayer rug) in my room and then noticed I had gradually become vegetarian at the dinner table...she put one and one together and eventually confronted me about it. I couldn't really pretend anymore and I just caved in and told her everything." William*

Conversely, some converts appear to have no compunctions over disclosing their new faith, and indeed often appear to positively revel in their new Islamic identities. In many cases, the prevailing sense of relief and fulfilment that accompanies the enactment of conversion is placed in such stark contrast with the anxiety and stress of the earlier decision phase that the convert cannot but be overjoyed at its *successful* resolution. This almost palpable sense of release and elation is emphatically expressed through the open, and often very public, proclamation of the new identity, which may then be embraced without hesitation and uncertainty,

*"After taking my shahadah, on the way home, I was so happy, so content to finally be a Muslim – on the way home, I wanted to stop people in the street and tell them...I would've shouted it from the rooftops if I could!" Irene*

In some cases the issue of disclosure may even be rendered redundant, as an overtly Muslim lifestyle that incorporates conspicuous markers of *Muslim identity* such as adopting the *hijab* for women, or growing a beard for men, or more general sartorial, dietary, onomastic or even behavioural changes will serve to highlight and draw attention to the change of religious affiliation.

## **5.2 - Adapting to change**

The word ‘conversion’ is derived from the Latin ‘*convertere*’, meaning ‘to revolve, turn around’ or ‘head in a different direction’, and thus an element of change is implicit in the term itself. Snow and Machalek (1983), following the ‘classical’ paradigm of religious conversion (Richardson 1985), contend that conversion does indeed entail “radical change,” but are unable to elaborate further on “how much change is enough to constitute a conversion?” Indeed, they are in fact forced to ponder, “exactly what is it that undergoes radical change? Is it beliefs and values, behavior and identities, or something even more fundamental?” (Snow and Machalek 1983: 264). This uncertainty appears endemic to the field with most studies finding it difficult to conceptualise the myriad and multifarious effects of religious conversion.

Within this study, the nature of change wrought by conversion, namely, its characteristics, degree, duration, and the delay before its onset, varied enormously between different participants. For some, conversion signified a profound yet immensely private, inner, spiritual transformation. Conversely, other converts felt that the putative inner spiritual transformation also had to be mirrored in other more overt and tangible ways, including sartorial, dietary, onomastic or even behavioural changes, if the conversion experience was to be ‘consolidated’ (Rambo 1993: 127), or to be rendered meaningful and assume permanence. These differences reflect in some ways the early findings of Lofland and Stark (1965: 864-5) who distinguished between ‘verbal converts’, “who professed belief and were accepted by core members as sincere”, and ‘total converts’ who “exhibited their commitment through deeds as well as words”. These terms are not entirely satisfactory, as they perhaps imply that ‘verbal’ converts are somehow less sincere than their ‘total’ counterparts. We shall now briefly turn to some of the changes that can take place post conversion.

### **5.2.1 Onomastic changes**

It has long been recognised that changes in personal nomenclature can often reflect major changes in society, particularly those arising alongside religious conversion. As both Bagnall (1982) and Horsley (1987) demonstrate, name change was often an

important indicator of religious affiliation during antiquity, particularly within the Christian tradition. Indeed the archetypal Christian conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus is reflected in the changing of his name to Paul. Similarly, widespread onomastic changes have been associated with conversions to Islam throughout history. Bulliet's (1979a, 1979b) quantitative study of mass conversion to Islam and the emergence of a Muslim society in Iran in the 4<sup>th</sup> century was based entirely upon changing naming patterns. Consequently, he was able to estimate the rate of conversion to Islam (or at least the rate of Islamization of Iranian society) by studying the 'uptake' of Islamicised names. Ironically, the early history of Islam, particularly during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, did not set precedents for widespread onomastic changes. Rather, virtually all of the early converts to Islam retained their pagan Arab or other names upon conversion, with only a small number of individuals being required to adopt a *Muslim* name if the original name had unpleasant or pagan connotations,<sup>168</sup> one of the most cited examples being that of Abdul Uzza (meaning servant of Uzza – a pagan Arab deity) being changed by the Prophet to Abdullah (meaning servant of Allah). Consequently, it is interesting to note that *Muslim* names are in fact for the most part simply innocuous or 'inoffensive' pagan Arabic names. This custom has filtered through to Islamic legal praxis and thus there is no *religious* requirement for converts to adopt a Muslim name upon conversion.<sup>169</sup> Nevertheless, many converts do choose to change their names following conversion, either in part or full, and for a variety of reasons.<sup>170</sup>

*"At the beginning I threw myself into the thick of it – what I mean is I became pretty hardcore...I was trying to be the best Muslim I could be. I changed my lifestyle around completely ~ at one point I refused to even respond if people called me Dave. I didn't want any half measures because there wasn't any turning back. I had to give it my full and take it seriously." David/Ibrahim*

Our earlier encounter with David suggested that his recourse to an administered *shahadah* had helped facilitate an ostensibly irrevocable commitment to his new faith and community. Similarly, his post-conversion adoption of an overtly Muslim

<sup>168</sup> See for example, Sunan Abu Dawud, Hadith no. 4301, 4305.

<sup>169</sup> See for example, Siddiqi, M. H. (2004) 'New Convert: Is Changing Name Necessary?' Fatwa Bank, IslamOnline.net, 28/09/2004, [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask\\_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503544938](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503544938) [accessed: 28/06/2005]

<sup>170</sup> This unwritten convention on naming has long been recognised; Esposito (2003: 228) for example, writes that "converts are typically given Muslim names as a sign of conversion". However these findings appear to be mirrored by research on conversions to other religious traditions too, for example, Roberts (1990: 102) suggests that in fact contemporary conversions to many religious traditions are "symbolized by a change of name."

lifestyle (including a change of name) also appears to be aimed at motivating increased fidelity on his part, signifying a contextual bifurcation of sorts that helps ensure there is no ‘turning back’. Moreover, the validity and transformational efficacy of his conversion experience is predicated, at least in part, on his ability to convincingly occupy this new identity and space. One of the important markers of this new identity is his adopted *Muslim* name, and his refusal to acknowledge the existence of a pre-conversion name is particularly revealing as it illustrates the critical importance some converts can ascribe to issues of naming in new identity constructions.

Mary also opts to change her name, however, her motivations are somewhat different to those of David. Whereas David’s adoption of a Muslim name is predicated on a desire for the conversion experience to be rendered more meaningful and assume some level of permanence (i.e. effect real change), conversely, Mary changes her name as an outwardly manifest reflection of the very real changes that have already taken place within herself,

*“After my shahadah I took the name Maryam. I wanted to change it because I’d changed in myself.” Maryam*

Ironically Maryam is in fact the ‘Arabicised’ version of Mary and so does not represent a true name change *per se*, but rather a translation or rendering into Arabic of her pre-conversion name. This nuance is significant for it is indicative of the approach of many converts to early post-conversion life, during which there is a tendency to conflate various cultural expressions of Islam with the faith itself: in Mary’s case, leading to the perception that anything *Arabic* is also inherently Islamic. This perception does change with time and we will explore this aspect more fully in later sections.

Both examples thus far have illustrated the seriousness with which converts can approach issues of nomenclature and identification, and indeed some converts may even resort to having their names legally changed. However, these are rather rare instances and contrary to the example of most converts, who despite assuming a *Muslim* name during host group interactions, often continue to use their original names in non-Muslim contexts,

*“My Muslim friends all know me as Hamzah, but my friends and most of my family still call me Simon – I suppose because that’s how they know me. I asked my dad to use my Muslim name once but he said he named me Simon and that’s how it was going to stay.*

*I don't mind – I mean at then end of the day it's just a name I guess...it doesn't change who I am." Hamzah*

Hamzah encounters strong objections to his name change from the receding group, and as a consequence finds his new name relegated to host group usage alone. Despite whatever his initial sentiments may have been with respect to naming, and clearly they were of some significance if he felt the need to ask his father to refer to him using his Muslim name, he now rather pragmatically concedes that his new name has no real bearing on his *real* identity. Nevertheless, and despite his remonstrations to the contrary, his new name remains instrumental to the process of becoming normalised as a Muslim, particularly through other Muslims' attribution of social trust, and conference of host group membership. Although the change of name should in principle hold no inherent worth in itself, nor any bearing on the individual's conversion status, in reality, the new name serves as a symbolic reminder of the commitment and investment the convert has placed in the host group. Consequently many converts assume dual identities that allow them to occupy multiple *spaces*, which are often reflected through the names they assume within these spaces. At best, such examples illustrate that an individual is particularly adept at traversing cultural spheres, however, at other times and points in the individual's life (such as those induced by crisis, or changes in circumstances or commitment), it may also point to a cultural schizophrenia of sorts that cannot reasonably be sustained for any prolonged period of time.

For other converts the reasons for adopting a *Muslim* name are rather less personal but just as important,

*"I think it's very important that people should be able to tell from my name and the way I dress that I'm Muslim but at the same time not write me off as a foreigner...I'm English and I'm Muslim...I'm proud of my heritage" Joseph*

Joseph adopts the name Bilal upon conversion, however, the change does not appear to be at the behest of the host group and nor is it due to any personally held belief that a name change is mandated either. Rather, the principle underlying motivation appears to be a desire for recognition and acceptance as a Muslim. Ironically, this is tempered somewhat by concerns that he may as a consequence be stereotyped vis-à-vis his ethnicity, in effect becoming a 'foreigner' through association – a term he fears is used synonymously with *Muslim*. He attempts to counter this assumption by retaining his *Western* surname – a common practice amongst converts and indeed it

is rare to encounter converts with both *Islamic* forenames and surnames.<sup>171</sup> Some converts go further, arguing that as ethnically white British Muslims they are uniquely placed to present the Islamic message to wider society, and thus obligated to refute any perceived inherent incompatibility between their ethnicity and new faith. One of the ways in which they achieve is through the adoption of a Muslim forename – a clear assertion of their new religious affiliation that is nevertheless placed in stark contrast with their indigenous surnames and/or appearance. Consequently the question of adopting a *Muslim* name can be transformed beyond a simple issue of personal nomenclature to become an overt part of the wider *da'wah* strategy.<sup>172</sup> Curiously the same argument is sometimes employed by other converts who conversely choose instead to retain their original names,

*"Most people probably think of Islam as a Pakistani thing or an Arab thing and so I feel I have a duty to show them that there is such a thing as an English Muslim also. I can't really do that if I take on an Arab name or dress like a Pakistani or eat curry! lol"* Jeannette

Jeannette's name is an integral part of her identity which she feels need not be compromised by virtue of her conversion to Islam. Rather, she contends she *must* retain her name (and other cultural characteristics) if she is to avoid becoming subsumed by foreign cultural traditions which she is clear to distinguish from the religion to which she has converted. The motivation once again is an emphatic disassociation of *ethnic* cultural and religious components.

### **5.2.2 Dietary and other Lifestyle changes**

Issues pertaining to naming are only one facet of the complex and myriad changes that can accompany conversion to Islam. These changes are very diverse, and in addition to changes in belief systems and worldview, may also incorporate sartorial, dietary and behavioural changes, the substantive forms of which may also vary widely between individuals. In addition, the changes are highly dynamic, often

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<sup>171</sup> The hesitation in changing ones surname may stem partly from the fact that the practice is frowned upon from an Islamic perspective as a person is traditionally recognised by his or her father's name. It is for the same reason that Muslim brides often do not take their husband's surnames upon marriage.

<sup>172</sup> The *New Muslim Project (NMP)* states on its website: "Living in Britain it is important for the New Muslims to keep their surnames.... keeping in mind that we are fast developing into a multi-cultural society it would be an advantage to Islam, from a *dawah* point of view, to remove the misconception that Islam is only for those of Middle Eastern or Asian descent. It also shows that accepting Islam does not mean abandoning cultural heritage." <<http://www.newmuslimsproject.net>>

accompanying increasing levels of religious praxis, usually as a consequence of religious instruction or shifts in group affiliation, and thus are not fixed or in any way irrevocable. Our aim here is not to provide a comprehensive listing of the myriad changes that may take place following conversion, and neither are we concerned primarily with enumerating the minutiae of post-conversion changes themselves, but rather to explicate more general trends in post-conversion change with important illustrations from converts' own experiences.

The changes undertaken may be broadly regarded as either due to the emphatic assertion of a new Muslim identity, or in fulfilment of perceived obligations underlying the assumption of a Muslim lifestyle, although these are in no sense mutually exclusive and the differences stem principally from the motivations underlying them as opposed to any substantive difference in their actual outcomes. Moreover, as the Sharia traditionally divides all human actions into five shades of permissibility,<sup>173</sup> the changes may not necessarily be considered to be of equal merit, and consequently, a weighting system means that religious tenets deemed obligatory (particularly prohibitory ones) are more likely to be adhered to than other supererogatory actions. Less taxing demands are naturally easier for converts to incorporate into their lives and so can take precedence over those deemed to entail greater hardship. In addition, 'private' lifestyle changes, or at least those that are only enacted in the presence of other group members, are more likely to be embraced soon after the conversion, than more 'public' changes, which may inadvertently disclose the new identity prematurely to non-Muslim audiences (Bourque 1998a: 9).

*"I stopped drinking pretty much straight away. Same with pork even though that was pretty difficult. Salat (trans. prayer) took a little longer though – although that was partly because I had trouble memorising the words." Morgan*

Morgan views the injunctions against alcohol and pork extremely seriously, taking great pains to remove them from his diet and lifestyle soon after his conversion. However, other more proactive measures such as learning the ritual prayer (*salat*) pose much more of a challenge, requiring considerable effort and investment on his part before the changes can be realised, and consequently are postponed until much later. Morgan's experience helps to illustrate an important pattern amongst new converts, in which the individual undergoes a gradual Islamization of behaviour over

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<sup>173</sup> Namely, the obligatory (*wajib*), the recommended (*mandub*), the permissible (*mubah*), the offensive (*makruh*), and the unlawful (*haram*).

time through the progressive incorporation of *Islamic* components into his or her lifestyle. This process correlates with the inevitable growth in religious knowledge and level of comfort in occupying the new identity, but can also reflect changes in belief and commitment and often accompanies moves towards orthodoxy, particularly if the convert's experiences of Islam thus far have been more solitary, idiosyncratic or associated with heterodox or fringe movements.

The degree to which a convert should *Islamicise* his or her behaviour and appearance is often hotly contested amongst convert circles,<sup>174</sup> and can become a point of controversy itself,

*"One of the beautiful things about Islam is that it can adapt to any culture – I mean look if you go to Indonesia – their Islam is completely different to Islam in Mali or India or wherever. Of course the fundamentals are the same and it's a recognisable form of Islam that they all practice but what I'm trying to say is that their cultures haven't all been painted over by an Islamic brush or whatever. In the same way I can quite naturally be 100% English and 100% Muslim at the same time. I don't have to wear this or that or speak in Arabic to be any more Muslim and plus a lot of things that people do is just cultural anyway." Joseph*

Iterating Jeannette's sentiments earlier, Joseph is also keen to stress the universality of Islam whilst eschewing the parochialism of specific cultural interpretations of the faith. He is adamant that certain cultural practices are in fact simply masquerading as 'Islamic practices', and thus the debate is not over the importance or relevance of *Islamicising* one's lifestyle *per se*, but rather what actually constitutes *Islamicity* in the first place.

The concern with the authenticity of Islamic praxis is not only relevant for converts, but is arguably a perennial debate in many Muslim societies too. Indeed, groups like the Salafiyya, whose very *raison d'être* is an attempt to discern the truly 'authentic' Islamic practices,<sup>175</sup> from the practices that represent, in their view, the centuries of cultural accretions in the wider Muslim world, often condemn many ethnic customs, norms and parochial forms of religious behaviour and action, as *bidah*, or reprehensible religious innovation (Awan 2007b: 216-7). Converts are undoubtedly aware of these existing tensions within Islamic discourses today, and

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<sup>174</sup> See for example some of the postings on the New Muslim Project forum where this has been a recurring thread: <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/newmuslimproject>>

<sup>175</sup> The word *Salaf* loosely translates as predecessor, and so in the case of the Salafiyya 'authenticity' is enshrined in the actions of the *as-Salaf as-salih*, or the pious predecessors, represented by the Prophet and the first three generations of Muslims, and whose model they attempt to emulate.

therefore are usefully able to appropriate these debates to provide support for their own interpretations and religious leanings.

### 5.2.3 Gender relations, the *Hijab* and other Sartorial changes

This concern with the authenticity of Islamic praxis also informs, to a large extent, the debate over renegotiating gender relations and sartorial changes, particularly the *hijab*, both amongst Muslims generally,<sup>176</sup> and new Muslims in particular.

Often translated as the ‘veil’, the *hijab* stems from the Arabic verb *hajaba* meaning ‘to cover’ but refers more generally to a female dress code encouraging modesty, and may assume different forms in different Muslim contexts,<sup>177</sup> often being dependent on social norms and customs, as well as differing interpretations of scripture. The *hijab*, being the most obvious of sartorial changes for female converts (and perhaps the most overt assertion of their *Islamicity*), can be a particularly prominent and defining issue for many converts and quite usefully serves to distil the issues surrounding post-conversion change in general. Just over half [46/86=53%] of all female participants in our sample indicated that they wore some form of *hijab* on a fulltime basis,<sup>178</sup> however, amongst those who had been Muslim for 5 years or more, this figure rose to around 77% [37/48] reinforcing our earlier assertion of a gradual and cumulative Islamization of behaviour over time. For converts that choose to don the *hijab*, it may assume numerous diverse (and often innovative) forms, from simple headscarves to elaborate body-length *jilbabs*. Some converts even choose to experiment with trendy hats or headgear as a substitute for more traditional apparel, whereas conversely others may opt for the more austere *niqab* or face covering. As has already been suggested, the underlying reasons for any post-conversion change (including the adoption of *hijab*) can be broadly understood in

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<sup>176</sup> Indeed Mahmood (2005) suggests that there is constant deliberation amongst Muslims over exactly what constitutes sartorial authenticity and sartorial ‘correctness’ for Muslim women.

<sup>177</sup> For example, Iranian women adopt the *chador* when leaving their homes whereas women in Saudi Arabia often cover completely (including face veils and sometimes gloves), although we should bear in mind that these differences stem primarily from differing interpretations allied with various schools of thought, and thus a *Salafi* from the Gulf states will in theory dress no differently from a *Salafi* in Britain.

<sup>178</sup> Although this figure should be treated with some degree of caution as a number of the interviews were conducted or arranged in *Muslim spaces* (namely Mosques or Islamic conferences and other gatherings) and consequently the individuals may have sought to dress in a more overtly religious manner than they would perhaps have otherwise.

one of two ways; firstly the change may act as an overt statement of group affiliation,<sup>179</sup> serving as an emphatic assertion of the new Muslim identity,

*"I first started thinking about covering around the time the French government were banning hijab in schools – I thought to myself' those sisters are fighting for the right to wear it and here I have the choice and I'm not! Why?' I felt I had to wear it in order to stand shoulder to shoulder with my sisters and I wore it with pride. I'm not going to sit here and say it's been easy because frankly it hasn't. I've been verbally abused and spat on in the street. My mum feels embarrassed walking with me in the street but I don't regret doing it – I'm proud to be recognised as a Muslim." Khadija*

Khadija's encounter with the *hijab* stems principally from a political event,<sup>180</sup> that results in her questioning her own views (or a lack thereof) on the issue of veiling. Realising that she is afforded the choice to wear *hijab* but has thus far chosen not to, whilst other Muslims aspire to but are nevertheless denied the choice, precipitates an awakening of sorts. Her quite sudden adoption of *hijab* then is principally a form of social activism that seeks to display solidarity with her community (in this case the global Islamic fraternity or *ummah*) by being recognised as, and associated with *visibly practising* Muslims. I have written elsewhere on the salience of a communal religious identity that may arise during periods of perceived group crisis, evoked by events such as the Iraq war, the Palestinian *Intifada*, or the global war on terrorism. It is in these instances, that individuals become more prone to reassessing what religious identity means to them as a response to pressing questions and challenges from a pervasively non-Muslim environment (Awan 2007b). As a consequence of her adoption of *hijab*, Khadija experiences first hand something of the prejudice associated with being a visible minority, which up until now was only felt vicariously through the experiences of French schoolgirls chafing under the new legislation enacted under a rigid *laïcité*. However, her experiences, although negative in terms of the reaction from the receding community, nevertheless lead to a positive assertion of her new identity. Thus the adoption of *hijab* (and indeed the specific form of *hijab* adopted), and the 'staging of self' are intimately interwoven (Moors 2006; Christiansen 2011), and female converts are increasingly aware of this

<sup>179</sup> In a highly publicised case in 2005, Michelle Leslie, an Australian model facing drugs charges in Bali, claimed to be Muslim during her trial and attended court dressed in a full-length *burqa*. Sceptics argued that her conversion was purely expedient and a ploy designed to manipulate public sentiment and foster leniency amongst the Muslim courts (The Age 2005).

<sup>180</sup> In 2004 the French government banned overt religious symbols like the *hijab* from public schools, and whilst the ban applied to *yarmulkes* (Jewish skullcaps), turbans and conspicuous Christian crosses too, the press were quick to dub the ban 'the law against the veil', correctly identifying the impetus behind the French government's decisions.

capacity of dress and style to communicate identity (Christiansen 2011; Allievi 2006).

The other major motivation for post-conversion change lies in the fulfilment of perceived Islamic obligations which in turn underlies the assumption of an overtly Muslim lifestyle,

*“I started wearing hijab from day one. When I converted I submitted myself to Allah completely – that’s what becoming Muslim means,<sup>181</sup> accepting all of his commands completely and without hesitation and so I didn’t take my shahadah until I was ready to do exactly that.” Aisha*

The speed with which Aisha adopts this change is fairly uncharacteristic of new Muslims, however, her stated reasons underlying the change are common to many converts who choose to wear the *hijab*. She provides no rationale for her decision, save for the fact that it is a divine command (i.e. that it is *wajib* or obligatory) and thus necessitated by virtue of the fact that she has chosen to become a Muslim and thus *submit* to God’s commands *in toto*. Moreover, she points out that she deliberately delayed her decision to convert until she was certain that she could do this and therefore abide by the rulings of the new faith. Other converts, whilst accepting the obligatory nature of some Islamic practices, nevertheless introduce personal validations of those practices,

*“No-one questions why a nun wears her habit or why Jewish women cover their hair but it’s exactly the same principle, so why should I suddenly be oppressed because I choose to wear one? Did you know that in every single classical depiction of Mary, she has her head covered? ...you didn’t know that did you but she does – go and check for yourself! The hijab elevates women above the poor ‘liberated’ souls in the posters and the semi-naked car ads and the glamour magazines – it makes men stop and view me first and foremost as a person who has a mind and a personality as opposed to simply a body.” Teresa*

Teresa provides a *rational* explanation for her adoption of the *hijab*, promoting the view that the veil liberates women from the lascivious glances of a voyeuristic male audience, mirroring what Franks (2000: 920) refers to as the “disruption caused the by the hijab to the established hierarchy of the gaze”. She is highly critical of the prevailing socio-cultural context and presents the *hijab* as a solution to the ills of an androcentric society, thus reversing the common Orientalist trope of the veil as a

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<sup>181</sup> Aisha here is referring to the literal meaning of *Muslim* and *Islam*, which as the active participle and verbal noun of the verb *aslama* mean ‘one who submits (to God)’, and ‘submission (to God)’ respectively.

symbol of Islamic misogyny. Her views are not far removed from some strains of feminist thought, and indeed consistent with her pre-conversion views, and as we shall explore later, converts inevitably translate texts, myths and rituals using the vocabulary with which they are most familiar or proficient. Her account also enters the realm of apologetics whereby she attempts to defend the Islamic *hijab* by invoking the practice of veiling in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Curiously, the majority of female converts that did not observe *hijab* nevertheless conceded, somewhat ruefully, that they probably should (or at least would in future), and attributed their reservations to personal weakness and lack of willpower,

*"I know I don't really dress the way I should...I guess my iman [trans. faith] isn't really strong enough yet. I will one day inshallah [trans. God willing] but when I'm good and ready." Linda*

Linda acknowledges that her conversion requires an attendant sartorial change that she has not yet been able to enact. However, she remains optimistic that this eventual outward change in appearance will accompany, and thus reflect, inner changes in her strength of conviction and commitment. Linda's reasoning mirrors Christiansen's (2003, 2011) findings amongst female Islamic activists and Islamists, which suggest that a change of clothing is usually accompanied by a change of conduct, and thus women who adopt the hijab inevitably perceive themselves as improved versions of their former selves. This process of gradually adopting Muslim beliefs, and their attendant practices, or indeed gradually incorporating Islamic practices, in order to shift closer to 'orthodoxy' (however this term is conceptualised by the convert), is an important and often inevitable part of a process of enculturation that I refer to as *cumulative Islamization*.

Despite Linda's reticence in donning the *hijab*, at no point in the narrative does she question its validity. Indeed, the vast majority of female converts appeared to adopt religious teachings on veiling, inter-gender relations, and related issues in a fairly uncritical manner. This may appear surprising, considering that a number of scholars have argued that the critical disjuncture between 'Islam and the West' involves issues of gender equality and sexual liberalization (Huntington 1996; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Grim and Finke 2007).

Moreover, a growing number of Muslim women (and men) are critiquing traditional practices and presenting themselves as 'Muslim feminists' (Badran 2009;

Ferneea 1998), as well as contesting patriarchal interpretations of the Quran, and veiling in particular (Ahmed 1993; Mernissi 1992, 2011; Barlas 2002; Wadud 2006). How then do we account for, or indeed reconcile, the fact that many female converts in the West freely adopt and appropriate what are often popularly perceived in the West as symbols of inequality, oppression and patriarchy (Nieuwkerk 2006). As Poston (1992: 164) suggests,

*“The media presentation of Muslim women as veiled, secluded, uneducated and little more than a material possession of the male finds little to commend it in the eyes of the contemporary Western woman, and...the stereotypes regarding female subjugation to the male have exercised a wide influence.”<sup>182</sup>*

There may be a number of possible reasons for this apparent incongruity. Recent research on women’s participation in religiously conservative (i.e. evangelical, fundamentalist, and orthodox) traditions is particularly revealing in this respect, and displays a much more complex and nuanced relationship between religion and patriarchy than might be immediately obvious. A number of scholars have pointed to the fact that women’s individual interpretations of religious precepts and traditions often display a marked disparity from institutional interpretations of the same (Bartkowski and Ghazal Read 2003; Bartkowski 2001; Rose 1987; McNamara 1985). Often this disparity stems from women’s novel and selective interpretations of scripture and religious teachings in ways that are empowering and advantageous, without overtly rejecting tradition and authority (Bartkowski 2001; Hermansen 2006). Some women may also consciously and strategically accept aspects of religious patriarchy, such as submitting to one’s husband (Stacey and Gerard 1990), in order to strengthen marital relations, or indeed, to renegotiate gender relationships and boundaries (Brasher 1998; Griffith 1997).<sup>183</sup> Even in cases where there is no apparent disjuncture between individual and institutional interpretations of religious traditions, there may nevertheless exist a significant disparity between religious beliefs or ideology and everyday praxis (Pevey, William, and Ellison 1996; Ammerman 1987; Gallagher 2003; Manning 1999).

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<sup>182</sup> Poston (1992: 164) in fact argues that this is the underlying reason “which has perhaps contributed to the relatively low proportion of female converts”. My earlier critique of Poston’s dataset clearly shows why he may arrived at this conclusion which runs counter to all other evidence which suggests a preponderance of women amongst converts to Islam.

<sup>183</sup> Badran (2006: 210) argues that many convert women inevitably accept traditional gender roles following marriage, but invoke terms like ‘complementary’ to reframe these roles positively.

Returning to the Islamic context, Bartkowski and Ghazal Read (2003) suggest that Muslim women are able to employ religious ideas on veiling in highly empowering ways, mirroring some of the strategies adopted by female religious adherents in negotiating patriarchy seen above.<sup>184</sup> Some Muslim women in the UK, for example, have adopted religiously conservative teachings in order to contest minority cultural norms pertaining to issues as diverse as mosque attendance, choice of marriage partner, education and career aspirations, marital and divorce rights, amongst numerous others (Awan 2007b; Awan forthcoming). This trend reflects the wider growth of an austere Wahhabism or Salafism amongst diasporic Muslim youth, that condemns many ethnic customs and norms as *bid'ah* (reprehensive religious innovation), providing these individuals with an authentic vehicle through which they can forge an alternative Islamic identity to that bequeathed by parents (Awan 2007b; Lewis 1994; Roy 2004).<sup>185</sup> In doing so they may be able to confidently and successfully repudiate the imposition of cultural constraints, or negate the socio-political impotence imposed by the *biraderi* and other tribal power structures, that may have exerted a serious stultifying effect on their aspirations and prospects for the future.

Franks (2000) argues, in an in-depth study of the adoption of the hijab by White convert women, that the significance of wearing the hijab in Britain is often very different to its general perception. Rather than being a sign of conformity and rendering the wearer invisible, in many cases, the converse in fact holds true, and converts are in fact exceedingly visible. Badran (2006: 204) agrees and sees the donning of the hijab by some Muslim converts as, “assertively putting religion back into [the] public space”. Franks (2000) further argues that the motives and effects of hijab, particularly vis-à-vis power relations, are highly situational and contextual, and therefore defy easy characterisation. El-Guindi (1999), accounts for the adoption of religious symbols such as the veil, which may appear to contradict gender equality to Western eyes, rather differently, suggesting that they may in fact not even be viewed as symbols of patriarchy by the community itself. Indeed in many cases, such as diasporic communities or environments that are deemed to pose a threat to group

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<sup>184</sup> For other ways in which Muslim women have employed Islamic teachings or sources to contest patriarchal practices see, Cooke (2001), Barlas (2002), and Wadud (2006).

<sup>185</sup> The parental generation is often likely to follow a much more syncretic religious tradition, often involving Sufi practices, such as the *Barelwi* tradition in British Pakistani communities (Awan 2007b).

identity, the hijab may be seen as bulwarks of identity and group membership (Awan 2007b), particularly through the maintenance of an increasingly shifting “halal/haram frontier” (Allievi 2006: 145). Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that religious groups demand (and indeed receive) far greater commitment from their adherents, and impose a greater degree of *strictness*,<sup>186</sup> when they represent a smaller proportion of the population (Stark and McCann 1993, Perl and Olson 2000).

Thus a more nuanced interpretation of practices such as veiling may perhaps go some way towards explaining why female converts may be unwilling to interrogate, critique or contest, ostensibly patriarchal issues. For many female converts, the successful integration into the host group or community is often predicated upon their willingness to adopt and internalise the host group’s rituals and interpretational frameworks on a range of issues, which in some cases may mean they inadvertently end up reifying patriarchy.<sup>187</sup> This reasoning applies to many other aspects of post-conversion change too, and does not imply that converts appropriate the beliefs, myths, rituals, and practices of a religious tradition in toto, and without any sort of critical examination. Rather, for some converts the urgent social and affective need to ‘belong’ overrides any potential cognitive dissonance. Festinger’s (1957) classical theory of cognitive dissonance posits that individuals seek out information confirming beliefs or behaviours while actively avoiding contrary information, in order to mitigate uncomfortable psychological tension. Thus Muslim converts (and particularly new Muslim converts), might therefore deliberately and consciously immerse themselves in beliefs, rituals and practices that are congruent with the opinions and beliefs of their new co-religionists, whilst simultaneously eschewing that which is not. Put differently, as Kilbourne and Richardson (1989) contend, to successfully pass as a convert, the individual needs to know how to talk like a convert, behave like a convert, and indeed, look like a convert.

The small number of individuals who felt confident enough to critique the *hijab* in principle, had been Muslim for many years and thus were self-assured in their levels of Islamic knowledge and practice, and relatively well-established in their Muslim identities,

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<sup>186</sup> I have adopted Iannaccone’s (1994: 1182) definition of ‘strictness’ as ‘the degree to which a group limits and thereby increases the cost of non-group activities’.

<sup>187</sup> Rambo (1993: 108) reinforces the critical important role rituals play in providing “integrative modes of identifying with and connecting to the new way of life.”

*"I don't cover my hair and never have. I don't think it's necessary – I mean I've studied the Quran for many years and even argued with scholars about it, and there is nothing in it explicitly demanding that I cover my hair." Jennifer*

Jennifer's obvious familiarity with the canonical sources grants her immense confidence in her reading and interpretation of scripture, and consequently she is able to reject the specific practice of hair covering without rejecting the notion of *hijab* in principle. She is certainly correct in her assertion that there is no explicit order to cover one's hair to be found in the Quran. Instead the two principle verses dealing with *hijab*, use more ambiguous terms; verse 33:59 orders believing women to "draw their *jalabib* (cloaks) close round them (when they go out)" whereas verse 24.31 orders women to draw their *khumur* (scarves) over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to other women, children and their close male relatives (*maharim*). The actual details of what is entailed within the *awrah* (the area which is to be covered by *hijab* for both men and women) is instead derived from numerous *ahadith* on the subject (Sahih Bukhari 8: 347, 4480; Sunan Abu Dawud 32: 4092, 4101, 4102), which constitute what is referred to as the *sunnah* aspect of Islamic law, being second only to the Quran as a primary source for the Sharia. Jennifer's omission or selective reading of the Islamic canon then is highly revealing and characteristic of a 'pic and mix' approach amongst some converts who seek to reconcile their adopted faith with their old lifestyle, as opposed to their lifestyle with their new faith. In stark contrast, other individuals will convert expecting to change their lifestyles *in toto*, by submitting completely (as with Aisha) to the perceived demands of the new faith. Of course in reality the change is far less pronounced than envisaged, however the perception of a 'divinely fixed' faith that does not change to suit the 'whims and fancies of mortal men' as one respondent put it, can be one of the powerful appeals of the Islamic faith. Consequently, upon conversion individuals like Ethel are likely to attempt to incorporate all changes into their lives, or at the very least, not reject the validity of any of these aspects, even if they cannot personally fulfill them themselves,

*"One of the things that first drew me to Islam was the fact that it was divinely fixed and eternal – none of this nonsense about changing to suit the times like the Church has done in condoning homosexuality ~*

*We are human and so limited in our understanding of what is best for us and what is not. Islam is a complete system and way of life that is proscribed for us by Allah and has to be accepted and practised in its entirety. You can't agree with some parts and*

*not with others and still call yourself a Muslim.” Ethel*

Sartorial changes are not confined to female converts alone; Abdullah who converted around 4 years ago, is one of the many male converts who wears what he describes as ‘Muslim dress’ in public. Alongside a full beard, he is normally attired in a white *thawb* (traditional Arabic ankle length tunic) and traditional skullcap (which is exchanged for a white turban on Fridays). A *miswak* (ethnic toothbrush) perched in his mouth and *tasbih* (rosary beads) in hand often complete the ensemble. When asked why he has chosen to alter his appearance in this way he replies,

*“It’s completely natural to want to emulate the person you respect or love, and who could be more worthy of that than the beloved Prophet Sallalahu alayhi wasallam<sup>188</sup> (trans. peace and blessing be upon him).” Abdullah*

Abdullah’s response introduces the important concept of following the *sunnah*, or custom of the Prophet. The central importance of the *sunnah* in Islam has already been illustrated by virtue of its position as a primary source for Islamic law, and whilst virtually all Muslims will recognise the importance of adhering to parts of the *sunnah*, Muslims incorporate its aspects into their day to day lives in diverse ways and to differing extents. For some, it can be all-encompassing, from preferences and tastes, (such as using the *miswak* and eating honey), and outward appearances (such as growing a beard), to general behaviour, ethics and dealings with others. Conversely, for others the Prophet’s character (popularly attributed qualities such as mercy and kindness) is the principle, and perhaps sole aspect of the *sunnah* worthy of emulation, whereas other aspects of the *sunnah* are deemed to be historical artefacts that have no direct relevance or applicability to the modern day.

Regardless of the degree to which changes are enacted, the complex process of internalising rituals and practices, and general lifestyle re-evaluation can be so profoundly life-changing that converts, ensconced within their new identities over the course of many years may experience difficulty in accurately recalling what life was like prior to these changes,

*“It’s sometimes difficult to remember what it was like before I became Muslim. And although you’re asking me about how I changed, this is my life now and it’s so all-encompassing that it’s almost impossible for me to remember what it was like not to pray five times a day for example.” Nathan*

This is an important point that serves to reinforce our earlier assertion (raised at the outset of the study) that we are only ever presented with retrospective

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<sup>188</sup> This is a traditional invocation that follows any mention of the Prophet’s name.

reconstructions of prior conversion events and experiences. Consequently, individuals inevitably experience some difficulty in attempting to reflect upon earlier experiences, without first filtering them through an Islamic lens. This difficulty hints at what is perhaps the most profound yet subtle change to take place following conversion, namely the change in one's perception,<sup>189</sup>

*"I suppose I do see things differently now. Sometimes I feel like I'm an outsider in this society – not because I feel I'm an outcast or anything but because I feel I don't understand this society anymore...I don't share their goals and aspirations. Their lives seem so empty and how they live their lives - that used to be me. I can't believe it now when I think back to those days – I don't know how I didn't see it earlier. This is going to sound silly, but you know the film *The Matrix*? Well I feel it's a bit like that in the sense that I decided to take the red pill and woke up to the real world around me."*

*Judith*

Judith attempts to articulate this change in her perception, and struggling to convey her feelings coherently, instead draws striking parallels with pop culture references in an attempt to express this change. *The Matrix* (1999) depicts a dystopian future in which humans are enslaved by sentient machines, but are oblivious to this fact because they reside in an artificially constructed simulation of reality that resembles our world today. The blue and red pills represent the choice between remaining embedded within the matrix in ignorant bliss, and painful extraction into the real world, respectively. Judith invokes the powerful metaphor of the red pill as her decision to convert to Islam,<sup>190</sup> which for her represents a painful, but nevertheless honest, perception of reality.

### 5.3 – The Social Matrix

Religious conversion is often understood principally in terms of entailing changes in belief systems and worldview in general, however, conversion can also be viewed as a performance that occurs within a social matrix.<sup>191</sup> Numerous studies of religious conversion have demonstrated the importance of social bonds in shaping religious conversion (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Machalek 1984; Stark and Finke

<sup>189</sup> There are parallels here with what Snow and Machalek (1983:265) refer to as the convert's "universe of discourse", or what LeBlanc (2003) calls 'new forms of subjectivity' (LeBlanc 2003), .

<sup>190</sup> A number of writers have identified the deep religious (particularly Buddhist) and philosophical undertones to *The Matrix* and its sequels, the presence of which have also been confirmed in interviews with the Wachowski brothers themselves (Meinhold 2009).

<sup>191</sup> For more on the social matrix within which conversion occurs, see Chapter 3.1.3.

2000; Clarke 1987), however, it is not just the group to which one is converting or *host group* that potentially informs the conversion process, but rather the group that one is leaving, or *receding group*, must also be viewed as an integral actor within this social matrix. Before proceeding, it is worthwhile elaborating upon exactly what we mean by the terms *host group* and *receding group*.

Much research on religious conversion is based upon case studies of individuals who are drawn to actual groups, denominations, churches or defined socio-cultural entities within a given faith, and thus the conceptualisation of what an individual is converting *to*, is highly parochial, and thus fairly straightforward and unproblematic in the vast majority of cases. Conversely, and as stated earlier, studies of conversion to Islam may be anomalous in that they can represent a much less clear and less demarcated religious conversion experience. Within the Islamic tradition, the general absence of an established religious hierarchy, the minimalism of a conversion act which does not necessarily require religious sanction, the presence of numerous cases of socially isolated ritual conversion experiences,<sup>192</sup> and the oft-invoked conceptualisation of a global body of believers (Ummah), all contribute to the uncertainty over exactly what an individual is actually converting to. Of course, in many cases, we can identify much smaller and discrete conglomerations that aid demarcation of the contours of conversion, namely, specific Sufi orders and their associated *tariqas*, Islamic socio-political groups (e.g., *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, *The Nation of Islam*, *Jamaat-i Islami*), broader Islamic movements (e.g. *Jihadist*, the *Ikhwan*), and least helpfully, major divisions within Islam or Islamic schools of thought (*Shiite*, *Ismaili*, *Deobandi*, *Barelwi*, *Wahhabi*, *Salafi*, *Hanafi*, *Maliki* etc.). However, even then, many converts will be entirely oblivious to precisely what they are converting (due to a lack of theological sophistication early in their conversion) – a problem no doubt compounded by the fact that many highly parochial groups will nevertheless seek to blur these distinctions, and present themselves as simply belonging to *ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah*, the body loosely representing Sunni orthodoxy.

In light of these issues, the *host group*, for the purposes of this study, is understood as the social entity or entities characterising or representing the faith to which any given individual is converting. In some instances, this may be a specific

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<sup>192</sup> These include individuals who may have converted to Islam following a purely intellectual engagement with Islamic texts or beliefs – what Lofland and Skonovd (1981) would characterise as the ‘Intellectual conversion motif’.

group (such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, to which Jamal converted), or a particular Sufi circle attached to a well-known Sufi sheikh or *pir* (as in Jason's case), or in the vast majority of cases, simply individual Muslims (such as partners, relatives, friends, neighbours, and colleagues), who represent the convert's only social engagement with Islam. Many of these individuals may not be particularly religious adherents (and perhaps may even be better described as nominal Muslims), whereas others may be best represented as *culturally* or *ethnically* Muslim.<sup>193</sup> In any case, most will rarely self-identify beyond the simply 'Muslim' moniker.

The use of the term *receding group* also requires clarification. Following section 3.1.3, the receding group is not only comprised of the various layers or stratifications of the pre-convert's social matrix, but also any social, cultural, or religious groupings with which the pre-convert was associated.

Earlier we introduced the notion of a *dual self*, which serves as a useful concept in understanding the importance and impact of the social component upon the conversion experience. The *private self* is primarily engaged with the intimate thoughts, feelings and convictions underlying the conversion, whereas the *social self* must contend with the lived reality of being embedded in a complex social matrix within which the conversion becomes manifest. Consequently, in spite of whatever changes in the convert's worldview take place, both *receding group* and *host group* play key roles in determining the contours of the conversion experience and its aftermath.

The receding group is in many ways a misnomer, for it assumes that conversion is accompanied by a complete reorganisation of social structures and relationships. Moreover, it implies an antagonistic relationship between the two groups and reinforces the perception of conversion as entailing contextual disjunction, which as we have discovered is rarely the case. Instead, these groups are not necessarily diametrically opposed to one another, and there is considerable interaction and overlap between their spheres of influence. For example, in some cases, individuals from the receding groups, such as friends or family members who were Muslim prior to the individual's conversion, will often also count themselves amongst the host group. Nevertheless, there is a very clear shift in orientation

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<sup>193</sup> This idea of a 'cultural' Muslim is adapted from Modood (2005) who, commenting on Islamophobia, contends that the familiar 'biological racism' has been displaced by a newer 'cultural racism', which focuses on language, religion, family structures, dress and cuisine – traits that define what it means to be Asian.

associated with conversion which can be usefully articulated using this taxonomy and thus it offers a convenient means of approaching the subject.

### 5.3.1 The Receding Group

We have characterised the stratification of the social matrix earlier (chapter 3.1.3) as comprised of a number of layers, which may be thought of as representing three progressively more distant concentric circles with the convert at their very centre: the primary, secondary and tertiary spheres. **i) The primary sphere**, which includes close friends and family; spouses, parents, children, siblings etc, and who are all considered to be integral actors in the convert's social matrix, is as we have seen already, of fundamental importance to the conversion. Indeed, the feelings, thoughts, and opinions of the primary sphere often not only dictate whether or not conversion takes place, but also directly informs many of the contours of conversions' various stages. However, this primary sphere retains much of its significance following conversion, and may, for example, influence the manner in which the convert subsequently immerses him or herself in the post-conversion social matrix.

As we have discovered in previous sections, conversion can prove to be a particularly trying time for many converts as the processes involved are often fraught with difficulties, anxieties, and uncertainty. In such scenarios one might expect individuals to turn to those closest to them in the hope that they might provide some measure of emotional and material support, thereby helping to allay some of the difficulties that appear to be inherent to this period. However on the contrary, most converts find they are unable to seek the support of close family and friends, and instead relationships with members of the primary sphere are themselves strained as a result of the conversion, compounding the individual's anxiety further. Indeed, the initial reaction to the conversion from the primary sphere is overwhelmingly one of familial (and particularly parental) disapproval. This disapproval can range in severity from an unstated and largely private displeasure at the convert's lifestyle choices, to one of outright hostility and opprobrium where the new convert is effectively ex-communicated by the family, as we saw in Bryan's case earlier. The reasons underlying the primary sphere's disapproval of the conversion can also vary considerably. Simon's father is presented as a devout Christian whose principle grievance does not ostensibly appear to be with Simon's adoption of the Islamic faith

per se, but rather with what he perceives to be a *rejection* of his Christian upbringing,<sup>194</sup> upon which the conversion is ultimately predicated,

*"We're a fairly religious family and when I decided to become a Muslim, my dad felt I was rejecting the way he'd raised me and rejecting the Christian values he'd raised me with. If I'm honest with you, it upset him quite a lot at the time. Now though, he's come to accept who I am and sees me as being closer to those values, even though I'm a Muslim, than my brother and sisters who are supposed to be Christians but don't lead lives that he particularly approves of." Simon*

For the families of other converts, it is not the perceived rejection of one's upbringing and, what Bromley and Shupe (1981: 248) refer to as a "breach of reciprocity",<sup>195</sup> that proves so egregious, but rather the fact that the convert has rejected the prevalent worldview in favour of a socially devalued one, which is assumed, will ultimately prove debilitating to the convert.<sup>196</sup> Moreover, as Lewis (1994: 198) contends, the emphasis on preserving cultural, linguistic and ethnic identity amongst some Muslim communities in Britain, simply reinforces the suspicion that Islam is alien to European culture. As a result of adopting this 'socially devalued and alien' culture or faith, it is also implied, by extension, that the convert has not fully considered the implications and ramifications of converting to Islam,<sup>197</sup> and so through their disapproval and actions, family members are in fact attempting to 'save' the individual from a 'rash' decision. There are uncomfortable parallels here with now largely debunked practices of 'deprogramming', sometimes euphemistically referred to as 'exit counselling' (Giambalvo 1995; Landau Tobias and Lalich 1994), which were employed in the 60s and 70s to 'reverse' the effects of 'brainwashing' by religious cults, through psychotherapy, confrontation and intense critique (Ungerleider and Wellisch 1979; Bromley and Richardson 1984; Robbins

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<sup>194</sup> Beckford (1983: 132-7) argues that families who are most likely to respond with "strong and sustained anger" to their child's conversion are those who are likely to view their child as a 'model child', and who feel they provided a "close-knit, affectionate" upbringing, "characterized by firm and fair discipline".

<sup>195</sup> By this Shupe and Bromley (1981: 248) mean the child's rejection or dismissal of parental sacrifices.

<sup>196</sup> Often there are striking parallels with revelations of sexual orientation and the perceived familial reactions to it. Indeed as Lewis quipped earlier, 'I was much more comfortable to come out on my terms as and when I was ready... God I almost make it sound gay'! For a detailed discussion of parental and familial reactions to children's disclosure of sexual orientation, see Savin-Williams and Dubé (1998).

<sup>197</sup> In effect family members are suggesting that converts are going against 'Rational Choice theory' more commonly associated with conversion, in which "Individuals act rationally, weighing costs and benefits of potential actions, and choosing those actions that maximize their net benefits" (Iannaccone, 1997:26).

and Anthony 1982).<sup>198</sup> Naturally, such efforts to criticise or undermine the convert's decision can be deemed to be indicative of a controlling or interfering parental mindset and can cause intense resentment amongst new converts as they are considered to be dismissive of personal choice,

*"My mum and my brother thought I was crazy doing what I did and making a big mistake. They thought I was throwing away my successful legal career, arguing that who in their right mind would want to employ a veil-wearing Muslim woman"<sup>199</sup> ...They also thought I'd end up marrying some immigrant who couldn't even speak English properly! Lol. I guess mum was half right on that front...I did marry an immigrant but he actually speaks better English than she does!" Jennifer*

The situation often does improve with time and an eventual reconciliation (albeit sometimes only partial) appears to be the norm in most cases. Often the initial adverse reaction is tempered by the realisation that the convert has not changed substantially (in terms of his/her personality and character), or in some instances, has even changed for the better.<sup>200</sup> As with Simon's case above, Joe's parents become far less critical of his choice when they see that not only do their worst fears fail to materialise, but rather that the conversion appears to have had a positive effect on his conduct towards them,

*"When I first converted my parents were completely opposed to it and they had all these ideas in their head that I was going to become a fundamentalist or associate with terrorists or become violent etc. But actually what happened was the exact opposite. My character became a lot more gentle and I started behaving better – I began spending more time with my parents, showed them a lot more respect and kindness – once they saw the change in me for the better they knew it was Islam that was the cause and they began to see it in a much better light." Joe*

In a very small number of cases, family members were generally supportive of the individual's decision from the very outset, however this scenario was more likely to occur in cases where converts had recounted a relatively liberal upbringing or background. Consequently, the parents or siblings were not necessarily supportive of

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<sup>198</sup> Stoner and Parke (1977) describe the five stages of deprogramming as i) Discredit the figure of authority (the cult leader); ii) Present contradictions (ideology versus reality); iii) The breaking point (subject begins to listen to the deprogrammer - when reality begins to take precedence over ideology); iv) Self-expression (subject begins to criticize cult); v) Identification and transference (subject begins to identify with the deprogrammers and oppose cult).

<sup>199</sup> Jennifer does not currently wear the *hijab*; whether or not this was her own personal choice or stemmed from her family's opposition to it is not made clear.

<sup>200</sup> Anway (1995) provides a number of accounts (including her own) of parents' gradual reconciliations with their convert children, which often lead to a very positive reaffirmation of the relationship.

the decision to convert to Islam *per se*, but rather supportive of the individual's right to make a decision about their own religious affiliation, whatever that might be.

*"I have to admit that my parents were taken aback by my choice to become a Muslim, but they were fine about it. To be honest, the fact that they were ok with it didn't surprise me....my Mum and Dad were part of the sixties generation and had experimented with lots of things in their time, and so they had always been cool about letting us also live our lives the way we chose." Peter*

There is some evidence to suggest that parental or familial background may be partially responsible for the reactions observed (hostile or otherwise), following disclosure of religious conversion in a number of cases. A number of studies have discerned some degree of correlation between the manner in which parents raised their children, and their relative social class, suggesting that lower class parents were more likely to emphasize conformity in their children whereas middle-class parents were more likely to emphasize creativity and self-reliance (Kohn 1969; Ellis *et al.*, 1978). These findings provide some tentative support for much anecdotal evidence that suggests converts to Islam tend to hail from middle-class backgrounds, which leads us to posit that children of middle class parents may be under less pressure to conform to the religious affiliation of their parents than those of working class parents, and thus are more likely to engage in creatively exploring alternative religiosities and lifestyles. Moreover, it follows that working class parents in turn are more likely to display hostile or negative reactions to overt displays of religious creativity or breaches of religious conformity, which conversion to Islam certainly appears to represent in the West. This theory is supported to some extent by this study, which found that the most extreme reactions to children's conversions to Islam stemmed from parents of working class background.<sup>201</sup> However, in other cases, the evidence is less convincing, particularly as many middle and upper class parents were just as adamantly opposed to their children becoming Muslim.

The other major social impact on the primary sphere following conversion pertained to the presence of a non-Muslim partner or spouse. Converts to Islam are highly unlikely to marry a non-Muslim partner (or indeed a non-religious Muslim partner), and thus this scenario only arises when an individual in a marriage or relationship with a non-Muslim decides to convert to Islam independently of their partner. The religious conversion of only one half of a couple then inevitably places

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<sup>201</sup> Kose's (1996b: 137) study found the opposite, suggesting that working class parents were less likely to react in a negative way than middle class parents.

a great deal of strain on both individuals within that relationship. These findings are supported by studies by both Stark and Finke (2000), and Iannaccone (1990), who suggest that those with less *religious human capital*,<sup>202</sup> are more likely to religiously intermarry than those with a higher degree of *religious human capital*. To put it another way, stronger adherents to a given religious tradition are less likely to marry a person from a different religious tradition than weaker or nominal adherents. These general observations are rendered even more problematic in the Islamic context, as the Quranic laws pertaining to marriage stipulate that Muslim men and women may not marry idolaters (Quran 2:221), and only Muslim men may marry women from amongst the *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book), namely Jews, Christians and Sabeans (and who are thus under no legal obligation to convert to Islam) (Quran 5:5). Consequently, individuals who find themselves in an interreligious marriage following their conversion to Islam, may in *some* cases be faced with the prospect of either leaving their spouse or partner, or violating certain religious precepts.<sup>203</sup>

This injunction was never taken literally by either of the two converts in our sample who found themselves in this predicament.<sup>204</sup> In the case of Susan, a 46 year old woman who had been married for 23 years, the partner simply opted to convert to Islam a few months later too, thereby eliminating any potential conflict. Susan's partner was not interviewed as part of this study and so it is difficult to ascertain whether his conversion was brought about by theological conviction (as was the case with Susan), or was conducted nominally in order to mitigate any potential relational harm. The second case involved Lisa, a 29 year old female convert who had only been married for 18 months. Her husband had not opted to convert to Islam and the couple separated 4 months after her religious conversion. However, their divorce was not explicitly linked to her husband's refusal to undertake even a nominal conversion, but rather Lisa felt that their aims, priorities and lifestyles inevitably drew further apart over the course of the four months. Ultimately the distance

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<sup>202</sup> Iannaccone (1990: 299) defines 'Religious human capital' as "familiarity with a religion's doctrines, rituals, traditions, and members", whereas Stark and Finke (2000: 120) conceive of it as "the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture".

<sup>203</sup> Although Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a highly respected Muslim scholar, digresses from this opinion by suggesting that female converts do not necessarily need to divorce their non-Muslim husbands, as long as he does not prevent them from doing good, or does not 'encourage them to evil' (quoted in Roald 2004: 272).

<sup>204</sup> Allievi (1998: 188) noted the opposite within his sample, finding that most such relationships quickly ended.

between them grew unsurpassable and eventually rendered reconciliation virtually impossible.

Lisa's case shares parallels with the experiences of other converts within our sample. However, in these cases, the couples' relationships were strained, not as a result of religious intermarriage *per se*, but rather as a result of partners exhibiting differing levels of religiosity.

*"I decided to get married to Aslam after we finished university and Aslam asked if I would convert to his faith first. Now to be honest, Aslam wasn't exactly a practising Muslim or anything – I mean the fact that we were living together as erm, man and wife shall we say, should tell you all you need to know about how good a Muslim he was! But I could see it was important to him in name only and so went along with it, and everything was just fine for a while. I've never been one to do things half-heartedly and I guess the problems started when I began to read and learn more about Islam and began to find myself drawing closer to the teachings. Aslam put up with it for a while, but I guess the final straw was when I decided to wear the hijab to a family function we were going to, and he had a fit, and it was then that I realised how far we'd actually grown apart religiously. It wasn't long after that, that I filed for divorce and I think he was actually secretly relieved on the inside too." Heather*

Heather's case is somewhat ironic, considering that her conversion to Islam stems initially from a desire to marry Aslam and is carried out in the absence of any sort of religious sentiment, representing what we might refer to as a 'nominal' conversion. However, her later burgeoning religiosity leads her to reject the very same Aslam on the grounds that he is in fact only nominally Muslim. Heather's experiences, although somewhat extreme in their denouement, nevertheless feature fairly prominently in the experiences of a number of female converts who undertake nominal conversions to Islam, ostensibly to marry a nominal or 'non-practising' Muslim partner.<sup>205</sup> These individuals often find themselves engaged in some form of spiritual awakening at a later stage,<sup>206</sup> and arguably undertake a secondary, spiritually or theologically motivated, 'genuine' conversion,<sup>207</sup> which often places

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<sup>205</sup> As these individuals are generally referred to in the contemporary British Muslim idiom.

<sup>206</sup> The absence of converts in our sample, who had only undertaken nominal conversion for marriage purposes, is not necessarily representative of the real picture and is more likely to be related to our sampling method which deliberately sought out self-identifying Muslim converts, as opposed to nominally religious converts who perhaps viewed their religious identity as significantly less important.

<sup>207</sup> These multiple shifts in religious affiliation and religiosity can perhaps be better understood within my broad interpretational framework of *Transitional Religiosity Experiences (TRE)*, which encompass five key motifs, namely *adoption, intensification, transition, attenuation and defection* (Awan 2007b: 209-10). In light of the current study, we are interested primarily in those motifs that

significant pressure on the original nominal Muslim partner to become stronger in his religious belief or praxis too.

**ii) The secondary sphere:** The secondary sphere, which as we have stated encompasses colleagues and other friends who interact with the individual on a regular basis, but not necessarily in an intimately personal capacity, is not generally deemed to be of great significance as the associations are largely voluntary. However, they may nevertheless play a disproportionate role in indirectly informing decisions vis-à-vis conversion, particularly when pertaining to issues of disclosure and post-conversion change,

*“When I decided to wear hijab, I waited until I changed jobs, even though I was totally sure I wanted to do it...just because I knew it would be so much easier for people to accept me – to make a fresh start you know.” Yasmin*

Yasmin’s adoption of hijab is highly revealing. Despite the fact that her *private self* has already resolved to don the hijab, her *social self* is unable to effect such a change without the implicit acceptance of her colleagues and peers. Her primary concern is not with their reaction to, or rejection of, the idea of *hijab* per se, but rather with their anticipated reaction to seeing the change manifested in her instead. This problem is effectively circumvented by adopting the *hijab* concurrently with her new job, which for all intents and purposes allows the convergence of a ‘new’ secondary social sphere with the ‘new’ self. Brooks’ (2010) recent single-subject case study of female conversion to Islam and its influence on the workplace supports many of our findings on the disproportionate role played by the secondary sphere. The subject of the study was not only uncomfortable revealing her new Muslim identity in the American public school system, but her new identity also harmed existing workplace relationships and hindered the forging of new positive interpersonal relationships.

**iii) The tertiary (and most distant) sphere** encompasses elements of the wider society whose interaction with the individual is occasional and remote, and consequently the tertiary sphere exerts the smallest degree of influence over the convert. Nevertheless, despite its peripheral influence, the tertiary sphere can underlie key defining moments in the convert’s experience, as in the case of Khadija

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signal a heightened state of religiosity, namely: i) *intensification*: transitions from a state of nominal or moderate to strong(er) adherence, commitment or affiliation within the same religious tradition (e.g., those individuals who undergo born again experiences, or simply become more ‘practising’); and ii) *adoption or transition*: a move from no tradition or one tradition to another (e.g., conversion to Islam, or conversion within Islam (denominational switching, a move from one branch, sect or school to another) (Awan 2007b: 210).

who recounted being ‘verbally abused and spat on in the street’ as a result of her conspicuous change in religiosity (in the form of *hijab*). In some ways, the tertiary sphere can also serve as a ‘testing ground’ of sorts that allows the new convert to gauge the potential reaction of both the primary and secondary sphere to post-conversion changes, without implementing them completely or on a permanent basis. For example, Susan who we encountered earlier, engaged in an experimental approach to the faith before deciding to convert. Her temporary adoption of certain aspects of the new faith, such as fasting or wearing a headscarf “in a Muslim way”, allowed her assess to the feasibility of these potential lifestyle choices – partially by observing the resultant reactions from the tertiary sphere. She states, “I imagined people looking at me and thinking I was one of them and I loved the feeling”. Thus having gauged the response from strangers, which ranged from indifference to genuine curiosity, and crucially her own reaction to that tertiary response, she is motivated to convert on a more permanent basis.

If we examine the converts relationship to the receding group, then one of the main recurring themes throughout all of these narratives across all three social spheres, is the presence of some form of discrimination, opprobrium, or negativity vis-à-vis their conversions to Islam. Naturally the nature and degree of this negativity varies enormously between narratives, but can range from fairly minor issues such as, incomprehension over motives for conversion and a change in the friendly demeanour of strangers, to more serious social repercussions, such as losing one’s job, being excommunicated by parents, or being branded a social misfit by former friends.<sup>208</sup> Consequently, the receding group was largely presented in most narratives as hindering or in some way adversely affecting conversion and post-conversion life, and thus one of the inevitable post-conversion consequences of this negativity, particularly if it spanned all spheres, was a perception of social exclusion and stigmatisation.

Indeed this trend serves to reinforce the observation made by Lofland and Stark (1965: 862) that converts often ‘relinquish a more widely-held perspective for an unknown, obscure and often socially devalued one’. In the case of conversions to Islam, the perception of a ‘socially devalued’ perspective is particularly apt, as the

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<sup>208</sup> The mode of prejudice or social exclusion experienced following conversion can adopt unexpected forms. Franks (2000) studying the adoption of the hijab by White female converts to Islam, and non-Muslims responses to it, reported that some individuals found themselves on the receiving end of what amounted to racial abuse, despite their obvious and very visible ‘Whiteness’.

faith is often associated with cultural ‘backwardness’, patriarchal or misogynistic practices, and violence or terrorism (Klausen 2006; Pew Research Centre 2006; European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2003).<sup>209</sup>

*“The question I get asked most often by people is one, does my husband make me wear this [scarf] and two, do I support terrorism? At first such things would affect me a lot and I would be really upset by such things. Nowadays though I’ve got to the stage where it doesn’t anymore and to be honest I can’t be bothered and so I just throw my hands up in the air and say yes to both. I don’t have to justify my decisions to anyone and if people are so prejudiced then I don’t have the time to justify my choices to anyone – they have their lives and I have mine!” Jennifer*

Jennifer recounts how the prejudice she faces on the basis of her religion, eventually forces her to secede from any sort of debate with her interlocutors, reflecting her attitude to, and secession from, society in general. This is an important point, for the ubiquitous perception of societal exclusion, whether that is due to estrangement from one’s family or due to open prejudice from wider society, may be mirrored and thus compounded by a gradual *reciprocal secession* from mainstream society by the convert him or herself. This reciprocal secession is also deemed necessary in some cases, if the convert is to successfully abandon the old (beliefs, habits, and social circles) and embrace the new.

*“I found it quite difficult in some ways changing after my shahadah. [Interviewer: How so?]. Ok I’ll give you an example. I sometimes could go for weeks, even months without touching a drop of alcohol, but other times, I would bump into someone from uni, or would go out with the people I worked with, if someone was leaving or it was someone’s birthday, and when I was there, all my self-control would just go out of the window and I’d end up having a pint or two or worse. The next day, I would beat myself up over it and seek forgiveness from Allah, and promise to myself and Him that it wouldn’t happen again, but again and again I found myself being drawn to it when I was around people for who it was pretty normal. Gradually as I moved away from these influences, I found it wasn’t a problem again. I mean I could walk past the wine aisle in Tesco and not feel any craving or anything!” John*

John is very forthright in recounting his occasional, and by his own standards fairly serious, lapses in religious adherence. However, he does not attribute these shortcomings to a lack of willpower on his own part, but rather to the continuing

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<sup>209</sup> One might even consider the notion of a ‘socially devalued perspective’ to be a prerequisite for some conversions, particularly in instances where conversion becomes a form of protest against familial or social conditions. However, whilst the motif of religious conversion as ‘adolescent rebellion’ is well characterised in conversion studies, our sample provided very limited support for this thesis.

embedment within a non-Muslim social sphere, and particularly, his secondary social sphere in which practices such as drinking alcohol were deemed to be entirely normal. Thus we encounter once again the theme of a ‘corruptive’ *enabling environment*, whose threat can only be negated through radical secession, if not before conversion (as with the case of Pierre), then certainly followed it.

These forms of social exclusion and stigmatisation, often combined with some degree of voluntary secession, may lead to a situation in which a social void or vacuum is created, which may span the convert’s entire existing social stratification, or certain spheres within it. These social voids, which cannot reasonably be endured for any prolonged period of time, are usually filled in varying degrees by the incoming host group, which forms the focus of the next section.

### **5.3.2 – Host group**

The processes of socialisation or social embedment into the host group are a crucial part of the religious conversion process, particularly, if the convert wishes to ‘grow spiritually’, increase his or ‘human religious capital’ (Stark and Finke 2000; Iannaccone 1990), and indeed remain within the converted fold. Of course, this is not to imply that converts who eschew contact with their fellow group members, or who are unable to form and maintain relationship with their co-religionists, will somehow be lax believers or perhaps renege on their conversions. Rather, the central importance of the social dynamic of religious conversion has been empirically well established by numerous research studies. Indeed, many models of religious conversion, understandably, locate the religious group or organisation to which the individual is converting, at the very heart of the conversion experience (Long and Hadden 1985; Snow and Philips 1980; Stark and Finke 2000). Moreover, some studies go further and suggest that conversion is ultimately predicated upon the nature and extent of social relationships with the new group. Lofland and Stark’s (1965) well known model of religious conversion, for example, assesses the strength of social and emotional bonds with both non-group members and group members, positing that conversion is likely to occur if the balance of relationships is skewed towards the latter. Moreover, of the model’s four *situational factors* which determine the likelihood of religious conversion, fully three relate to the social sphere (growing affective ties between pre-convert and group members, weakening affective ties with

non-group members, and intensive interaction with group members). Glock and Stark (1966) refer to similar ideas on the relative weighting of friendships and social relationships with both group and non-group members as ‘social encapsulation’. Clarke (1987: 7) reinforces this view by suggesting that the vast majority of conversions to NRMs result from sustained contact between the proselytiser and potential recruit.

Once again, however, conversion to Islam does not appear to easily sit within this theoretical framework, for the reasons enumerated earlier, and thus a new characterisation of the social dynamic of conversion to Islam and the convert’s relationship with the host group, must be sought.

The nature and degree of social embedment in the host group is difficult to characterise in many cases, as it is predicated upon a range of changing factors including, the extent to which Muslims were involved in the individual’s shahadah, the level of general social interaction and bonding with other Muslims prior to conversion, the convert’s attitude towards organised forms of religion, the accessibility of Muslim social spaces (such as mosques and other meeting places), the convert’s general personality type (outgoing or reticent), and the convert’s relationship with the receding group, and in particular, with the primary sphere. Moreover, the convert’s initial mode of social engagement with the host group is not static and is likely to vary with time and changing circumstances. Mirroring the range of social embedment options observed with respect to the receding group, converts characterised their social engagement vis-à-vis the host group, as lying anywhere between social integration and social isolation.

In a very small number of cases, the host group played a relatively insignificant role in the convert’s post-conversion life. Indeed, the presence of a number of individuals who undertook socially isolated ritual conversion experiences displaying the *eremitic shahadah* motif, and who subsequently chose to remain largely aloof from their co-religionists, suggests that the role played by the host group in the convert’s life was almost negligible. Considering the fact that the vast majority of participants were contacted through other individuals, groups and organisations, the discovery of these ‘socially disconnected’ individuals can only be considered to have been largely fortuitous, and thus we cannot comment upon the frequency of this particular mode of social embedment.

In order to characterise the vast majority of converts who appeared socially integrated into the host group to some degree, it is worth briefly returning to the receding group. The host group exists in tandem with the receding group and similarly spans the entire social stratification, encompassing aspects of all three social spheres. Often the changes wrought upon the convert's relationships with the receding group as a result of the conversion, will be inversely mirrored by attendant changes taking place in the convert's engagement with the host group. Individuals who feel the full brunt of parental or familial opprobrium through excommunication or other social sanctions, for example, are all the more likely to seek deep levels of social support from within the host group.

Bryan, who we encountered in Chapter 4.1, experienced a strongly negative response from his parents after disclosing his conversion to them. They not only refused to be present at the occasion of his shahadah, but he was effectively excommunicated by his family immediately afterwards. As a result of this overt familial rejection, Bryan sought solace from within the host group and as a result forged closer links with many host group members, but in particular with Imran and his mother, who effectively served as a surrogate primary sphere. The highly negative reaction from the receding group was therefore crucial to the way in which Bryan approached the process of social embedment within the new group. Bryan's experiences reflect the experiences of many other converts who are forced to deal with rejection or abandonment by loved ones, as many of these individuals are also inevitably compelled to project their hopes and aspirations onto members of the host group, who then may serve as the proxy family by default. However, we should add the social vacuum created in the wake of the receding group does not automatically, *ipso facto*, position the host group to occupy this new void, but rather the transition and displacement is usually facilitated by the obliging host group who continue to encourage, support and engage positively with the conversion process. Thus social exclusion in the old context is often balanced and mirrored by social acceptance and inclusion within the new.

Another example of this inverse mirroring effect can be seen in many convert's experiences with the tertiary sphere. The popular vilification and negative representation of Muslims in some sections of the mainstream media (Runnymede Trust 1997; Poole 2002; Fetzer and Soper 2003; Asad 2002; Abbas 2000; European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2003), has also been extended to

converts in some instances, in which media reports have questioned the motives for conversion, or painted the phenomenon in negative or sensationalist terms.<sup>210</sup> Converts recounted finding these sorts of news stories derogatory and demeaning of the sincere choices that they had made, but not necessarily unexpected,<sup>211</sup> considering the wider British society's attitude to religion in the public sphere, and relationship with Islam in general. Similarly, some converts recounted negative reactions from complete strangers, including Khadija who recalled being 'verbally abused and spat on in the street' as a result of her conspicuous religiosity (in the form of her *hijab*), or Donna who was treated with pity by "a well-meaning but ignorant saleswoman". Converts can, as a result of these experiences, become extremely reticent to disclose their conversions to anyone but those closest to them, and are often legitimately concerned over public displays of religiosity (particularly through appearance and dress).

However, these experiences are often placed in stark contrast with the almost celebrity status of converts amongst their fellow co-religionists,

*"When I became Muslim I was really quite unprepared for the amazing reaction from the Muslim community. I was literally famous overnight, and made a fuss over when I went to the mosque. People who I'd never met before would greet me warmly or buy me dinner and genuinely enjoy being in my company. Most of all, people wanted to hear my story – they wanted to hear about me and how I got here. I was the centre of attention wherever I went." Steve*

Steve appears to relish his newfound celebrity status, responding positively to both the fascination with his life, and the material and other benefits that accrue from host group membership. Most of the individuals who welcome him in this manner are not known to him, which magnifies his sense of importance and self-worth. Moreover, he enthusiastically embraces his role as the archetypal "lost Westerner who saw the light of Islam", and who can now testify (in a very visible sense) to this transition.

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<sup>210</sup> For recent examples, see the headline of *The Independent*'s article written by Taylor and Morrison (2011) on Brice's (2010) report for *Faith Matters* on conversion to Islam. The headline reads 'The Islamification of Britain: record numbers embrace Muslim faith: The number of Britons converting to Islam has doubled in 10 years. Why?' This is in spite of the fact that Brice's (2010: 36) report clearly states the exact opposite: "There is no evidence of a mass conversion of the population, and this is hardly the beginning of the 'Islamification' of the United Kingdom". Similarly, *The Daily Mail*'s article written by Doyle (2011) on the same report, is emblazoned with an image of two non-convert women in severe niqab's, despite the fact that none of the converts interviewed for the story or mentioned in the study wore the niqab.

<sup>211</sup> Although a number of reports about converts in the media have also been positive, or at least, have maintained some degree of neutrality: see for example, Berrington (1993), Compton (2002), and Gordon (2005).

Whilst many other converts also commented on the extra attention they received from the host community, most in fact found the additional scrutiny somewhat discomfiting, particularly as they may have exhibited uncertainty about expressing their newfound religiosity at this early stage. One individual even mentioned the novelty factor associated with being a Muslim convert meant that he felt he was only cosmetically integrated into the community, and three years after his conversion, found he was still viewed as a “new Muslim”.

*“One of the things I found about the Muslim community when I converted was that I was kinda placed on this pedestal. Everyone wanted to know my conversion story and why I’d left Christianity and I didn’t mind it at first, but later I began to understand that the focus on me was actually for their own sake, because it just made them feel more secure in their own faith. As if somehow my conversion was corroborating the proof of Islam for them.” Mehmet*

Mehmet recounted a similar experience, suggesting that this focus on him was not motivated by genuine interest, but instead was in fact providing some sort of personal validation for his fellow congregation’s own faith.

These experiences are rare however, and most converts recount genuinely positive and long-term relationships with the host group,

*“My earliest memories as a Muslim are of an immense feeling of peace and being surrounded by warm, generous, beautiful people who showered me with unconditional love. They welcomed me into their homes and lives as their sister and asked nothing in return. Coming from a very cold English background, where even your parents or siblings struggle to openly show you affection or invite you around for dinner, I was completely taken aback by this..by this warmth. This human connection and empathy.”*

*Jan*

Jan favourably compares her expectations of social embedment (based on her pre-convert life) with her experiences of social integration within the host group, which she describes as ‘empathetic’, ‘warm’, and ‘unconditional’. Many converts recounted unbridled joy and astonishment at the “overwhelming warm hospitality and friendship” displayed by other Muslims, particularly when they contrasted these social interactions with more the familiar ‘measured’ British socio-cultural norms of engagement with strangers. Some converts also spoke positively of the provision of Islamic classes, circles, groups and talks, specifically for converts, by many mosques and Muslim organisations in Britain. Many individuals perceived these efforts to be evidence of the Muslim communities’ genuine concern for the welfare of new Muslims, and a desire to aid converts’ socio-religious immersion within their midst.

However, following the initial euphoria, many converts nevertheless felt that, as pleasant as these social encounters were, they were often transient, superficial and unable to fill the social void left by conflict with the convert's immediate family. Converts seeking a more meaningful and permanent way of cementing their relationship to the faith and having a social stake vested in the host group, often saw marriage to a fellow Muslim as a simple but most effective solution. Most converts suggested that they were actively encouraged to get married soon after their conversions, with fellow Muslims also reinforcing the idea that marriage would somehow fundamentally anchor them within the community, as well as uphold the well-known Prophetic dictum "When a man marries, he has fulfilled half of his religion". Often this advice was followed up by a marriage proposition or the suggestion of potential suitors. Many converts did go on to marry from amongst the Muslim community, and some spoke of gaining extended family-in-laws, virtually overnight, who served to fill some of the social voids left by the absence of parts of the receding group.

As we have seen, converts who choose to socially engage with other Muslims following their conversion are often able to make informed choices over the nature and degree of that social embedment within the host group. However, individuals living in cities that have active convert communities such as London, Leeds, Birmingham or Sheffield, amongst others,<sup>212</sup> are also increasingly afforded the choice to site their integration into the host community within either a purely or predominantly convert-centric setting, or within the wider Muslim setting (such as a local mosque). The wider Muslim community, depending both on its location and for historical reasons,<sup>213</sup> is likely to be organised around specific ethnicities (i.e.,

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<sup>212</sup> The *New Muslim Project* has local chapters and associated groupings in many areas, including the following cities (although this is not necessarily an indication of the relative convert population size in these areas, but rather the organisational ability and potential of converts who make up these communities): Islamic Foundation (Leicester) [[www.newmuslimsproject.net](http://www.newmuslimsproject.net)]; Leeds New Muslim Organisation [[www.leedsnewmuslims.org.uk/new\\_muslims](http://www.leedsnewmuslims.org.uk/new_muslims)]; South Coast New Muslims Project [[reverts.org.uk](http://reverts.org.uk)]; Nottinghamshire New Muslim project [[www.nottsnewmuslims.com](http://www.nottsnewmuslims.com)]; Sheffield New Muslim Project [[www.nmponline.org.uk](http://www.nmponline.org.uk)]; New To Islam Glasgow [[www.newtoislamglasgow.com](http://www.newtoislamglasgow.com)]; Manchester New Muslims [[www.manchesternewmuslims.com](http://www.manchesternewmuslims.com)]; and New Muslim Network (Wales) [[www.nmnwales.org.uk](http://www.nmnwales.org.uk)].

<sup>213</sup> The ethnicity of second- and third-generation European Muslims varies widely across Europe and broadly follows patterns set by colonial legacy. Muslims in the UK hail principally from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, whereas French Muslims are more likely to be of North African descent (Awan 2007b: 225). On a national level, the various waves of Muslim immigration to the UK have resulted in specific ethnicities congregating in certain localities in close-knit communities – a trend continuing to the present day with the arrival of refugees and socially displaced groups such as

Pakistani, Bengali, Gujarati, or Turkish), or less frequently, around specific Islamic ‘denominations’ (i.e. Barelwi, Salafi, or Deobandi).<sup>214</sup> Around half of the converts in our sample, given the option, chose convert-centric environments as the primary locus of their socialisation into the host group, for a number of reasons.

Some individuals felt that fellow converts were best placed to understand and advise on the “trials and tribulations of being a new Muslim”, particularly on issues that ‘born Muslims’ had understandably never encountered, such as dealing with non-Muslim parents and family members, or reconciling aspects of the new faith with long held previous beliefs. On a range of other issues, which might be of just as much relevance to second and third generation Muslims,<sup>215</sup> such as Islamizing behaviour, adapting to religious change, dealing with a non-Muslim partner, or relationships with the wider non-Muslim society, converts sometimes still preferred to seek solutions from fellow converts than other co-religionists.

In other cases, converts were more likely to socialize with fellow converts, as they held suspicions over the “cultural baggage” that some born Muslims brought to their religious beliefs and praxis. Many individuals spoke of their shock at discovering this extraneous material interjected into the Islamic canon. Moreover, and as we saw in the discussion on post-conversion change earlier, some converts argued that as ethnically White British Muslims,<sup>216</sup> they were uniquely placed to share the Islamic message with others through *da’wah* (proselytization efforts), and thus obligated to refute any inherent incompatibility between their ethnicity and new faith. Jeannette, a 41 year old female convert who held such views, vehemently argued against absorbing foreign cultural traditions, and suggested converts must make an emphatic disassociation between the ethno-cultural, and religious components of Islam. In essence, converts like Jeanette contended that they had only

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Somalis, Kurds and Albanians; for more on the historical profile of the British Muslim community, see Ansari (2002), Nielsen (1999), and Peach (2006).

<sup>214</sup> Although a number of mosques, particularly in London, are now beginning to congregate on a much more cosmopolitan basis.

<sup>215</sup> For more on the similarities between the experiences of converts and ‘born again Muslims’ from the second and third generation, who had ‘rediscovered’ their natal faith, see Awan (2007b) and Gilliat-Ray (1999).

<sup>216</sup> This view was generally isolated to White converts, and whilst some Black converts did tend to congregate in predominantly Black mosques, such as the Brixton Mosque in South London, they did not view their practice and interpretation of Islam in parochially ethnic terms.

changed their religious affiliation, and not their ethnicity, which might in fact be disputed by intimate association with ethnic Muslims.<sup>217</sup>

Other converts, however, found such views bordering on the racist, arguing that the appeal of Islam lay in its universality, absence of racial tendencies and conception of a global fraternity. Many of these individuals, such as Abdul-Salam, whilst critiquing ethno-cultural practices “masquerading as Islam”, did so through the lens of a ‘non-syncretic’ Islamic denomination, such as Salafism,

*“When I first embarked upon the Deen, I came across too much fitna, too much bid’ah. SubhanAllah, I mean these Guyanese brothers meant well and all, but they were doing some messed up things, like celebrating the Prophet’s SAW birthday and stuff. The Prophet SAW said that every innovation leads to error, and every error leads to the fire.” Abdul-Salam*

However, despite Abdul-Salam’s critique of these ‘cultural’ practices, he does not seek to secede from the community, but instead views these issues as an opportunity for da’wah amongst the Muslim community in order to correct and reform their Islamic praxis, and spread the Salafi methodology.

#### **5.4 The Lived reality and Remaining Converted**

Conversion is not easy, as Taylor (1999) suggests in the title of his article ‘Conversion: inward, outward and awkward’. Indeed, not only is conversion a complicated and often difficult process, but remaining converted poses its own distinct challenges. As Berger and Luckmann (1966: 145) somewhat pessimistically once suggested, “To have a conversion experience is nothing much: The real thing is to be able to keep taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. This is where the religious community comes in.” Bromley and Shupe (1979) agree, and highlighting the significant ‘dropout rate’ amongst New Religious Movements, suggest that recruiting new members is a completely different prospect from keeping existing members affiliated.

Converts usually hold a highly idealised pre-conversion view of the host faith and their potential co-religionists. This rose-tinted view of an outsider can often

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<sup>217</sup> In some cases, this may be completely unavoidable – Franks’ (2000) study of White female converts and their adoption of the hijab suggests that some individuals were victims of ‘racial’ abuse, purely as a result of their sartorial choices, which I would argue serves to negate their ethnic specificity.

differ drastically from the view from within, and it is only the lived reality of life as a Muslim after conversion that may potentially expose the various perceived shortcomings of the faith. Those that choose to remain within the fold of Islam, must overcome these various problematic issues, obstacles and shortcomings that militate against continuing affiliation, if they are to remain converted. These common issues and grievances can be broadly grouped into four categories: i), Cognitive or moral dissonance with aspects of Islam; ii) Disillusionment with co-religionists, iii) Difficulty in maintaining a Muslim lifestyle; and iv) External scrutiny.

#### **5.4.1 Cognitive or moral dissonance with aspects of Islam**

As we have seen from chapter 3.2, the average engagement period with Islam (the time elapsed between encounter and conversion) was found to be around 2 years. Within this period, the level of engagement with the theology and wider weltanschaung of the faith to which they were converting varied enormously between individuals. Those who converted primarily as a result of social interaction and affective bonds with fellow Muslims were the least likely to have undertaken intensive, private and impartial study of Islamic sources and teachings. Instead their knowledge of Islam was likely to have been garnered from within the host group, and may largely have consisted of uncontroversial, and perhaps even apologetic, literature and other resources.<sup>218</sup> Conversely, individuals whose conversion had hinged primarily on an intellectual, and often private, engagement with Islam, were far more likely to have encountered a variety of sources on Islam, including academic literature, and material from non-Muslim sources.

This variance in the intellectual and critical engagement with Islam prior to conversion meant that some individuals only became more fully acquainted with controversial or problematic aspects of the faith, which may have conflicted with their own pre-conversion worldview or sensibilities, after the conversion had actually been enacted. Alternatively, some converts found that their religious views had “mellowed with time”, as one convert put it, which meant that individuals may

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<sup>218</sup> Examples given were of a number of proselytising pamphlets and booklets produced by *Da’wah* organisations such as IPCC, the Muslim World League, and WAMY, or of audio-visual resources from Muslim organisations and websites.

have developed aversion or discomfort to certain aspects of Islamic teachings which had initially been appropriated unproblematically.

Laura, for example, attended a lecture at her university on the topic of the ‘Muslim family unit’ some years after her conversion, in which the speaker suggested that there were various sanctions in the Quran against ‘rebellious women’, one of which included the use of physical force by the husband. Laura, having been a victim of domestic abuse in a previous relationship, was appalled by this revelation and scoured her copy of the Quran as soon as she got home. Upon finding the verse, she recalled experiencing deep distress and depression. When asked how, considering that she was still a Muslim, she had reconciled herself to this verse,<sup>219</sup> she explained,

*“Well I ignored it at first but it did keep coming back to me, and so I eventually confronted some people about it, and the most reassuring answer I got was that the Prophet SAW, who every Muslim man should try to emulate, never once raised his hand against any of his wives, even when they plotted against him in the episode with the honey. So to me that is the true spirit of Islam. That is the ideal that we should all aim towards.” Laura*

Other converts were fairly sophisticated in their critiques and recalled encountering a range of problematic or troubling issues within the faith, including polygamy, the ‘Satanic verses’,<sup>220</sup> ‘ma malakat aymanukum’ (‘the ones your right hands possess’),<sup>221</sup> and the Prophet’s marriage to the young Aishah, to mention just a few.<sup>222</sup>

However, virtually all of these issues were eventually resolved in some manner, whether that was through the invocation of a multiplicity of interpretations, pointing to significant *ikhtilaf* (difference of juristic opinion) on the issue concerned,

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<sup>219</sup> The verse in question reads: “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whom part you fear disloyalty and ill conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance) for Allah is Most High, Great (above you all); Quran, 4: 34.

<sup>220</sup> See Quran 22:52. For a scholarly discussion of the incident, see Rubin (1997: 161) and Watt (1961: 60).

<sup>221</sup> This is classically thought to refer to female slaves or prisoners of war; see Quran 4: 24, 23: 5-6; see also, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Volume 8, Book 77, Number 600, and also Volume 5, Book 59, Number 459.

<sup>222</sup> There is some disagreement over Aishah’s age at the time of her marriage, with most sources suggesting she was six or seven years of age at betrothal and nine or ten years old when the marriage was consummated; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Volume 7, Book 62, Number 64. For a scholarly discussion of the sources and the event, see Spellberg (1994: 40) and Armstrong (1992: 157).

or attempts to contextualise the issue historically using traditional exegetical concepts, such as *naskh* (abrogation), *asbab al-nuzul* (the contexts of revelation), and chronological cognisance (particularly vis-à-vis the Meccan and Madinan verses). The eventual successful resolution of many of these conflicts might once again be attributed to Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, which posits that individuals seek out information confirming beliefs or behaviours while actively avoiding contrary information, in order to mitigate uncomfortable psychological tension. In these instances, converts might therefore deliberately and consciously seek out explanations that serve to moderate discomfiting aspects of their new faith, whilst simultaneously eschewing compelling evidence that engenders moral or cognitive dissonance.

A second related aspect of the faith that was of concern to some converts, was the prospect of navigating the inherent diversity of Islam in the form of its myriad Islamic cultures, denominations, sects, groups, schools of thought (*madhahib*), practices and beliefs, before attempting to locate themselves within this broad religious spectrum. This diversity, which prior to conversion was often lauded as a shining example of the pluralism of the Islamic faith and cited as one of the 'pull' factors influencing the decision to convert, can nevertheless become a source of confusion and uncertainty following conversion.

*"I found it all a bit confusing to be honest – I mean things like prayer and fasting everyone knows you have to do, but what about the rest of the stuff?! Some people say you should do one thing – others say do something else, and everybody has evidence to say their way is right!" Karim*

Some converts exhibited uncertainty or confusion over the ritual prayer or other aspects of Islamic praxis, whilst others struggled to delineate the boundaries of the lawful (*halal*) from the forbidden (*haram*), in addition to the more nuanced categories of actions that are obligatory (*wajib*), recommended (*mandub*), permissible (*mubah*), and offensive (*makruh*). This ambiguity over aspects of the newfound faith was far more likely to occur amongst socially isolated converts who were forced to traverse these often complicated theological formulations alone, by using multiple textual sources and information gleaned from a multitude of sources on the Internet,<sup>223</sup> often without any indication of their authenticity, veracity or level

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<sup>223</sup> Although the Internet is now increasingly host to a range of Islamic audio-visual resources that provide guidance and step-by-step instructions for a range of Islamic practices such as the ritual prayer (*salat*), reading the Quran in Arabic, performing Hajj, or undertaking funeral rites.

of consensus with the wider Muslim community. Rather ironically, some converts with multiple social connections within the host group also struggled to discern the eminently authentic, or orthodox, from weaker or unsubstantiated positions. Caroline's account illustrates this point well, as she displayed a great deal of uncertainty on a number of issues following her conversion, particularly as the information she had gained from her Algerian husband and mother in-law, differed substantially from what she was taught in her 'New Muslim' class at the local mosque, which in turn differed from the informal conversations she had had with a close Muslim friend from her workplace.

Conversely, individuals who created strong linkages and bonds with highly defined social groups, or displayed high levels of social embedment, were far less likely to evince confusion and uncertainty over prescribed beliefs and praxis. Thus the search for authenticity was less likely to be an issue for converts who were firmly embedded within, or affiliated very closely with a structured social grouping (such as a Sufi group or a traditionalist Maliki study circle), and which provided a highly ordered and controlled mode of engagement with engagement with Islamic texts and sources through mechanisms such as *taqlid*.<sup>224</sup> The inevitable question then arises, to which Islam is the individual actually converting?

#### **5.4.2 Disillusionment with co-religionists**

Inevitably most converts will, at some point in their post-conversion life, evince some dissatisfaction with elements of Muslim society or disillusionment with specific members or attitudes within the Muslim community. As we have already stated, these are usually the result of highly idealised and utopian pre-conversion visions of life as a Muslim, and unrealistic expectations of their co-religionists.

The most common grievance often stems from dissatisfaction with other 'born Muslims' and their apparent lack of commitment or adherence to their faith,

*"Sometimes I'm quite disheartened by the way other Muslims behave – Islam is the truth and it's not difficult to fulfil the moderate demands that Allah makes of us"* Stuart

Converts often express incredulity at, what is in their eyes, blatant and wanton violation of Islamic norms, ethics and principles by other Muslims. Perhaps these sorts of views are to be expected from many converts, considering the investment

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<sup>224</sup> The 'blind' following or imitation of a school or scholar in religious laws and commandments, as derived by them without necessarily understanding the evidence or reasoning behind them.

they have placed in the community and worldview, which they are then forced to share with ‘lax or nominal’ Muslims, who appear to them to be undeserving of either.<sup>225</sup> Moreover, there is often a palpable sense of betrayal and anger felt by converts, who in many cases have had to abandon family members, friends, and old lifestyles, only to discover dissatisfaction and even contempt for their chosen way of life from some of their fellow adherents. Devon was one such convert who felt extremely uneasy over the faith he has entered into, as a result of the conduct of his fellow Muslims,

*“So Islam says you shouldn’t drink right? – why is it then that so many Muslim shopkeepers sell alcohol or run off-licenses, or nauzubillah [trans. We seek forgiveness with Allah] drink alcohol themselves? Why did I bother leaving a life in which this was absolutely normal and permitted, for a life in which it’s forbidden, if the people who should be serving as my role-models are no better than the kuffar [trans. non-Muslims/infidels] that I left behind.” Devon*

Some converts also mentioned hypocrisy, double standards, and curiously appeasement of ‘the West’ as underlying reasons for the conduct of fellow Muslims.

Others were not necessarily disillusioned by the respective levels of piety and religious praxis of fellow Muslims, but rather appeared to take umbrage at the alleged distortion of Islamic practices on ethno-cultural grounds, particularly through the perceived surreptitious incorporation of cultural practices masquerading as Islamic practices that we encountered in the previous section. These individuals suggested that the traditions, customs and cultural accretions associated with these “ethnic varieties of Islam” sought to adulterate the pristine vision of Islam to which they had converted.<sup>226</sup>

Indeed this disillusionment has become fairly widespread in some circles, and criticism of the host community has often been scathing, with a number of high-profile converts extensively and publicly critiquing and lambasting the wider Muslim community. Michael Young, a British convert to Islam published an article in 2000 entitled ‘Frustrations of a Muslim convert: Committed to Islam, vexed by

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<sup>225</sup> Badran (2006: 194) suggests that converts often “experience contradictions between the Islamic ideal and its practice more acutely, or in a more raw way, than many born Muslims”, precisely because they have not inherited coping mechanisms to deal with inconsistencies between ideals and reality.

<sup>226</sup> There are striking parallels here with the attitudes of second and third generation Muslims who use similar arguments to provide themselves with an authentic vehicle which they can employ to forge an alternative Islamic identity to that bequeathed by immigrant parents (Awan 2007b; Lewis 1994; Roy 2004).

Muslims', which appeared in both the Muslim magazine *Q-News* and the online magazine *Islam for today*, and which appears to distil many of the sentiments found amongst my sample,

*"Based on my personal experience, my advice either to new Muslims or anyone considering the possibility of accepting Islam would be simply to judge a religion not by its adherents, many of whom may fall far short of the ideal in a variety of ways (and I include myself in that!), but rather by the theology and teachings of the religion itself. To be honest, I remain in Islam very much in spite of and not because of my experiences with Muslims. Only a handful have been of any help to me and quite a few hard-line politicos and joyless, uptight puritans have been a real hindrance. However, despite my great disappointment at both the lack of organized support available to new Muslims and the widespread politically focused rather than God-centered Islam so prevalent today, plus my intense dislike of the nasty behavior and attitudes of some of the Muslims I have encountered in person and online, I have most definitely found in the religion of Islam an intellectual and theological satisfaction that I never knew in Christianity. And at the end of the day, one's beliefs about God are what truly matters."*<sup>227</sup>

The excerpt from Young's article illustrates aptly the profound disillusionment converts can experience vis-a-vis those within the tradition, with Young arguing compellingly that he in fact remains a Muslim "in spite" of his fellow Muslims actions, and certainly not because of them. Young's strategy for coming to term with this profound disparity between the expectations and actual conduct of fellow Muslims, is also to be found in many narratives and involves simply, and perhaps disingenuously, divorcing the embodied practice of Islam in its various manifestations from an abstract conceptualisation of the faith itself. For many converts, the theological, philosophical and moral framework that represents Islam remains largely intact, and thus serves to obfuscate the many shortcomings of its adherents whilst simultaneously continuing to provide crucial validation for the decision to undertake religious conversion.

As we stated in the previous section, disappointment can also arise from unfulfilled aspirations and expectations of social embedment, particularly in scenarios where the convert experiences severe social dislocation from the receding group as a consequence of conversion, but has been unable to integrate satisfactorily within the new host group.

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<sup>227</sup> <http://www.islamfortoday.com/frustrations.htm>

*"I found conversion to be a lonely experience. All this 'brother this' and 'brother that' is all fine and dandy but in my experience, and maybe I've just been unlucky, but there wasn't anything deeper to it beyond the mostly plastic smiles and handshakes in the mosque. Maybe I was expecting too much. I guess I was thinking about the old days, and how the Ansar [helpers] gave half of everything they had to the Muhajiroun [emigrants] after the community made hijrah, but it was stupid and naive of me to expect that. Those were the great Sahabah [companions of the Prophet] – and of course there's no comparison to the Muslims today.~*

*Yeah, it's all 'brother, brother, brother' until you show interest in a sister for a nikah [marriage] and then you find out, 'hey guess what? You the wrong colour'. 'Excuse me? I thought I left racism at the mosque door when I came in'". Edward*

Once again, Edward's profound disillusionment stems from unfulfilled expectations from the host community, particularly as he compares them, to their obvious detriment, with the first generation of Muslims, who are universally regarded within the Islamic tradition as 'the best community to have walked the earth'. Moreover, Edward, a Black convert of four years, also raises the ugly spectre of underlying racism in the community, after discovering that very few Turkish Muslims at his local mosque were willing to countenance marrying an ethnically black convert.<sup>228</sup> As we stated earlier, marriage can be an important strategy for social embedment within the host community, and whilst many converts do go on to marry 'born Muslims' from different ethnic groups to their own, a small number of individuals did feel that there was resistance from some quarters over "marrying your daughter to a White man",<sup>229</sup> as one Nathan put it, although he attributes this to something other than racism,

*"When I made my intentions about marriage clear, I didn't exactly get the response I was hoping. I mean, to be honest, I can kind of understand where people are coming from. Everyone knows what English society is like with its zina [trans. adultery] and lewdness, and If I'm honest I took as much part in that as everyone else around me, and I did some shameful things that I'm not proud of. Alhamdulillah, reverting to Islam cleanses you of all your sins and makes you pure and innocent again, but I guess not everyone can get their head around that. If I was in that position, would I want to marry my innocent virgin daughter or sister to someone who's been around the block more than a few times? I don't know. That's why I think it's sometimes better to marry*

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<sup>228</sup> There is potentially a generational aspect to these attitudes, as many second and third generation Muslims not only appear to have no issues with ethnically diverse marriages, but some in fact consciously seek out converts for marriage, as anecdotal evidence from a number of Muslim marriage websites show.

<sup>229</sup> The resistance from the host group to marrying a convert was only experienced by four converts, all of whom were in fact male.

*someone from a similar background – [it] doesn't have to be a convert – it could be a lapsed Muslim, you know, who found the deen".* Nathan

Nathan and Edward's understandings of the reasons behind resistance to marriage with a convert are very different, and inevitably give rise to different solutions. Nathan chose to marry a fellow convert to Islam (who was in fact of Indian extraction), although the relative scarcity of eligible convert partners meant this was not a common solution. Conversely, Edward elected to marry a born Muslim from a less dissimilar racial background, by marrying a first generation Somali immigrant.

### **5.4.3 Difficulty in maintaining a Muslim lifestyle**

Allitt (1997: 35), writing on the phenomenon of conversions to Catholicism, states that "the convert who is more punctilious in his new faith than the lifelong communicant is a familiar figure in Catholic lore". We might extend this characterisation to converts in all faiths, whose religious zeal is assumed to be almost self-evident. However, in reality, converts can display as much variance in levels of religiosity and religious praxis, as any other religious adherent.

One might expect that individuals who have consciously elected to theologically and intellectually engage and affiliate with a new faith are unlikely to be lax or nominal adherents to that religious tradition, and this tends to generally be a fair characterisation of these individuals. However, converts who display affectional motifs for conversion (such as those individuals whose conversion hinges on relationships with fellow Muslim) may not share the same intellectual and theological conviction about the parameters of the new faith, and may display ambivalence over the extent to which their everyday lives should revolve around the perceived sanctions and requirements of Islam. Perhaps more surprisingly, even those individuals who ostensibly undertook a conversion for predominantly 'cognitive reasons', and which was preceded by a protracted study of the faith and its demands, may have misunderstood or underestimated the commitment commanded by the new lifestyle,

*"I think everyone knows that Muslims pray five times a day facing Mecca – kids learn it in R.E. (religious education class), so it's not as if it's a secret or anything. But to know that Muslims pray five times a day is not the same as praying five times a day. Of course I knew I would have to do this before I converted, but I was genuinely unprepared for how difficult it would be. I mean I understand it, and appreciate the beauty of interrupting your day – from whatever you're doing, to stop and remember*

*God – it's really beautiful. But it is really, really hard at times, especially Fajr (the pre-dawn prayer)".* Ewan

Ewan draws a sharp distinction between understanding a concept theoretically or in an abstract sense, and attempting to enact it in a corporeal sense, suggesting a profound disconnect between belief and praxis. Moreover, some converts are even more disconnected from the lived reality of post-conversion life, as they may recount undertaking an almost unwitting conversion, during the course of which, the individual became a Muslim without even being fully aware of the change taking place. In many of these instances, converts confessed to not being fully cognisant of the potentially onerous demands of the host faith prior to conversion, and which consequently proved to be a rude awakening from their “reverie”.

For some converts, the difficulty in maintaining a Muslim lifestyle appears to stem instead from a premature and overzealous embrace of the minutiae of religious observance soon after the conversion, which cannot reasonably be sustained over any prolonged period of time. Moreover, this doctrinal rigidity and overbearing religiosity rarely mirrors that of the host group,<sup>230</sup> and the newfound haughty attitude (evident in the highly critical stance adopted towards fellow adherents for their apparent lack of religiosity) and overt displays of piety, can prove problematic for the convert’s successful embedment and integration and into the wider community. Most such converts begin to reject these early tendencies, realising the untenability of such a stance and eventually begin to moderate both their actions and beliefs, bringing them in line with their wider social circle.<sup>231</sup>

Some converts may also exhibit uncertainty over the role the Islamic faith may play in their lives in other ways too. Western concepts of religion rooted in the Christian tradition are often accused, by some converts, of relegating religion to the personal or private sphere. In contrast, Islam is increasingly viewed as a faith and ideology that is all-encompassing (covering the legal, political, and social spheres) and thus is often described as a ‘way of life’.<sup>232</sup> Indeed, this is particularly the case

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<sup>230</sup> Indeed Allievi (1998: 210) suggests that converts are invariably far ‘stricter’ in their religious interpretation and praxis.

<sup>231</sup> Naturally, converts embedded within groups that uphold rigid, radical or puritanical interpretations of the faith (such as some *Salafis* or groups like *Hizb ut-Tahrir*) are obviously unlikely to moderate their positions, unless they simultaneously choose to secede from these groups.

<sup>232</sup> This view, although simplistic, stems from the lack of distinction within classical Islam between the Church and state, which is inevitably contrasted with Christianity’s stance enshrined within the Biblical verse, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21, King James Bible).

with conservative strands of Islam who are more likely to conceive of their religion as a *minhaj* (all-encompassing system), or a complete social order (*al-nizam al-Islami*) (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004: 159). Lewis (1988: 2) writes,

*"When we in the Western world, nurtured in the Western tradition, use the words 'Islam' and 'Islamic', we tend to make a natural error and assume that religion means the same for Muslims as it has meant in the Western world, even in medieval times; that is to say, a section or compartment of life reserved for certain matters, and separate, or at least separable, from other compartments of life designed to hold other matters. That is not so in the Islamic world. It was never so in the past, and the attempt in modern times to make it so may perhaps be seen, in the longer perspective of history, as an unnatural aberration"*

Consequently, converts may be unaware of strongly traditionalist views that the “unsanctified part of life that lies outside the scope of religious law and those who uphold it is seen as an impiety, indeed as the ultimate betrayal of Islam” (Lewis 1988: 3). Indeed, converts who traverse religious boundaries whilst retaining the ‘Western’ conception of faith as a primarily private affair, and are unprepared for, or oblivious to, Islam’s potential myriad interventions in virtually every aspect and sphere of their life, may find the conversion experience completely overwhelming.

#### **5.4.4 External Scrutiny**

As we have already seen in the previous sections, conversion to Islam can carry with it serious repercussions, particularly in the form of discrimination, stigmatisation, opprobrium, negativity or just a general sense of social exclusion from the receding group. Most converts cannot possibly foresee this state of affairs,<sup>233</sup> or envisage that a change in one’s private religious affiliation could carry such severe social sanctions,<sup>234</sup> ranging from racism (Franks 2000), and outright hostility from complete strangers, to losing one’s job or being rejected by family members. Indeed we might conceive of these negative repurcussions as a form of ‘religious regulation’ which Grim and Finke (2007: 636) define as “the restrictions placed on the practice, profession, or selection of religion”. Whereas this normally relates to top-down, state imposed restrictions on faith, I suggest it is equally valid to conceive of the adverse

<sup>233</sup> Unless of course the conversion is partly predicated upon a wider social protest against Western hegemony, capitalism, or globalisation, and through which individuals consciously seek alignment with disenfranchised minority positions (see chapter 6.2.4).

<sup>234</sup> Lofland and Stark (1965: 862) suggest that converting from a “tiny cult or sect” almost always means relinquishing “a more widely-held perspective for an unknown, obscure and often socially devalued one”.

social and other consequences of converting to Islam as a form of *popular religious regulation*.

Van der Veer (1996) writing on the political economy of conversion, suggests that by converting to a world religion, people are in effect converting to a politically empowering modernity, by for example, joining the market economy or becoming citizens of a nation. Whilst van der Veer is principally writing of conversions from parochial religions to Christianity, it is nevertheless striking that conversion to Islam in Britain and other Western countries, for the time being at least, represents the polar opposite; significant political disenfranchisement.<sup>235</sup> Whilst most pre-converts are generally aware of the socially devalued perspective associated with Islam and the widespread prevalence of Islamophobia (Klausen 2006; Pew Research Centre 2006; European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2003), many converts appear naïve and blissfully unaware of the intense external scrutiny that is potentially likely to follow their *own* conversion. Encountering this intense external gaze and its attendant social stigmatization and disenfranchisement after conversion, may prompt deep reflection, angst and internal conflict on the wisdom of, not only converting to Islam, but of continuing life as a Muslim. Bromley and Shupe (1979:181) recognise the significant and deleterious effect of this external gaze and suggest that ‘disaffiliation’ is likely to occur when members renege on their conversions, “out of frustration with attempting to fulfil the church’s goals in the face of rising public hostility.”

As a result of these various factors, it is highly likely that many converts struggle to ‘remain converted’ for a whole host of reasons. Inevitably some will ultimately drift away from Islam or renege on their conversions, or simply move on to another tradition, perhaps following their ‘conversion career’ path as Richardson (1985) puts it. This reneging on the religious conversion does not always need to be viewed negatively, as Shupe and Bromley suggest (1981: 209-10),

*“Most converts to new religions ultimately discover that they do not wish to dedicate their entire lives to the cause, and they simply resume their former lives or start anew. This is not wasted effort, however; it is a discovery that allows these individuals to define a personal course for themselves that holds out a greater potential for personal satisfaction and fulfilment. Were it not for the overwhelmingly negative public*

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<sup>235</sup> This finding also runs counter to Bulliet’s (1979: 41) argument that historically, conversion to Islam never accompanied declining socio-political status or rank.

*judgment of the new religions many converts could look back on that period as a high point of personal growth.”*

Naturally, this study is based upon individuals who self-identified as Muslim converts, as opposed to ex-Muslims, and so we cannot hazard a guess as to the frequency of retention of Muslim converts, but the ubiquity of these factors in most narratives suggests that the retention rate of Islam, in these contexts at least, is potentially likely to be lower than conversion to other comparable traditions such as Buddhism or Catholicism.

## CHAPTER 6. PART II: MOTIVATIONS

Thus far we have explored in some detail, the convert's situational context prior to conversion, identifying salient aspects of the pre-conversion life that directly inform conversion. We have also explored the rich and complex processes that a conversion to Islam may entail, describing shifts in conviction and commitment as well as depicting the various manifestations of the conversion rite itself. Finally, we have also described the various post-conversion changes that may take place following the shahadah, identifying modes of adapting to change and patterns of social embedment. However, we have not yet delved into what is arguably the most fascinating aspect of this phenomenon (Rambo 1993: 137), namely what motivates people to undertake religious conversion at all.

### 6.1 Delineating Motivations for Conversion

Delineating the motivations for conversion is not only the proverbial 'Holy Grail' for many scholars of conversion, but also for many proselytising religious communities, who see the systematic explication of the reasons behind conversion as a way of validating the claim to truth for their given faith.<sup>236</sup> Indeed, this is undoubtedly one of the principle underlying motivations for the very creation of conversion narratives or testimonies in the first place. Brereton (1991: 3), for example, suggests that the primary purpose of the evangelical Protestant conversion narrative has historically been to "teach, edify, persuade and exhort".<sup>237</sup> Therefore any potential enquiry in this area must be conscious of the insertion of patently proselytising material,<sup>238</sup> as opposed to content of a more conventional biographical nature (which may nevertheless still contain a certain missionary bent), within accounts of conversion.

Moreover, as I have argued throughout, we must acknowledge and accept that we cannot undertake a study of conversion *per se*, but rather only a study of retrospective reconstructions of prior conversion events and experiences, which in themselves cannot be accepted as wholly objective and unproblematic reports.

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<sup>236</sup> Conversely, the presentation of psychological explanations for religious conversion, as was the wont of much of the early literature on conversion (Long and Hadden 1983; Richardson 1985), may be equally distressing for religious adherents and proselytising groups alike.

<sup>237</sup> Hermansen (1999: 56) agrees, questioning the impetus behind this literary genre, asking "is it to edify, inspire, justify, convince, or confess?"

<sup>238</sup> Both Beckford (1978) and Taylor (1976) argue that conversion narratives should be seen as religious scripts that are rehearsed (sometimes unconsciously) in order to promote religious doctrine or ideology.

Rather, they might better be understood as “artfully accomplished constructions...[that] embody socially transmitted rules for constituting certain experiences as religious conversions” (Beckford 1978: 250), or accounts that are employed to construct ‘myths of self’ in order to testify to the sincerity and significance of the conversion experience (Griffin 1990). Moreover, the authors of these ‘artfully accomplished constructions’ will likely be “seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions” (Denzin and Lincoln 1994: 12), leaving the researcher the unenviable task of attempting to ascribe reasons or causes, and fill lacunae within the account.

Even when the researcher can clearly delineate motivations in certain accounts, it is simplistic and perhaps naïve to assume that an individual’s motivations for conversion can be distilled and presented unproblematically. If conversion is a process, as Rambo (1993), Batson *et al.*, (1993) and others have convincingly argued, then we must acknowledge that there may exist a range of differing motivations that span the conversion process; the motivations for leaving the natal faith may differ from the motivations for resolving a crisis, or the motivations for joining a religious tradition, which may in turn differ from the motivations for remaining converted or part of the host group. As Mendoza (2003: 199) suggests, a convert’s “motivation reaches a peak of relevance during the initial commitment, and it may change as the converts acquire a new mystic language and reconstruct their personal life stories”.

The quest for unearthing the motivations for religious conversion has a long history within a number of research disciplines, but particularly amongst psychologists of religion. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the psychologist Edwin Starbuck (1901) delineated a set of conscious motivational factors, which he argued were influential at the time of conversion. These were,

- 1) Fears:** such as fear of death, Hell, and the afterlife.
- 2) Other Self-regarding motives:** such as the approval of others, meeting loved ones in heaven, ambition, and improving self-worth.
- 3) Altruistic motives:** such as enjoining and doing good in the world, positively influencing others, and love for God.
- 4) Following out a moral ideal:** such as feelings of duty, yearning for a higher ideal, and control angers and passions.
- 5) Remorse for and conviction of sin.**

- 6) **Response to teaching:** which involve rationality, the appeal of reason and intellectual judgement.
- 7) **Example and imitation:** such as the influence of family, friends and relatives.
- 8) **Urging and social pressure:** such as coaxing and threats of wrath.

Despite its age, Starbuck's (1901) model has proved highly influential and is still cited by many authors for its foresight, depth and versatility. Poston (1992), for example, strikingly suggests that no one has really improved on a motivational model for religious conversion since then.

The two most widely cited contemporary models of religious conversion are Rambo's (1993) 'systemic stage model', which focuses upon modelling the various stages and processes of religious conversion,<sup>239</sup> and Lofland and Stark's (1965) highly refined 'world-saver' model, which has been of seminal importance within the discipline and establishes conditions and pre-disposing factors for religious conversion.<sup>240</sup> Whilst both of these models have been extremely useful and important in developing our understanding of religious conversion and how it is brought about, neither explicitly focuses upon the motivations for conversion. In fact, very few models of religious conversion have focused specifically on what motivates individuals to undertake religious change. Glock's (1964) study is one of the few that considers the elucidation of motives to be of the utmost importance in understanding the phenomena of religious conversion and participation, but defines these motives in archaic and highly reductive terms, identifying them as 'primary deprivations'. One of the corollaries to this model, and another of Glock's (1964) important contributions to religious conversion theory is the recognition that the type of group an individual chooses to affiliate themselves with is wholly dependent upon the deprivations experienced prior to conversion or affiliation, reinforcing my argument of religious specificity proposed earlier.

Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) 'motivational motif' model is the only other well-known study that has attempted to study motives for conversion, and remains

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<sup>239</sup> Batson *et al.*, (1993) 'creative problem solving' model is another well-known study that attempts to model the stages of conversion.

<sup>240</sup> Indeed, numerous studies having attempted to test the Lofland and Stark (1965) model empirically, with mixed results; Kox *et al.*, (1991), for example, studying Dutch adolescents found that the model offers a fairly adequate set of *conditions* of conversion, but is inadequate as a model for the *process* of conversion. Snow and Phillips (1980) application of the model to an extensive study of recruitment and conversion by the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement in America, reported similar findings.

the most sophisticated, and widely employed model to date. Lofland and Skonovd (1981) choose to move beyond a focus on motives *per se*, and instead propose the notion of conversion motifs, by which they mean defining experiences or themes which make each type of conversion substantially different and distinctive. Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) six motifs are highly useful, in that they are theoretically broad enough to subsume a range of diverse biographical representations of conversion as distinct conversion motifs, whilst simultaneously retaining their specificity. Dawson (1990) suggests that, whilst these motifs are useful, real conversion experiences are unlikely to fit neatly within a given motif, and are more likely to display a mixture of motif types. Hood *et al.*, (1996) also has reservations and suggests that, although highly promising, the model has not yet been sufficiently validated or 'empirically operationalised' to render it completely unproblematic.

A number of studies within the field of psychology have attempted to explore the feasibility, reliability, and validity of assessing religious conversion biographies using Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) 'motivational motifs' model. Indeed, two recent studies of conversion to Islam have also attempted to test this model using their empirical datasets.

Kose and Loewenthal (2000) explore the feasibility, reliability, and validity of assessing Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) conversion motifs from religious biographies among British converts to Islam, using Kose's (1996) research amongst British converts to Islam. They discovered that the intellectual, experimental, and affectional motifs were frequently present in the conversion biographies studied (among 71%, 60%, and 66%, respectively). This suggests that the most frequent features of the religious biographies of those interviewed were: searching for a meaning or a path in life by reading and discussion (intellectual); experimentation with Muslim religious requirements (such as prayer, diet, dress, and social relationships; experimental); and liking or esteem for Muslims or friendship, marriage, or both with a Muslim (affectional). Kose and Loewenthal suggest that these motif ratings are a feasible means of giving "shorthand" representations of rather complex religious autobiographies. These representations retain some of the specificity of individuals' religious autobiographies while enabling quantitative analyses to be carried out, and conclusions to be reached, about normative features of conversion (Kose and Loewenthal 2000: 107). Most conversion experiences were rated as world-affirming in that communication with the non-Muslim world was not

said to have been impaired or disrupted by the conversion, and there was no reported evidence of rejection of the non-Muslim world other than what was entailed in changing dietary and other habits. One way of looking at these findings sees two broad groups of converts to Islam. Members of the first group were more likely to be men, non-Sufi, not married to a Muslim at the time of conversion, and reporting intellectual and experimental motifs and generally world-affirming conversion history. Among those interviewed this is the normative conversion to Islam. Members of the second group were more likely to be women, Sufi, or both; married to a Muslim at the time of conversion; and reporting affectional and mystical motifs and a more world-rejecting conversion history. Kose, attempts to interpret his empirical data on Islamic conversion in Britain through application of a much older, non-empirically founded model of conversion to a Christian sect in the United States. The results are dubious to say the least, with two of the six motifs appearing to hold no relevance to the sample group.<sup>241</sup>

Lakhdar *et al.*, (2007) undertake a psychological study of French converts to Islam, applying reversal theory,<sup>242</sup> to explore the underlying motivations for religious conversion. In doing so, they also attempt to test the validity of Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) 'motivational motifs' model and find it only partly satisfactory, with only five of their motivating factors corresponding to the model; intellectual (telic), experimental (autic mastery), affectional (autic sympathy), coercive (conformist), and revivalist (paratelic). The remainder of their sample, they suggest, should be subsumed under three new proposed motifs; negativist (opposing one's family), alloic mastery (fighting on the side of the poor), and alloic sympathy (sharing possessions). In summary they find that the very personal and active motivating factors were responsible for the vast majority of conversions, whereas societal, and passive motives were far less represented amongst their sample.

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<sup>241</sup> Revivialism and coercive conversion respectively.

<sup>242</sup> Reversal theory focuses on the "dynamic qualities of normal human experience to describe how a person regularly reverses between psychological states, reflecting their motivational style and the meaning they attach to a given situation at a given time" (Apter 2001: 3)

## 6.2 Motive Categories

The existence of a number of models of religious conversion, and particularly for our purposes here - Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) model of motivations for conversion, offers useful opportunities to empirically test the validity of these theoretical models using newer data sets, as a number of research studies have attempted in recent years (Lakhdar *et al.*, 2007; Inaba 2004; Kose and Loewenthal 2000).

However, I have opted not to follow the familiar paradigm of these psychological studies of religious conversion, which seek to test their datasets using a non-empirically founded model of religious conversion to another tradition, for three principle reasons. First, the overarching aim of this study was, and remains, to develop an authentic and holistic understanding of religious conversion *as it is*, rather than *as it should be*; not based upon previous theoretical presuppositions and assertions. Consequently, the aim was not to confirm or refute existing theories or extant knowledge on religious conversion, but rather to inductively generate rich, substantive theory that was inextricably grounded in the descriptions of experiences given by participants, through employment of the Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser and Straus 1967). Consequently, conversion narratives within the dataset were meticulously scrutinised using a constant comparative method which led to the inductive emergence of conceptual categories, and unearthed a large array of potential motives for conversion. Through iterative processes, these motive categories were progressively refined and aggregated further, until it was possible to identify a finite set of salient motive categories that were able to subsume the experiences recorded within the entire dataset.

Secondly, in addition to social, psychological, emotional and numerous other factors, the motivation for and experience of conversion can often be shaped by substantive religious or spiritual desires, yearnings, and experiences which cannot simply be summarily dismissed, as is often the wont of some strains of literature on religious conversion (Rambo 1993: xiv-xv), particularly if we are attempting a phenomenological understanding of religious conversion. In fact, as Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998) suggest, the one element that is neglected in the literature on religious conversion is the term 'religious'. They argue that in almost all studies thus far, the term religious simply denotes the group with which an individual is being identified, and according to most studies, one could just as easily have a *religious*

conversion to a political movement or philosophical society. Rather, this particular dimension must be retained if we are to avoid divesting the individual's conversion experience of any real religious specificity. Otherwise, we will fail to address the convert's attraction to any one particular worldview over another. Indeed Heirich (1977: 657) criticises existing explanations of conversion on a similar basis arguing that they "do not explain why any particular perspective should be attractive to potential converts." Consequently, I have opted to follow Glock (1964) and argue that the nature of an individual's motivations for conversion has a close relationship with the type of religious change enacted, and by extension I argue, the type of religious solution sought, thereby introducing a justification for religious specificity. This focus on the 'pull' factors of the faith to which one is converting is tempered somewhat by the fact that I am not necessarily concerned with what the 'theological' attraction of the Islamic faith is *per se*, but rather, I am far more interested in what it is perceived to be by the convert, as this is ultimately the benchmark by which a conversion is undertaken.

The final reason for adopting a new method for elucidating motivations stems from the nature of motivations themselves. Motivations are extraordinarily complex postulations, and discerning the motivation(s) for religious conversion in particular, is no easy feat. I will illustrate the complexity of discerning conversion motives by drawing on three examples of conversion from Christianity to Islam from within our sample.

Julian, like many other Muslim converts in Britain, narrates theological problems with Christianity as a way of accounting for his conversion to Islam. However, this in itself can only be understood as his motivation for leaving Christianity, and *not* the motivation for converting to Islam. Indeed, the vast majority of individuals who evince problems with Christianity inevitably turn their backs on religion altogether, becoming atheists, agnostics or secular humanists (Pew Research Center 2009a). Thus the transition from Christianity to Islam must require the articulation of some further motivation beyond an intellectual disenchantment with Christianity alone.

A second convert named Sarah also identifies disenchantment with Christianity, but characterises this as an inability to "come to terms with the concept of the Trinity". In Sarah's case, the recourse then to the unflinching monotheism of Islam makes much more sense as a motivating factor, but even then is still not

entirely conclusive. One could still potentially argue that Sarah could have simply undertaken a ‘less costly’ conversion to a religiously less distant faith (Starke and Finke 2000: 123-4), which also held a fairly rigid conception of monotheism, such as Unitarianism,<sup>243</sup> or indeed even Judaism, rather than convert to Islam. Thus her motivation for conversion to Islam would still need to be explicated further.

The third example is that of David, whose disenchantment with Christianity was only initiated by familiarity with the works of Muslim evangelists and polemicists, who “exposed the theological weaknesses and factual errors of the Bible clearly” to him, but concomitantly provided a valid alternative in the shape of the Quran and Islam. For all intents and purposes then, David’s motivations for both leaving Christianity and accepting Islam are, one and the same.

In line with these observations I have opted to employ a different methodology for elucidating motivations for conversion. Rather than ask, what the motivation is for any given conversion, I have found it more fruitful to ask:

***What positive outcome is achieved, or what negative issue is resolved, through conversion?*** The use of the terms *positive* and *negative* here should not be understood as inferring any sort of value judgement, but rather relate solely to the convert’s own perception of these events, as opposed to some objective universal understanding. For example, the employment of conversion as a form of protest or rebellion against parents and society (6.2.9), may be viewed negatively by society, but for the convert, conversion has been employed usefully in this instance to help achieve a *positive* outcome.

The eleven categories identified as a result are:

- 1) Conversion as theological or intellectual corroboration**
- 2) Conversion as lifestyle or perspective reconciliation**
- 3) Conversion as lifestyle evaluation or reconfiguration**
- 4) Conversion as political or economic critique or dissent**
- 5) Conversion as socio-cultural critique or dissent**
- 6) Conversion as religious critique or dissent**
- 7) Conversion as social matrix reconfiguration**

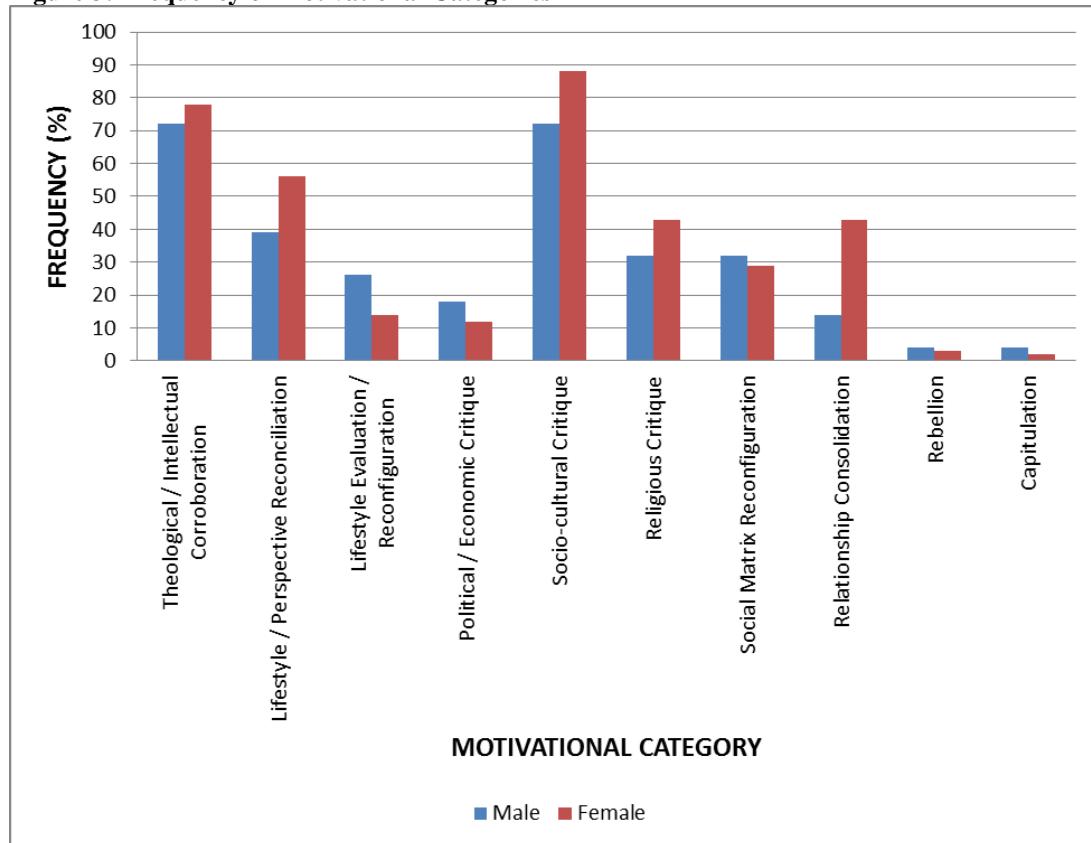
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<sup>243</sup> Unitarianism is a Christian denomination, eponymously named for its conceptualisation of God as one person, which can be contrasted with the more familiar Christian conceptualisation of the Trinity which defines God as three entities coexisting as one in being. Wilbur (1952: 302-3) quotes Priestley, a founder of the Unitarian movement, who defines Unitarianism as the “belief of primitive Christianity before later corruptions set in”, one of which he states is the doctrine of the Trinity.

- 8) Conversion as relationship consolidation**
- 9) Conversion as rebellion**
- 10) Conversion as capitulation**
- 11) Conversion as supernatural or mystical concordance**

Whilst we do not wish to contest the uniqueness of each convert's individual experiences, or dispute the patently high degree of biographical specificity contained within each conversion narrative, these themes were able to subsume the diversity of motivating factors from within our sample, under their overarching rubric. Most conversion narratives made reference to multiple categories, and in the majority of cases it was not possible to definitively discern a hierarchy of motivation. Consequently the figures presented here only represent the frequency with which any particular category was prominently referenced within the dataset and thus provides a measure of significance within the sample as a whole, but does not indicate the relative relevance of a category within a narrative that invoked multiple categories.

**Figure 3: Frequency of Motivational Categories**



### **6.2.1 Conversion as Theological or Intellectual Corroboration**

This category was present in around three quarters of all accounts, with no significant difference observed between genders [N: 108/143=76%; F: 67/86=78%; M: 41/57=72%].<sup>244</sup> The basis for this category hinged upon the idea that individuals who had accepted the intellectual or theological basis for Islam's claim to truth, were likely to undertake conversion in order to assuage the cognitive dissonance engendered by failing to follow these beliefs through to their logical conclusions. Converts like Deborah and Gerard, encountered earlier, expressed this postulation as being "true to one's self", and not being able to "live a lie" respectively.

Converts invoked a number of aspects of the Islamic faith which they claimed substantiated their positions on the veracity of Islam. These included: the poetic and linguistic beauty of the Quran [11%]; the concept of *tawhid* (unity of God) or Islam's unwavering monotheism [78%]; the scientific corroboration of the Quran, often referred to as the 'scientific miracles in the Quran' [13%]; the *i'jaz al-Quran* (inimitability of the Quran) or other evidence for its divine nature [61%]; the simplicity and logic of Islamic worship and rituals [37%]; the life of Muhammad [6%]; constancy of Islamic teachings on a range of issues, including homosexuality and gender [38%]; and the rationality of Islamic teachings more generally which were held to be in consonance with science and the modern world [54%].<sup>245</sup> Curiously, in some cases, this assurance in the 'truth of Islam' had not resulted from a direct reading of the canonical primary sources of Islam (such as the Quran or hadith), but rather from information gleaned from an eclectic reading of proselytising and apologetic literature produced by various missionary organisations and preachers.

For some converts, this realisation or acknowledgement of the 'authenticity' of Islam, was the culmination of a much longer spiritual journey which had also included encounters with a wider gamut of religious options (including Buddhism, Hinduism, various Christian denominations and various New Age movements), and

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<sup>244</sup> Both Roald (20: 89) and Kose (1996a: 87, 98) reported the prominence of intellectual motives for conversion within their studies.

<sup>245</sup> Curiously, almost a century ago, Thomas Arnold (1913: 413-7) came to similar conclusions in his seminal work, *The Preaching of Islam*, in which he suggested that Islam's historical proselytising success was primarily attributable to "Islam's theological simplicity which is easily grasped by people of all education, and holds at its core views that are already held by Christians and Jews [i.e., monotheism]", as well as the fact that "Islam is founded on rational principles".

therefore ‘compelled’ the individual to convert to Islam, considering they had been actively “seeking the truth”.<sup>246</sup>

These findings are supported by much of the recent sociological literature on religious conversion which portrays recruits (or pre-converts as they are referred to in this study) as ‘active agents’ or ‘seekers’ who make rational, informed decisions of their own volition (rational choice theory), often after undertaking systematic and in depth analyses of the religious options available to them, weighing their relative costs and benefits as part of the ‘religious economies model’ (Richardson 1985; Gartrell and Shannon 1985; Kilbourne and Richardson 1989; Iannaccone 1997; Stark and Finke 2000).

### **6.2.2 Conversion as Lifestyle or Perspective Reconciliation**

This category was present in almost half of all accounts, with significantly higher representation amongst female converts than males [N: 70/143=49%; F: 48/86=56%; M: 22/57= 39%]. The category depicted conversion as being motivated by a desire to reconcile one’s private beliefs, lifestyle or perspective (which may have been perceived as being out of kilter with the surrounding society) with a less individualistic, idiosyncratic, and atomised existence. Many pre-converts held views, beliefs and principles that they felt were mirrored by Islamic practices and teachings,<sup>247</sup> and thus a conversion to Islam helped to subsume these minority positions, vis-à-vis majority society, under a more coherent ‘plausibility structure’ (Berger 1967: 45),<sup>248</sup> that made these minority positions appear less idiosyncratic or eccentric, by granting them recognition, authority and authenticity. The underlying motivation once again appears to stem from the desire to attenuate cognitive dissonance (Festinger et al. 1956, Festinger 1957), brought about by a contradiction in one’s own beliefs or behaviour, and the broader framework or worldview to which one ostensibly professes affiliation, whether that be Christianity, secularism or the notion of the modern nation state. Through conversion, the convert employs the meta-schema of Islam to reinterpret or translate, what are otherwise, highly

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<sup>246</sup> Other studies have also recognised the importance of pre-converts’ engagement with other religious traditions prior to conversion (Kose 1996: 121; Zebiri 2008: 44).

<sup>247</sup> There are interesting parallels here with early Muslim converts in post First World War Britain, who Ansari (2002: 131) suggests may have held Unitarian beliefs prior to their conversions, and thus the acceptance of Islam may have in fact represented an easy and natural adoption of the new faith.

<sup>248</sup> This category provides empirical support for Rambo’s (1993: 41) hypothetical postulation that suggests consonance over core values and symbols would facilitate conversion.

idiosyncratic views, beliefs and positions, in an attempt to form a cognitively consistent, coherent, robust, and defensible worldview.

A number of converts spoke of their conversion to Islam as a natural, almost involuntary, assimilation into a highly familiar mode of thinking and being, referring to the process as “coming home”, “finding my true path”, and “fit[ing] into my real skin”.<sup>249</sup> Moreover, converts often employed the distinctly Islamic contemporary term ‘reversion’ to characterise and articulate this perception of returning to an innate, genuine self through conversion.<sup>250</sup> Thus religious conversion in these instances can be considered to be ‘conservational’ in nature, during which individuals are not converting to a ‘foreign or alien’ religion, but rather are nostalgically reclaiming traditional Christian socio-cultural mores lost through processes of secularisation in the West.

Other researchers have also tentatively recognised these processes. Poston (1992: 169) suggests it is possible for some individuals to undertake an almost subconscious conversion, where some converts “felt they had always been Muslims without knowing it or...had gradually become Muslim at some indeterminate point in the past.” Haddad (2006: 44) reports that some female converts perceive their conversion as returning to “their original and natural being as a Muslim”. Lee (2001: 78-80) studying contemporary Xhosa women’s conversions to Islam in South Africa, similarly finds that far from entailing a conceptual and cultural leap, the shift to Islam in fact represented a return to traditional Xhosa cultural roots, with its familiar rituals and ideologies such as those on gender relations and modesty, becoming an “embodiment of a nostalgic Xhosa past that is no longer viable in a chaotic modern world.”

Lee’s (2001) findings on gender relations are particularly pertinent, as they reflect the views held by a number of female converts from within the sample, and perhaps help to illuminate the observed gender disparity for this particular category. Around a quarter of women from within this category [23%] spoke of their pre-conversion anxiety over societal expectations of women, and the way in which conversion had enabled them to express their pre-existing, and often anachronistic values and beliefs, such as those on modesty, celibacy, and gender roles, through the

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<sup>249</sup> Griffith (1997) suggests that the ‘liberation or recovery of the authentic self’ is in fact a familiar trope from conversion narratives in a number of religious traditions.

<sup>250</sup> Some converts also invoked the related concept of *fitrah* to identify the innate self.

legitimising prism of Islam, without fear of censure or mockery. Consequently, for these women, conversion to Islam represented a legitimate reclaiming of innate ideas on womanhood, femininity, women's social roles and gender relations, which represent a disappearing indigenous heritage.

### **6.2.3 Conversion as Lifestyle Evaluation and Reconfiguration**

This category was present in just under one fifth of all accounts, with marginally higher representation amongst male converts [N: 27/143=19%; F: 12/86= 14%; M: 15/57= 26%]. The category related to the employment of religious conversion as a means of resolving life problems, or helping to enact positive changes through lifestyle reconfiguration or identity reformulation. Pre-converts attempting to deal with problems such as alcoholism [11%], drug addiction [7%], hedonism [44%], abuse [4%], stress [56%], criminality [41%] or general spiritual anomie [67%], identified conversion to Islam as a means of reconfiguring or restructuring their lifestyle to (re)instate order and discipline, reduce psychological stress, and aid with boundary formation around values and ways of life.<sup>251</sup>

For many of the converts who invoked this category, the appeal of Islam appeared to lie in its ability to provide a new and often novel perspective and interpretive framework for their lives, which brought with it a sense of personal empowerment, and both theoretical and practical solutions to many of their problems.<sup>252</sup> Some converts welcomed Islam's rigorous demands on their time and lifestyle, particularly through the five daily prayers (*Salat*), fasting in Ramadan (*Saum*) and other rituals, which helped to disrupt a problematic habitual lifestyle. Others saw Islam's strict discipline and abstention from intoxicants to be a powerful countervailing force against alcoholism and drug abuse.<sup>253</sup> Those individuals who turned to religion seeking an escape from hedonism or general spiritual anomie, found that Islam provided direction, purpose and meaning to their lives.<sup>254</sup> This "reorientation to the meaning of life" (Gillespie 1991: 28), and restructuring of the

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<sup>251</sup> For more on 'boundary formation' see Pargament (1997) who suggests that religion generally serves this purpose by offering a framework for individuals to understand and engage with their worlds.

<sup>252</sup> This mirrors what Kox et al., (1991: 227) identify as the "liberation from the entrapment of their own problems" as a consequence of religious conversion.

<sup>253</sup> These findings are mirrored by studies of remission of alcohol abuse (Tuchfeld 1981), and drug abuse (Ng and Shek 2001; Bennett and Rigby 1991), following religious conversion.

<sup>254</sup> Paloutzian (1981) reported similar findings, suggesting that religious converts had a measurably higher degree of 'purpose in life and value changes' compared to the control group of non-converts.

life narrative through conversion to Islam, was particularly important to those individuals who had experienced serious rupture in the life narrative through death of a loved one, illness, stress or incarceration. The prevalence of this category amongst the narratives of prison converts was particularly striking [M: 11/13=85%],<sup>255</sup> and was at least partly attributable to the appeal of Islam's highly regimented and disciplined lifestyle, and the changed moral frames of reference, upon which rehabilitation was often predicated. Anecdotal evidence from one participant even suggested that recidivism rates were lower amongst Muslim inmates, and this perception, regardless of its veracity, would undoubtedly engender motivations for conversion amongst some individuals. A large scale survey of Muslim prisoners (including converts) by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2010: 30-1) reported that the principle reasons behind conversions to Islam amongst prisoners were,

*“..a positive desire to change lives, and the most common reason was simply that Islam ...helped to strengthen identity and purpose. Most prisoners were attracted by...the discipline, structure and comfort provided by observing Islam through prayer, fasting and other rituals. A strong theme in the accounts of converts was one of Islam as a calming force that helped give prisoners perspective. Second, there was the opportunity to obtain support and protection in a group with a powerful identity.”*

The report corroborates key findings from this study, particularly by showing the underlying motivations for conversion to Islam in prison to be almost entirely based upon lifestyle reconfiguration and identity reformulation, and being inherently constructive and helpful. The suggestion that these changes are positive should not be at all surprising, considering that numerous studies of individual religiosity have reported the overwhelmingly positive effect of religion on people's mental health, including moral frames of reference (Bergin 1991), 'life satisfaction' (Ellison *et al.*, 1989: 100), and psychological well-being following stress (Pargament 1997).

Around 56% of the converts represented by this particular category reported experiencing some form of stress prior to the conversion, and thus was an important antecedent to conversions displaying this motif. However, this figure dropped to around 10% when taken as a proportion of the entire sample group, and therefore, stress was not considered to be a prevalent or important instigator for conversion to Islam more generally. These finding appears to go against a substantial body of contemporary research within the discipline of the psychology of religion that has,

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<sup>255</sup> Despite numerous attempts, I was unable to gain access to female prison converts.

perhaps inevitably, identified strong psychological antecedents for religious conversion. Many studies point to the prevalence of stress amongst religious converts (Shinn 1987; Galanter 1989; Ullman 1989), and amongst individuals undergoing ‘sudden’ conversions in particular (Kirkpatrick & Shaver 1990; Spellman *et al.* 1971; Moody 1974). Even within conversions to Islam, Köse (1996a), who was also firmly rooted within the psychology discipline, found that in the two years preceding conversion, almost half of his entire sample identified distress in some aspect of their lives. It is difficult to fully explain these observed discrepancies,<sup>256</sup> but suffice it to say that studies of religious conversion outside of the field of psychology of religion have largely rejected psychological approaches to religious conversion which are prone to the viewing the phenomenon in pathological terms (Rambo 1993).

#### **6.2.4 Conversion as Political or Economic Critique or Dissent**

This category was present in just under one sixth of all accounts, with marginally higher representation amongst male converts [N: 20/143=14%; F: 10/86= 12%; M: 10/57= 18%]. The category depicted conversion to Islam as being precipitated by intense disillusionment with aspects of the Western world which related specifically to the political or economic sphere,<sup>257</sup> and thus conversion provided a conduit for articulating this dissent, in ostensibly religious terms.<sup>258</sup> Many individuals pointed to globalisation [30%], capitalism [65%], Western or American hegemony [85%], and industrialisation or modernity more broadly [15%],<sup>259</sup> as the impetus behind their shift in religious affiliation. Converts, who invoked the spectre of globalisation or capitalism, were primarily protesting against what they perceived to be the Western world’s pernicious encroachment upon traditional cultures and societies, under the

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<sup>256</sup> The discrepancy with Köse’s work can also be partially explained by his definition of ‘stress’. For example, Köse reports that almost half of those identified as experiencing stress were in fact experiencing ‘spiritual meaninglessness’, which I have instead chosen to define as ‘spiritual anomie’ and not stress *per se*.

<sup>257</sup> Allievi (1998: 129-37) finds strong linkages between political motives and religious conversion amongst European converts, suggesting that a sacralisation of politics may be at play here.

<sup>258</sup> Kent (2001) identifies a similar dynamic at play within the post-Vietnam War era in the United States, arguing that the failures of political activism and social protest led many disillusioned students and radicals to become involved with heterodox New Religious Movements as a new means of achieving socio-political change.

<sup>259</sup> Particularly their impact upon nature, the environment, and sustainable ‘indigenous’ ways of life, (which some Muslim cultures were perceived to still be associated with).

guise of modernisation and democracy,<sup>260</sup> and its continuing economic exploitation of much of the rest of the world. Many of these individuals had been staunch critics of these various “ills of Western society” prior to their conversions, through affiliation with various ‘counter-cultural’<sup>261</sup> political movements such as the anti-globalisation movement, animal rights activism, environmentalism, the campaign for nuclear disarmament and socialism in various guises, depending upon the predominant political protest movement existent at the time of their conversions.<sup>262</sup> Many of these individuals later began to feel they could not continue to legitimately oppose ‘Western cultural hegemony’, ‘rampant Western capitalism’, or potentially any other cause, as they themselves were somehow partially responsible for its perpetuation, by virtue of being inextricably embedded within the system itself. In other words, their involuntary, but close association with the ‘system’ rendered their critiques open to accusations of hypocrisy and self-abnegation.

For many of these individuals the move to Islam signified a conscious shift to a system with,<sup>263</sup> what many converts perceived to be, a much more equitable economic perspective, evident from its prohibition on usury (*riba*) and the institution of *zakat* (almsgiving ‘tax’). Consequently, an ostensibly religious transformation nevertheless represented a voluntary deracination that allowed converts to disengage from this ‘collaborating’ identity, such that they could now observe, comment upon, and most importantly critique the situation from a new and untainted vantage point. Through assumption of the ‘new’ Muslim identity, these individuals became an authentic voice of the *other*, and who by virtue of that visible *otherness* in the public sphere, may have been better placed to advance their concerns and agendas through a ‘politics of presence’ (Philips 1998; Moors 2006).

A similar identity dynamic is likely to be at play amongst individuals who exhibited dissent from the predominant paradigm by aligning themselves with the poor, underprivileged or the Third world more broadly – what one might refer to as,

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<sup>260</sup> Only two individuals actually expressed opposition to democracy itself; one individual was a self-identified anarchist, whilst the other had joined Hizb ut-Tahrir, who have consistently adopted an anti-democratic position (for more on HT’s stance on democratic participation, see Awan 2007b).

<sup>261</sup> The term ‘counter-culture’ is a variant of the sub-culture theme first popularised by Roszak (1968).

<sup>262</sup> Roald (2004: 107) observes similar affiliations amongst her Scandinavian sample, suggesting that converts who became Muslim between the 1970s and 80s were drawn to various left-wing movements, whereas those converting during the 1990s had been affiliated with environmentalism.

<sup>263</sup> As I have stated already, Islam is increasingly being presented and perceived as a system, ideology or complete social order as opposed to simply a ‘religion’ (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004; Lewis 1988).

an identification with subalternity. This in itself was not perceived by participants to be particularly alien or emblematic of the adoption of otherness, but rather a human gesture, with one convert stating “siding with the underdog is terribly British you know”.<sup>264</sup> These examples evoke strong memories of the Western youth movements in the 1960s and 70s,<sup>265</sup> who sought to identify and affiliate with a range of national and other liberation movements in response to American domestic and foreign policy. This socio-political affiliation often sought to imbibe ethnic or cultural components too, such as adopting African-American slang and growing ‘afro’ style hair in solidarity with the Black Panthers and other civil rights groups in the United States, or stocking fermented fish sauce in refrigerators in support of Ho Chi Minh during the Vietnam War (Ayers 2001).

Considering the motivations for allegiance in this category, it is unsurprising that there exist compelling parallels with the motivating forces behind religious conversion in some colonial or developing contexts too, particularly in their encounters with modernity and the West. Hefner (1998), for example, views contemporary processes of religious transformation and change in West Africa as forms of socio-political protest against modernity, epitomised by ideas of citizenship and the modern nation state. Similarly, Viswanathan (1998) views some forms of religious conversion in colonial India as a mode of political and cultural resistance against the acculturation of colonial subjects to British rule. Others have also noted the relationship between religious change and identity politics (Nagata 2001), particularly when religious conversion is employed as a tool against the dominant majority (Duncan 2003).

### **6.2.5 Conversion as Socio-Cultural Critique or Dissent**

This was by far the most prominent category within the sample, with marginally higher representation amongst female converts [N: 117/143=82%; F: 76/86= 88%; M: 41/57= 72%]. Here, conversion to Islam was depicted as being precipitated by intense disillusionment with aspects of the social and cultural spheres of the Western world,<sup>266</sup> including immorality, hedonism, materialism, decadence, atomisation and

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<sup>264</sup> Lakhdar *et al.*, (2007) also recognise ‘fighting on the side of the poor’ as being a significant motivation for conversion to Islam in France, and employ Apter’s (2001) *Reversal Theory* to define it as ‘alloic mastery’.

<sup>265</sup> Particularly as many of the grievances (capitalism, Western hegemony) are common to both.

<sup>266</sup> Other studies of conversion to Islam have also seen dissatisfaction with a Western materialism or culture as being a key motivator for seeking religious change (Roald 2008: 100; Köse 1996b: 79).

the general imposition of conflicting core value-systems from the dominant paradigm, and within which the individual was unable or unwilling to assimilate.

Conversion to a different religious framework appeared to provide a highly effective platform for articulating dissent with one's own system.<sup>267</sup> Wohlrab-Sahr (1999: 352) argues that conversion to a “foreign religion becomes a means of articulating within one's own social context, one's distance from their context”. Conversion to Islam in particular, however, also provided a conduit for realising the individual's idealised notions of society and morality. Converts recounted being particularly drawn to Islamic teachings on the family structure, social collectivism,<sup>268</sup> social order, brotherhood, and a social or moral framework that provided a clear and consistent standard for behaviour that was not based upon moral relativism or shifting socio-cultural mores.

It is surely no accident that the predominant motivating factor for conversion to Islam delineated within our sample is also responsible for the rise of a whole host of other reactionary forms of religiosity in the modern secularised world, including various types of fundamentalism. Berger (1967) famously wrote of a ‘sacred canopy’ that had, in the past, provided structure, stability, and shared public interpretations and meanings. Bruce (1996) and others observe that the project of secularisation has in fact unceremoniously ruptured this canopy, such that the collective social bases upon which identity and morality were primarily predicated are no longer extant. Consequently, this project of secularisation, as Hefner (1998: 85) describes, “frustrates efforts to project overarching ethical values into the public sphere”. The loss or erosion of traditional beliefs, practices and the social and moral boundaries associated with them, through processes of secularisation and pluralism, often provoke resistance from certain groups from within, and it these groups that are termed ‘fundamentalists’ (Ethridge and Feagin 1979). Appleby and Marty (2002) see a causal linkage between the perception of a ‘godless, secular culture’ and the rise of religious fundamentalism, which they argue stems from the need to contest such a culture. Consequently, we may be better placed to conceive of this particular

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<sup>267</sup> Kolluri (2002) studying those who convert out of Hinduism to other faiths, suggests they are also often engaged in ‘cultural criticism’, in particular of Hindutva, the ‘ideological assertion of the Indian nation as Hindu culture’.

<sup>268</sup> Soutar (2010) questions whether the growth of Islam amongst female converts in Britain may have something to do with the appeal of collectivism, and a rejection of ‘typical British individualism’.

motivational category as being a homologue to fundamentalism, if not in its outcome, then at least in its motivation.

Converts railed against a number of problematic aspects of the socio-cultural sphere, however, they often essentialised these views by focusing upon a particular theme, which they felt effectively distilled their critiques. Almond *et al.*, (2003: 95) contend that fundamentalists do exactly the same by selecting “certain processes or consequences of modernity and single these out for special attention, usually in the form of focused opposition”. One particularly salient theme that animates fundamentalists of all persuasions, and converges with our discussion of Muslim converts’ cultural critiques, is that of women and gender. Indeed Bendroth (1993: 6-7) states that fundamentalism was in fact “born in an era of anxiety over gender roles” during which men perceived their world to be “dangerously feminised” to the extent it was producing a ‘passive form of manhood’.

Within the Islamic tradition, many traditionalists also perceive female roles in society in similarly anachronistic terms,<sup>269</sup> in that they are “determined by the biological functions of her gender” (Haddad 1984: 149). Moreover, as Ruthven (1997: 92) suggests, “protection of the patriarchal family and the symbolic capital it holds in the shape of female chastity is deeply embedded in the semantics of Islam.” Over half of all converts within our sample, expressed traditionalist ideas on gender roles, and remonstrated against the ‘pernicious’ effects of social disorder which they argued, arose from confused and highly damaging signals from within secular mainstream society on notions of womanhood, femininity,<sup>270</sup> gender relations, and the inherent worth of women.<sup>271</sup> Many female converts were particularly vehement in their protests over the demeaning commercialisation of women’s sexuality, an unhealthy focus on women’s bodies, and the deeply unfair double role women were

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<sup>269</sup> See for example Badawi (1971:43), in which he writes “Islam considers the home as the great kingdom of the woman. She is its mistress, its head and axis. She is the man’s wife, his partner, the solace of his loneliness, and the mother of his children. Islam considers a woman’s job of keeping house, looking after her husband’s affairs, and raising her children well as a kind of worship”.

<sup>270</sup> Indeed McGinty (2006: 111-25) sees the appeal of Islam partly in terms of its offering of ‘alternative feminities’.

<sup>271</sup> As Mernissi (1975: 1) notes, In Islam, “the individual cannot survive except within a social order”, which she went on to argue was being disrupted by modernity. It is strangely ironic then, that whilst Mernissi was speaking approvingly here about the disruptive influences of modernity on social order, and resultant female empowerment, some female converts are very much drawn to ideas of social order.

forced to play by competing with men in the workplace and raising children or maintaining the home.<sup>272</sup>

Converts contrasted this state of affairs unfavourably with the Islamic perspective to which they had converted, which they argued honoured, respected and protected women,<sup>273</sup> by returning to an innate and natural relationship between men and women.

### **6.2.6 Conversion as Religious Critique or Dissent**

This category was present in over a third of all accounts, with marginally higher representation amongst female converts [N: 55/143=38%; F: 37/86= 43%; M: 18/57= 32%]. The basis for this category hinged upon the idea that individuals who had encountered problems with their existing religious tradition were likely to assuage the cognitive dissonance engendered through continued affiliation, by rejection of that faith. Conversion to Islam, on the other hand provided an appropriate framework for fulfilling the individual's religious needs, and thus allowed converts to 'continue to believe', by offering a viable alternative to remaining within the 'weakened' existing tradition. For others, conversion to Islam also provided an effective platform from which they could critique the previous tradition, particularly as Islam was thought to possess a well-developed polemical and apologetic literary tradition.

Christianity was inevitably, the main religious tradition from which individuals were converting. Despite the fact that most individuals elected to clearly frame the specific appeal of Islam in contrast to the perceived failings of Christianity, a number of scholars have suggested that some conversions from Christianity to Islam are often more about the rejection of Christianity, rather than the appeal of Islam per se. Lee (2001: 66), recounting the experiences of Xhosa women suggests "Perhaps it would overstate the case if negative experiences with Christianity, rather than a positive understanding of the Muslim faith or other factors were situated at the centre of these conversion narratives". Dannin (2002) agrees, suggesting that the principle attraction of Islam amongst African Americans, particularly amongst the historically 'unchurched' community, was the fact that it

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<sup>272</sup> Indeed, some female converts see their critiques of these secular gender roles as a form of feminist empowerment, having little to do with patriarchy (Hermansen 2006: 262).

<sup>273</sup> Lee (2001) found that one of the key attractions to Islam amongst her female South African converts was the idea that women were respected, which also resulted in the conferral of safety.

*was not* Christianity and therefore not sullied by its associations with slavery and racial discrimination in the U.S. Whilst this explanation is certainly not without merit, the experiences of converts recorded here were very different. Most converts were highly articulate and sophisticated in their critiques when airing their litany of grievances with previous faiths. For many converts, the attraction of Islam rested in its ability to specifically address or counter the range of problematic aspects of various faiths raised. For example, individuals who had expressed unease with the divinity of Christ, starkly juxtaposed this against the mortality of Muhammad. Those who had found it intellectually impossible to come to terms with the Trinity, spoke of the rational ease with which they had embraced *tawhid* (unity of God). Converts who raised concerns with the historicity of the Bible, were quick to point to the Quran's 'miraculous preservation', and doctrines like original sin and transubstantiation were mocked as having no counterpart within the Islamic faith. Based upon these findings, we might posit that some conversions from Christianity to Islam are in fact largely underpinned by 'cognitive efficiency', which holds that individuals are likely to be drawn to simple conceptualisations of reality whilst avoiding significant cognitive inefficiency (Newell 1990, Boyer 2001).

#### **6.2.7 Conversion as Social Matrix Reconfiguration**

This category was present in less than a third of all accounts, with no significant differences observed between genders [N: 43/143=30%; F: 25/86= 29%; M: 18/57= 32%]. The category understood religious conversion to be predicated upon a fervent desire to reconfigure one's social circle towards a Muslim bias, or put differently, to either strengthen social bonds with Muslim friends and acquaintances, or to become more fully assimilated into a Muslim social grouping. Indeed, this was one of the few categories that unequivocally supported previous research that has attempted to portray religious conversion as a largely socially predicated process (Lofland and Stark 1965; Start and Finke 2000; Clarke 1987; Barro 2007).

Most converts within this category attested to the importance of strong affectional bonds with other Muslims formed during the period prior to conversion. Some of these friendships had developed after extended contact with 'foreign' Muslims, who had been met after travelling to a Muslim country for study, work or a

vacation.<sup>274</sup> Many of these individuals mentioned being profoundly affected by the ‘character of Muslims’ they had encountered during their travels, citing qualities such as humbleness, generosity, warmth, brotherhood, hospitality, patience in the face of adversity, and inner peace or serenity. Other converts had engaged with Muslims in a range of social settings much closer to home, including university campuses, prisons, workplaces and homes (through contact with a Muslim family member). For some converts, these local Muslims had proved equally ‘inspiring’, having provided proof of a “living Islam in the West” that was “perfectly compatible with [a] British way of life”, and which existed in spite of the antipathy often displayed by sections of the media and the general public towards Muslims and Islam in general (Poole 2002; Runnymede Trust 1999).

For many of these individuals, conversion was seen as a way of reinforcing bonds with these Muslim friends through an overt display of unwavering support, particularly if the pre-convert was highly ‘socially encapsulated’ (Glock and Stark 1966).<sup>275</sup> Others saw conversion or as a way of seeking to imbibe some of the positive character traits admired in Muslims, particularly by assimilating into the group perceived by the convert to be the living embodiments of these qualities. This is of course was not a unilateral process stemming solely from the convert’s desire to affiliate more closely with the host group, but rather was likely to be reciprocated, or perhaps initiated, by the host group too, particularly as proselytization and recruitment is usually found to follow the lines of pre-existing social networks (Gerlach and Hine 1968).

For some converts in this category, the appeal of Islam lay in the potential benefits, or rewards and compensators (Stark and Bainbridge 1987), conferred by affiliation and allegiance to the social group. This was particularly evident amongst both converts in prison, and converts to Sufi groups. Individuals in both these contexts often displayed a high degree of ‘social encapsulation’ (Glock and Stark 1966), and were clearly drawn to the religious group because it provided a ‘satisfying personal network’ (Kox *et al.*, 1991). Prison converts in particular were

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<sup>274</sup> There are parallels here with Barro’s (2007: 30) study, in which he reports that 25% of individuals in the US who changed their religion, cited friends or location as the primary motivation. He suggests this is attributable to inevitable changes in religious affiliation along with switching jobs or changing social networks, both of which may be associated with moving to a new location.

<sup>275</sup> I described this in Chapter 4.2.1 when discussing the undertaking of the *Social Shahadah* as a means of displaying allegiance to the host group by effectively stating that they were casting their lot with fellow Muslims.

found to convert to Islam as a means of affiliating with a religious group that provided certain tangible benefits and rewards, including security, a well-developed ‘social identity’ (Tajfel 1982), and mechanisms for rehabilitation.<sup>276</sup>

Despite the unequivocal role of social relationships in informing conversions in these cases, we should nevertheless be cognisant of the nuanced relationship between many of these categories. Stark and Finke (2000: 117) who follow Glock and Stark’s (1966) idea of ‘social encapsulation’ as an explanatory framework for conversion, nevertheless temper their argument by suggesting this is primarily because “social networks make religious beliefs plausible and *new* social networks thereby make *new* religious beliefs plausible”.

### **6.2.8 Conversion as Relationship Consolidation**

This category was present in less than a third of all accounts, with significantly higher representation amongst female converts [N: 45/143=31%; F: 37/86= 43%; M: 8/57= 14%]. The basis for this category hinged upon the notion that individuals involved in relationships, and in particular marriage with a Muslim partner, had a number of strong incentives to undertake religious conversion in order to cultivate or perpetuate that relationship. Thus, conversions to Islam within this category were viewed primarily as a means of consolidating relationships.

Many studies have long recognised the importance of marriage as a major factor in producing shifts in religious affiliation (Lofland and Stark 1965:119), or as others have suggested the patently clear relationship between intermarriage and religious conversion (Sherkat 2004; Lehrer 1998; Greeley 1989). Barro (2007: 30) reports that 37% of Americans who changed their religion, cited marriage or family as their principle reason for doing so. Stark and Finke (2000: 125) suggest that as a result of this linkage, intermarriage is inevitably linked to constituency loss by moderate and liberal religions, as conversion is unlikely to be a move away from ‘stricter religions’. Islam would certainly appear to register as a ‘strict’ religion, due to its missionary nature, limitations on certain types of intermarriage (see chapter 5.3.1) and sanctions against apostasy.<sup>277</sup> Thus Islam would generally appear to

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<sup>276</sup> The report by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2010) reports similar benefits of conversion for convert prisoners. Dix-Richardson (2002) also provides support for the preponderance of this category amongst prison converts by suggesting that the experience of converting to Islam in prison may actually be normative for male African American inmates in the US.

<sup>277</sup> See Saeed and Saeed (2004) for a detailed discussion on the debate over the potential ramifications of apostasy in Islam.

benefit from intermarriage, as religious affiliation shifts would, in theory at least, predominantly seek to act in its favour.

This postulation appears to garner mixed and sometimes conflicting support, from the studies that have sought to look at the role of marriage and relationships in conversions to Islam in the West. Ghayur (1984: 47) found that 90% of women who married Muslims in the U.S. had undertaken conversion to Islam. Henningson reported similar findings in Europe (1983, cited in Poston 1992: 411). Conversely Haddad (1983: 79) observed that converts in the U.S. were generally those who had married Muslim women. Allievi (1998: 47) also suggests that incidence of conversions enacted for the purposes of marriage alone were fairly significant amongst European converts. Roald's (2004: 95-6) study of Scandinavian converts also found that most had married Muslim men prior to their conversions. However, Zebiri (2008: 224) observed that at the time of conversion, only a third of converts were married to Muslim men. Similarly Kose (1996b: 112), who does not report on marriage explicitly, suggest that his category of 'man-woman relationship' only accounted for 14% of the sample.

The overall figures for this category mirror the findings of Zebiri (2008) and Kose (1996b). This significantly higher representation amongst female converts, which reflects the preponderance of women in many of the other studies cited above, is likely attributable to Islam's specific marital stipulations which do display an inherent gender bias, particularly as Muslim men tend to be somewhat less restricted in terms of their inter-marital options (see chapter 5.3.1), and also have the theoretical option of engaging in a polygamous marriage.

Irrespective of gender differences, conversion in all of these cases was viewed as a form of relationship consolidation for numerous reasons. These included, fulfilling a mandated religious or social requirement for the relationship to progress further; assuaging theological or other religious dissonance within the relationship (particularly with respect to the upbringing of any resultant offspring);<sup>278</sup> and mitigating relational tension or extending a conciliatory gesture to the other partner. In effect, and building upon Lehrer (1998), we might conceive of the relationship between conversion to Islam and intermarriage as resulting from 'endogeneity', by which we mean that couples evaluate the costs and benefits of

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<sup>278</sup> For more on conversion as a strategy for raising children as Muslims, see Hermansen (2006: 191).

maintaining different religious affiliations by employing a ‘rational choice’ or ‘religious economies’ model of religious affiliation (Iannaccone 1997; Stark and Finke 2000), before deciding on the nature and degree of changes in affiliation that will be enacted.

### **6.2.9 Conversion as Rebellion**

This category was present in a very small number of cases, with no discernable differences observed between genders [N: 5/143=3%; F: 3/86=3%; M: 2/57= 4%]. The category related to the employment of religious conversion as a means of opposing or rebelling against parental, familial or societal control. As one might expect, all five individuals displaying this category were under the age of 30, with two in fact still under 21 years of age.

In at least three of these cases, what the individual had converted *from*, seemed as important, if not more so, than what was being converted *to*. For example, Kulthum, a 23 year old female from a Sikh background sought to escape from what she perceived to be excessively moralising influences, overbearing familial control, and conservative social and sexual mores within both her family and the wider Sikh community, by converting to Islam. In particular, it was her relationship with a local Muslim man that had generated such intense familial opprobrium that it had led her to conceive of religious conversion as a way of chastising her family for their rejection of her choice of partner. Unable to meet, what she perceived to be, their conservative and unattainable expectations, she sought to break further familial and cultural taboos by explicitly rejecting the Sikh religion and culture for another faith. The identity of this replacement faith was largely incidental at the time and simply coincided with the faith of her then nominally Muslim boyfriend.

The adoption of a ‘foreign’ faith, and the attendant repudiation of one’s natal religion or culture, can be a highly effective symbol of both dissent and self-empowerment, as others have also noted (Emerson and Syron 1995; Hunter 1998). The more ‘costly’ the conversion (Starke and Finke 2000: 123-4), or the more religiously distant the new religion from one’s natal faith, the more efficacious the act of dissent is likely to seem. To put it another way, the more socially devalued the perspective, the more likely the religious change is to achieve its end. Indeed, Emerson and Syron (1995) studying adolescent involvement with Satanism viewed it principally as a form of dissent, due to its inherently pejorative characterisation by

wider society. Whilst not perceived as negatively as a conversion to Satanism, a conversion to Islam can still be popularly misconstrued as an affiliation with a hostile, backward and alien culture (Runnymede Trust 1997; Poole 2002; Fetzer and Soper 2003; Asad 2002; Abbas 2000; European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2003), and thus highlights the appeal of employing an Islamic conversion as an act of rebellion.

### **6.2.10 Conversion as Capitulation**

This category was present in a very small number of cases, with no discernable differences observed between genders [N: 4/143=3%; F: 2/86=2%; M: 2/57= 4%]. The category depicted conversion as being enacted as a process of capitulation, in response to some degree of duress. The furthest end of this scale represented forced conversions,<sup>279</sup> although unsurprisingly, no examples of forced conversion to Islam in contemporary Britain were found.<sup>280</sup>

Three of the cases (one female and both males) related to experiences within the context of a Sufi group, in which the individuals felt compelled to convert at the behest of the Sufi sheikh, after a certain ‘initiation’ period with the group had elapsed. Whilst all three individuals were free to leave the group at any time and avoid converting, they could not remain within the group without undertaking conversion. Thus the duress associated with the conversion stemmed from the intense scrutiny and peer pressure generated by the host group, and the distress over being perceived as a ‘failure’ by the charismatic group leader. Conversion was undertaken then, as a capitulation to the host group’s demands, and as a way of mitigating tension between themselves and other members. Considering this study was based on converts, all three individuals had opted to remain Muslims, and thus had been able to reconcile the manner of their shahadah, with their desire to remain within the fold of Islam.

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<sup>279</sup> Documented instance of forced conversions in the contemporary period are impossible to locate, and the main area of relevance to ‘forced’ conversions today relates to the conversion of minors by their parents or guardians (see for example Kusrin 2009), or the conversions of non-Muslim girls as a result of relationships and marriage with Muslim men, which are then often recast as involuntary conversions by distraught parents who experience difficulty, and in particular denial, in dealing with the perceived loss of their daughters (Ananthakrishnan 2009).

<sup>280</sup> There has been at least one unsubstantiated report of forced conversions in British prisons (Gilligan 2010), although this was vehemently denied by the prison service itself (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons 2010). There has also been some tabloid speculation on the forced conversion of Hindu and Sikh girls to Islam by ‘extremist Muslims’ (Daily Mail 2007), although no evidence of this was found by an extensive investigation by BBC Asian Network (2007).

The remaining female case in this sample involved a woman who had been married to a nominal Muslim for nine years and with whom she had two young children, but had herself remained an atheist. Around two years ago, after undergoing a gradual religious *intensification* experience (Awan 2007b), her husband eventually asked her to convert to Islam. When she refused, as it had not been a condition of her marriage, he threatened to divorce her and seek custody of the children. She decided, after much consideration, to capitulate to his demands and convert to Islam for the sake of her children. Somewhat ironically, she did eventually divorce from her husband, retaining custody of her children, but most surprisingly perhaps, decided not to renege on her conversion. Thus even in instances in which conversion has clearly been undertaken under duress, one cannot always explicate the motivations for remaining a Muslim.

### **6.2.11 Conversion as Supernatural or Mystical Concordance**

This category was present in just under one sixth of all accounts, with significant differences observed between genders [N: 20/143=14%; F: 18/86= 21%; M: 2/57= 4%]. The category related to the employment of religious conversion as a means of coming to terms with events and experiences, such as dreams [75%], mystical visions and other transcendental experiences [20%], signs from God [85%], and experiences of divine providence [35%], all of which could not be fully explicated within a rational cognitive framework.<sup>281</sup>

Converts often recalled the presence of experiences prior to their conversion that defied any sort of logical or rational explanation, and thus their existence called into question the very foundations of their worldview. In recalling these experiences, converts often attempted to quell any potential scepticism on the interviewer's part by pointing to the apparent improbability of the event and their own initial disbelief at its occurrence, presenting their first reaction as that of any *regular* person to what was a highly irregular event. The descriptions of experiences were overwhelmingly positive, with the most frequently invoked characterisations being those of 'love', 'light', 'peace' 'serenity' and 'guidance', reinforcing the belief that these were indeed genuine and divinely-inspired transcendental experiences.

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<sup>281</sup> Kose (1996: 109), for example, found that only four per cent of his sample (not including Sufic conversions), displayed "mystical motives."

Curiously, the experiences did not always precipitate an immediate religious conversion, as one might expect from narratives holding to this category,<sup>282</sup> but sometimes lay dormant until such a time when the incident could be re-evaluated and placed in a wider context of spiritual dissatisfaction. Thus, the supernatural experience is not necessarily characterised by sudden divine inspiration and conversion, but can often be accompanied by a more measured response that also displays other motivations.

Dreams, with overtly religious subject matter, and accessing Islamic symbols and ritual, were also commonly invoked as motivating conversion. This in fact reflects the important historical role played by dreams in conversion to Islam, particularly through the sanctioning of religious change (Fisher 1979; Ricklefs 2001; Jones 1979; Friedmann 1975). In many cases, dreams were found to augment the strength of conviction prior to conversion, or allow the individual to articulate feelings and desires that would normally be considered taboo. Often the putative message of the dream was initially bewildering or incomprehensible to the convert and remained so until later events transpired which then threw new light on the episode allowing a fuller engagement with its purported meaning.

Some individuals recounted experiences in which they felt they had been given a sign or message from a higher power that needed to be interpreted and then acted upon. In many cases, salvation through conversion was understood to be the most obvious or appropriate manifestation and expression of these signs or messages which pointed to divine providence. Even after their conversions, some individuals were hesitant to fully acknowledge the role of these events publicly, particularly as they may have been anxious over imposing their own non-vetted interpretations upon these episodes, and may have sought verification and validation of these feelings, thoughts and experiences using the new religio-canonic framework instead.

Some female converts identified with this category were found to have experienced multiple events of a mystical or supernatural nature, suggesting that perhaps certain individuals or women in particular, were predisposed to experiencing these sorts of events, or at the very least, willing to interpret or recount these experiences whilst others may have chosen to overlook them.

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<sup>282</sup> I am thinking here primarily of the archetypal ‘Pauline’ conversions to Christianity which are precipitated by sudden spells of divine inspiration or some profound mystical experience in which the convert discerns the ‘hand of God’.

## **CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION**

### **7.1 Profile of a Community**

One of the major aims of this study was to construct a detailed profile of the Muslim convert community in Britain, and having done so, I will summarise the findings here, drawing attention to the broad characteristics and contours of this group as a whole, and offer explanations for any salient patterns observed.

One of the significant findings in terms of the constituency of the research sample was the clear preponderance of female to male converts, both within the sample of Internet narratives [F:64%; M:36%], and within the main interview sample [F:60%; M:40%], and which both gave a remarkably similar female to male ratio of around 3:2. This clear gendered disparity is partly attributable to a range of factors pertaining to religion and gender broadly, including the widely reported findings that women tend to report being more religious than men (De Vaus and McAllister 1987), and indeed often show greater levels of religious commitment than men (Tamminen 1994). However, I suggest that these gender disparities also relate to the specificity of the Islamic faith as the object that is being converted to. Gender disparities within certain motivational categories showed that women were slightly more likely than men to view conversion as ‘lifestyle or perspective reconciliation’ [F:56%; M:39%], and as ‘socio-cultural critique or dissent’ [F:88%; M:72%].

The female preponderance in both of these categories points to the idea that some women in modern Britain have been unable or unwilling to accept significant and widespread changes in gender roles, social attitudes towards women, and inter-gender relations more broadly, and who have seen in Islam, either a nostalgic reclamation of earlier socio-cultural mores; or amongst the younger convert demographic, a more ‘equitable, dignified, and natural’ paradigm for women’s relationships with men and society more broadly. Women were also significantly more likely to view conversion as, ‘relationship consolidation’ [F: 43%; M:14%] and as ‘supernatural and mystical concordance’ [F: 21%; M:4%]. The former appears to be largely attributable to the inherent religious and cultural gender bias that constrains Muslim women’s marriage to non-Muslims (thus, all things being equal, non-Muslim women who engage in relationships with Muslim men are over-represented by default), whereas the latter is more difficult to account for, but may

indicate that women are more willing to countenance supernatural explanations for certain types of events, or indeed communicate these events differently and more overtly religiously than men (Knight et al. 2005).

Converts were found to represent a fairly young age profile, with the average age at conversion calculated to be 27.0 years [M: 24.7; F: 28.6], and the average age of conversion at the time of interview to be 31.2 years [M: 28.3; F: 33.1]. The age demographic of Muslim converts reported here, when aligned with many of the motivational categories for conversion elucidated, including conversion as ‘political or economic critique’, ‘socio-cultural critique’, ‘lifestyle evaluation or restructuring’, and ‘lifestyle or perspective reconciliation’, suggests that conversion to Islam in Britain could be characterised in many cases as a highly dynamic and youthful socio-religious movement that bears striking parallels with other global socio-political movements which have similar youthful constituencies (Diani and McAdam 2003). Moreover, the younger age demographic of Muslim converts more generally suggests that religious change is more likely to be undertaken at a point in one’s life when (re)formulation of an yet unreified identity is still plausible, and indeed, when changes in religious affiliation are likely to be less costly, in social, economic (in relation to jobs, careers and financial responsibilities), or emotional and relational terms (with respect to dissolution of marriages and long-term relationships, and impact on children). To put it another way, the more likely religious conversion is to cause significant rupture within the established life narrative, the less likely it is to occur.

Finally a slight gender discrepancy between the average age at conversion (men were typically around four years younger than women) may also be attributable to some of the reasons I have elucidated above with respect to the preponderance of women more generally. Women who countenanced conversion as ‘relationship consolidation’ would be more likely to do so at a stage of life when they viewed this switch in religious affiliation to be worthwhile in terms of the time and ‘affective capital’ invested in the relationship, as part of a wider cost-benefit analysis. Women who viewed conversion as ‘lifestyle or perspective reconciliation’ or ‘socio-cultural critique or dissent’ as part of a nostalgic yearning for past mores, would inevitably need to hail from an earlier generation in order to experience these sentiments. Those who belonged to a younger generation, but invoked similar motivational categories as the result of moral and cognitive dissonance between some internalised ideal and

the perceived reality, would need sufficient time to ferment a sense of disillusionment, before deciding to act upon it.

The other major finding with reference to age related to the relatively insignificant difference observed between the ‘age at conversion’ and the ‘age at time of interview’ (4.2 years). There are a number of possible explanations for this apparent consonance in the two mean ages, with potentially far-reaching ramifications for each. First, there is a possibility that the average age of conversion is gradually decreasing as a result of increasing contact with Muslims or Islam, and particularly, the increasing frequency of early age encounters with Islam, some of the reasons for which I have already mentioned above. Moreover, the motivations for converting may themselves be shifting in favour of a younger convert age profile, particularly as a result of pervasive socio-political forces that I have alluded to a little earlier.<sup>283</sup>

Alternatively, however, the similarity of the two figures may point to a particularly high ‘dropout rate’ amongst Muslim converts, which suggests that individuals may renege on their conversions within a few years of accepting the Islamic faith, as the result of a whole host of factors that we have seen militate against continued affiliation with the Muslim faith. This would potentially allow us to use the concept of liminality to describe the function of conversion to Islam in Britain,<sup>284</sup> or indeed present the Islamic faith as only one of the many sojourns on the peripatetic spiritual journey of religious seekers undertaking what Richardson (1978) refer to as a ‘conversion careers’. There is no direct evidence to support this postulation, but there is some anecdotal evidence reported in this study that suggests disaffiliation with the Islamic faith may occur much more frequently than previously thought.

A socio-economic profile of converts revealed an interesting dichotomy. The majority of converts were represented by one end of the spectrum which characterised these individuals as highly educated, upwardly mobile, (socio-economically) integrated, middle-class professionals. Most of these individuals viewed their conversions in terms of multiple motivational categories including

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<sup>283</sup> These findings may also be partly attributable to aspects of my sampling methodology that may have discriminated against many older converts, who perhaps were less conspicuous or identifiable as Muslims, as they were less likely to display an overtly ‘Islamic’ appearance and identity, or were less likely to frequent places of Muslim social gathering.

<sup>284</sup> For more on liminality see Melton and Moore (1982).

‘theological corroboration’, ‘Socio-cultural, political/economic, or religious critique or dissent’ or ‘lifestyle or perspective reconciliation’. However, the opposite end of the spectrum was characterised by underachievement and unemployment, and associated with a small but significant minority of converts involved with radical Islam, criminality, and terrorism. In these cases, conversion to Islam was primarily perceived to be a means of ‘lifestyle evaluation or restructuring’ and ‘social reconfiguration’ which provided help with identity reformulation (particularly through appeal to group identity), renewed moral frames of reference and rehabilitatory mechanisms.

The racial profile of the sample was also intriguing, with only 57% of participants identifying as White. The remainder of the sample was composed of: 22% Black or Afro-Caribbean, 11% Asian, and 10% as Mixed or Other. There were very few obviously discernible variations between the relative appeals of motivational categories to various racial groups. The one main exception was the preponderance of Black or Afro-Caribbean converts in categories of conversion such as ‘social reconfiguration’ and ‘socio-cultural/religious critique or dissent’, and which I suggest is largely attributable to the appeal of notions of racial harmony and the ‘brother/sisterhood of humankind’ in the Islamic faith. In addition, some Black converts’ invocation of conversion as ‘lifestyle or perspective reconciliation’ was also predicated upon the idea that they had rediscovered in Islam, a religious heritage that had been stripped from them along with their innate identity during the devastating slave trade.

Most converts do not appear to have been particularly religious prior to conversion. The vast majority were identified as *nominally religious* [71%: M: 79%; F: 65%], representing a weak or intermittent religious affiliation that was not generally borne of conviction or ‘faith’ but rather was based around familiarity, honouring cultural or familial traditions, or adherence to social norms. Around one quarter of all converts considered themselves to be *strongly religious*, however, the vast majority of these held strongly *private* beliefs [N: 13%; F: 16%; M: 7%], often due to disillusionment with the ‘establishment faith’. A minority of converts had held strong religious beliefs, but crucially, within some organised *institutional* context [N: 8% F: 10%; M: 5%]. Finally, less than a tenth of the sample were willing to self-identify as entirely *non-religious* [N: 8%; F: 8%; M: 9%].

## 7.2 Accounting for the growth of Muslim conversion in Britain

One of the major questions, and indeed concerns, of those who have sought to study converts in the West, has related to the putative size of this group, and amongst social commentators in the mainstream media, whether or not this group is indeed growing. Evidence from numerous anecdotal sources suggests that conversion to Islam is a growing phenomenon across much of Europe and the United States (Beck 2007; Reuters 2007; Haddad *et al.*, 2006). My own observations of the increasingly visible presence of converts in mosques, Islamic organisations and other Muslim fora, as well the public sphere more broadly appear to confirm this growth in the UK at least. Moreover, my calculations for the size of the British convert population, based upon data from the 2001 UK Census, gives a figure of 69,794, which despite being an under-representation due to methodological issues, also supports a sustained growth thesis, particularly as this figure has far surpassed previous conservative estimates.<sup>285</sup> I suggest that this recent surge in the *rate* of conversions can be attributed to five main facilitating factors:<sup>286</sup>

- i) The growing presence of Islam in Britain, through immigration, higher birth rates amongst Muslims, and particularly through the visible presence of educated, professional second, third, and even fourth generation British Muslims. This presence has enabled more frequent and more engaging social and other interaction between British Muslims and their fellow Britons.
- ii) The increasing numbers of white and black converts, who are often quite conspicuous as Muslims, helps to portray Islam as a faith that is indigenous to Britain, and not exclusively associated with ethnic cultures. Converts and groups like the *New Muslim Project* appear to be cognisant of the role they themselves play as potential “ambassadors of Islam”, as one participant stated, and take conscious steps, such as retaining their English names and avoiding ‘ethnic’ dress, in order to avoid alienating non-Muslims.
- iii) Well-publicised conversions of celebrities and distinguished personalities, such as that of the journalist Yvonne Ridley, footballer Frederick Kanoute, boxer Danny Williams, or Italian ambassador Torquato Cardilli (Baker

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<sup>285</sup> Compare for example with Kose’s (1996b: 19) figure of around 5,000.

<sup>286</sup> I am not referring here to the motivating factors for conversion more generally covered in chapter 6.2, but rather the circumstantial factors that have affected the *rate* of conversions in Britain.

2001), have been instrumental in raising media and public awareness of conversion to Islam, and have helped to allay some of the misconceptions and stigma attached to Islam, making conversion more socially acceptable.

- iv) Increasing access to Islamic texts and discourses through greater mobility, and increasingly globalised communication systems, including satellite television channels and the Internet, allow greater familiarity with Muslims and Islam.
- v) Finally, the prominence of Muslim issues in the media, although often unlikely to engender a positive view of Muslims, can nevertheless provide the initial impetus for developing an interest or more profound understanding of Islam. Occasionally this impetus is so strong that it may also help to foster an affinity for Muslims and their faith.

It is this final factor that has proved so important in recent years, and perhaps the most surprising, considering that highly mediatised terrorist attacks like those in New York on 9/11, or in London on 7/7, have undoubtedly proven to be a “public relations disaster”, as one participant put it, for Muslims and Islam more generally. Moreover, other recent events, both in Britain and further afield, such as the Danish ‘Muhammad cartoon’ controversy, the furore and subsequent bans imposed on the Muslim veil in many parts of Europe, the videotaped beheadings of British hostages in Iraq, and the reporting of odious cultural practices such as ‘honour killings’, to name but a few, have simply reinforced the image of the Islamic faith as one inextricably associated with cultural ‘backwardness’, patriarchal or misogynistic practices, and most prominently, violence or terrorism (Pew Research Centre 2006; European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2003).

However, whilst there is no question that the seminal events of 9/11 heralded something of a paradigm shift in Muslim’s relations with, and reception within the West, as the rising tide of anti-Islamic sentiment in Britain and elsewhere has shown, the intense glare of public scrutiny has inadvertently, and somewhat paradoxically, piqued the intellectual curiosity of many Westerners. This attention on the texts and teachings of Islam itself, although perhaps unwarranted, has allowed many Westerners to learn, for perhaps the first time, more about the faith of the *other* within their very midst. Consequently, many mosques and Islamic organisations across Europe and the United States were inundated with requests for guest speakers,

Islamic literature and copies of the Quran.<sup>287</sup> Many of these institutions later reported a significant surge in conversions, with one Dutch Islamic centre claiming a tenfold increase in the rate of conversions (Whittel 2002), whilst the Centre for American Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported that,

*“34,000 Americans have converted to Islam following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and this is the highest rate reached in the U.S. since Islam arrived here.”*<sup>288</sup>

Thus, somewhat paradoxically, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 appear to have inadvertently accelerated the growth of the Islamic faith in the West, by bringing the faith associated with the perpetrators of this violence onto the public agenda. The man believed to have masterminded the attacks, Osama bin Laden, was even heard to boastfully remark upon this phenomenon to his *al-Qaeda* lieutenants:

*“In Holland, the number of people who accepted Islam during the days that followed the operations were more than the people who accepted Islam in the last 11 years. I heard someone on Islamic radio who owns a school in America say: ‘We don’t have time to keep up with the demands of those who are asking about Islamic books to learn about Islam.’ This event made people think, which benefited Islam greatly”* (Quoted in Jimenez 2002).

There have even been recent unverified reports of conversions amongst U.S. Marines stationed at the prison facility housing *al-Qaeda* members and other suspected terrorists at Guantanamo Bay (Ali 2003).

The sharp increase in conversions following this particular event, although eliciting surprise by its magnitude, is not unique but rather fits a pattern set by recent history. Following the outbreak of the Gulf war, some Westerners found themselves being drawn to the Islamic faith, and a number of news sources published the Saudi's staggering claim to have welcomed 5,000 new converts from the Allied forces stationed there alone (Jimenez 2002). A similar upsurge in conversions was witnessed during the Bosnian conflict (Berrington 1993), and following the furore surrounding the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and the infamous ensuing *fatwa* by the Ayatollah Khomeini (Whittel 2002). Such occurrences will inevitably have shocked and confounded many, but perhaps there is some truth in the adage, that there is after all, no such thing as bad publicity and, as

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<sup>287</sup> Clark Lobenstine, Executive Director of the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington alluded to this demand in his testimony to the US Commission on Civil Rights, “September 11 has presented an opportunity for public education about other faiths, especially Islam, and since that date there has been a surge in demand for speakers who can address this”. (US Commission on Civil Rights 2003: 14)

<sup>288</sup> Nihad Awad, chairman of CAIR, quoted in *Al-Ayyam* (London), 12/11/2001.

one convert suggested, the “constant demonisation of Islam has [simply] awokened the Western inquisitive mind to ask what is so evil?”

### **7.3 Converting Online and the future of conversion to Islam**

My study of proselytisation and conversions to Islam on the Internet has offered an intriguing avenue for exploring the burgeoning relationships between religiosity and the virtual sphere. Whilst many religious traditions now conduct aspects of religion online, I have shown how many Muslim organisations and individuals have been pioneering in their embracing of cyberspace as a legitimate arena for da’wah and other religious proselytisation activities. Whilst it is difficult to assess the results of these initiatives, the growth of exclusively virtual conversions goes some way in pointing to the success of their efforts.

Indeed, this study has meticulously described and documented a number of these ‘virtual conversions’ that have been enacted in online spaces such as discussion forums and online chatrooms. Whilst being at the forefront of studying conversion to Islam in the virtual sphere, I have nevertheless sought to problematize the characterisation of an ephemeral online/offline divide, particularly as the act of conversion itself will in fact most likely remain relegated to the offline world, particularly as the declaration of the shahadah is likely to be enunciated in person. The documentation of these virtual conversion experiences has also unearthed intriguing findings vis-à-vis the social aspect of religious conversion, and the relationship between online and offline social spheres, particularly as many converts online undertake changes in religious affiliation without ever having encountered group members from within the real world.

As this study and many others have shown, religiosity online is undoubtedly booming on the Internet (Campbell 2010), and anecdotal evidence suggests that religious conversion online is similarly on the rise, with all major religious traditions now appearing to be well represented by websites offering religious inculcation and conversions online.<sup>289</sup> What then, are the underlying factors and social trends behind

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<sup>289</sup> Indeed, even religious traditions which are notoriously difficult to convert to, such as Judaism, appear to offer conversion services online. See for example, *Esynagogue.org* which describes itself as “The Cyberspace Synagogue and JewU-Jewish Institute for Religious Instruction”, and features on its homepage an “Online Distance program for Conversion to Judaism”.

this rise in conversion (as well as other forms of religiosity) online? It appears the reasons can be essentially presumed to be fourfold:

i) Increasing democratisation of religious knowledge and religious authority online: The widespread availability of searchable databases of the Quran, *hadith* collections, *tafsir* (commentaries and exegesis) and other classical texts from the Islamic canon, alongside the provision of substantial databases of ‘e-fatwas’, combined with the inherent anonymity offered online, allows novices and the laity to engage in the production and dissemination of religious knowledge with a level of sophistication and competency that belies their more modest backgrounds (Awan *et al.*, 2011: 35, 53). These findings within Islamic fora online, reflect much wider trends on the Internet, which have proven conducive to the levelling of traditional hierarchies of knowledge and power (Castells 2009; Bunt 2003). Therefore I argue that the traditional ulema (religious scholars) have been partially displaced by the Internet, and thus are no longer considered to be the ultimate repositories for moral authority and guidance they once were (Awan 2007b: 220). Consequently, religious leaders and functionaries, located within mosques and other traditional Islamic environments, may not be considered essential for ‘conferring’ religious conversion, or dispensing other religious rites and rituals as they are now considered redundant.

ii) Increasing access to web platforms: In 2010, for example, the number of adults in the UK accessing the Internet every day or almost every day had almost doubled to 30.1 million users (around 60 per cent) from around 16.5 million users in 2006.<sup>290</sup> Internet access and usage is of course affected by a number of socio-economic and demographic factors (i.e. age, location, marital status and education), and thus if the figures are broken down further by age, around 99 per cent of those aged 16 to 24 had in fact accessed the Internet (Office for National Statistics 2010). The significant increases in Internet access, points to more frequent encounters with Muslims online, but also to greater exposure to Islamic proselytization efforts online.

iii) The development and proliferation of a range of new web technologies, particularly ‘Web 2.0’, which refers to a wide range of second generation of services on the Web, such as social media and social networking sites, that have allowed

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<sup>290</sup> The number of adults classified as Internet users (i.e. those having accessed the Internet in the last three months) was significantly higher at 38.3 million adults (Office for National Statistics 2010).

users to contribute as easily as they consume,<sup>291</sup> meaning that these individuals therefore have more personally invested in the virtual world. Moreover, this growth in Web 2.0 has further blurred the distinction between producers and consumers of media and texts, and given rise, as some have suggested, to a new category of *prosumer* (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). Individuals are thus more likely to see explorations of, and experimentations with, religiosity and spirituality online as personally mediated and highly creative processes as may be evinced by the plethora of conversion narratives posted on *YouTube*. Indeed the public nature and widespread dissemination of these conversion experiences online may even point to the growth of a consciously performative role for religious conversion.

iv) The changing demographic of web usage itself. This final point is of particular significance, as many of the emerging online religious converts are, following Prensky (2001), ‘digital natives’ rather than ‘digital immigrants’.<sup>292</sup> Prensky (2001: 6-9) identifies these ‘digital natives’ as native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet. On the other hand, and compared to the ‘digital natives’, ‘digital immigrants’ are defined as those who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in their lives, adopted many or most aspects of the new technology and platforms. Consequently, many of these online religious converts are not converting to Islam (or indeed any other faith) in a *new* virtual environment. Rather, it is arguably the predominant environment with which they are familiar and comfortable. Indeed, this newer generation of religious converts already locate much of their everyday social and other interaction online, whether it be social networking, shopping, dating, playing videogames, watching movies, reading news, listening to music, or learning. In fact any activity in the ‘real’ world now has a virtual counterpart that may appear to be more appealing to a certain age cohort that represents this ‘digital native’ and so it is unsurprising that their religious activities, such as conversion, should also take place within this arena (Awan *et al.*, 2011: 55).

Based on these findings I suggest that conversion to Islam is not only likely to increase in coming years, but will also increasingly shift to online spaces in many

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<sup>291</sup> This is the most widely accepted definition of Web 2.0. See <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>

<sup>292</sup> The average age from within the Internet sample, which was estimated to be around 23.0 years [M: 23.7; F: 22.6], was found to be slightly lower than the age of the main interview sample group, and thus reflects the younger age demographic of Internet users more generally.

cases, reflecting wider social trends. Moreover, these sorts of studies of religious conversion online will no doubt continue to elucidate increasing shifts towards modes of private religiosity, and patterns of disaffiliation from institutional forms of religion.

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This study has attempted to engage with and understand the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in a holistic manner, as a complex and multi-faceted process, addressing the important questions of *why* (motivations) and *how* (processes) individuals become Muslim in contemporary Britain. In this endeavour, the Grounded Theory method has proven itself to be an eminently useful tool for analysing conversion narratives, particularly in the systematic and rigorous manner in which it has been able to draw out and delineate salient themes and elements from this corpus of material.

Despite our earlier reservations vis-à-vis the authenticity of conversion accounts, the conversion narratives have also revealed their immense utility in conversion research, particularly in the rich and very detailed accounts of the salient aspects of religious conversion that they have provided. Moreover, the inevitable ‘reconstructedness’ of the narrative, with its potential selections, embellishments, omissions and fabrications, have ultimately not proven detrimental to the study. Rather, the reliance upon these constructed narratives has reinforced our phenomenological viewpoint, in which we acknowledge that we are primarily interested in religious conversion as it is experienced by the participant.

One of the most important contributions of this study has been in delineating an innovative and empirically based methodology for elucidating motivations for religious conversion. However, as I have shown, motivations for religious change are amorphous and complex and there is no simple cause and effect calculus that appears to be tenable. Instead, motivations may change over time depending upon the convert’s point along the conversion journey, and indeed multiple motivations may be held simultaneously, further complicating the analysis.

As part of negotiating this complex area of enquiry, rather than asking what the motivation is for any given conversion, I have found it more fruitful to ask: *What positive outcome is achieved, or what negative issue is resolved, through conversion?* This has enabled a much more sophisticated and nuanced engagement

with the question of what underlies religious conversion, without negating or undermining the convert's own testimonies. Moreover, the employment of the Grounded Theory to analyse 'units of meaning' within narratives, as opposed to attempting to assess the narrative as a whole, has meant that we are not evaluating individual converts' experiences, but rather are meticulously analysing the entire dataset as a whole, drawing attention to the frequency of motivational categories within the corpus of data. Not only is this method less likely to be rejected by participants, but it is also scientifically more robust and significant. However, whilst the use of the constant comparative method has proven immensely useful and powerful as a tool for analysing narratives, the Grounded Theory's reliance on 'packets' of meaning does not lend itself to presenting the rich, vivid and highly evocative personal accounts of religious conversion to readers. This is perhaps the greatest limitation of the Grounded Theory method – a limitation that I have attempted to attenuate in large part by not employing the highly reductive 'line by line' coding method, and by illustrating conceptual categories with larger and more complete excerpts from the narratives themselves.

In exploring the processes of conversion, I have shown how aspects of life prior to conversion, such as previous religious affiliation, social embedment and level of tension with the pre-conversion context, can have significant and lasting effects on the contours and eventual outcome of religious conversion. In addition I have explored the multifarious changes that inevitably accompany religious conversion, and the ways in which the convert themselves understand the religious transformation that has transpired. Moreover, I have shown that remaining converted is rarely easy; not only must the convert find strategies to deal with varying levels of critique and opprobrium from *outsiders*, and contend with disenchantment with the faith and fellow believers from the inside, but must also attempt to negotiate complex religious beliefs, rituals and boundaries, on what can prove to be a very lonely path.

Converts to Islam in Britain represent a surprisingly diverse, and highly disparate group of individuals, who in many cases, have very little in common, save for their adoption of the Islamic faith. Converts are drawn from all walks of life, ages, social classes, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds, representing a veritable microcosm of British society more generally. Hervieu-Leger (1998: 218) argues that in today's modern secular world, all religious identity, including natal religious

identity, must be constructed. A continuing focus on conversion to Islam in Britain (or indeed conversion to any traditional faith in liberal Western democracies), will undoubtedly provide important clues and answers about wider processes of religious identity construction, and why widely-held assumptions about the decline of religion, the privatisation of religiosity and the secular nature of modernisation and modernity more broadly (Hefner 1998), have not proven entirely accurate.

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