

**BRITISH MUSLIM CONVERTS: AN INVESTIGATION OF
CONVERSION AND DE-CONVERSION PROCESSES
TO AND FROM ISLAM**

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By

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Abstract

This study proposes an investigation into the formation of a new British Muslim identity, alongside various personal and social challenges and consequences many Muslim converts face as a result of conversion to, and in some cases from, Islam. The thesis analyses the factors and elements that greatly contribute to a more positive conversion experience and draws on insights from colonial history, the political climate, the Islamic *fitrah*, and western theories on conversion and identity development.

Based on a qualitative study sample of thirty-four British converts, the thesis argues that many challenges Muslim converts face are due to them having a limited understanding of Islamic teachings and their rights. The study was guided by research questions: What are the anticipated benefits and positive elements that encouraged the start and continuation of an Islamic conversion journey? What constitutes a comfortable and balanced British Muslim identity and lifestyle for westerners? and What are the main problems and challenges new Muslims face that can lead to de-conversion? Is Lewis Rambo's stage model, alongside Helen Ebaugh's de-conversion stages appropriate for the study of conversion and de-conversion to and from Islam? It was found that those who enjoyed being Muslims were able to create a balanced British Muslim identity by negotiating and applying their own western values to their understanding of The Prophet Muhammad's biography and The Quran, and integrated Islamic values into their own environments and everyday lives that were free from foreign cultural practices. It was important to understand what they were expecting to benefit from Islam and how they later perceived, practised, expressed and understood their new faith and identities as British Muslims.

The study also examines how converts deal with Islamophobia and extremism, and how Islamic conversions can be perceived as a threat to White British identity, social class and values. The participants shared common difficulties regarding gender and racial discrimination, living among Muslims, identity development, marriage, parenting, Muslim culture, isolation, integration and practising Islam, but at different levels, and with differing consequences. The sacrifices, challenges and consequences faced by some individuals as a result of a de-conversion are explored, which includes living with hidden identities as 'closeted disaffiliates' out of fear of abuse and stigmatisation.

Glossary

Abaya: The long and loose black cloak worn by many Arab women in the Gulf region.

Allah: The Arabic term for ‘The One God’.

Al Salamu alaikom: May Allah’s peace and mercy be upon you. This is the Islamic greeting used among Muslims, which is equivalent to “Hello”.

Alhamdulillah: Praise be to God.

Burka: The traditional Arab and Asian face veil that may either cover the entire face or reveal the eyes only.

Dawah: The practice or policy of preaching, proselytizing and inviting people to Islam.

Eid: The first *Eid* of the year is known as *Eid Al-Fitr*. It is a joyous social celebration that marks the end of the month of *Ramadan*. The entire community comes together for special prayers and to congratulate each other. The second and final *Eid* celebration of the year is called *Eid Al-Adha*. It commemorates the completion of the Hajj pilgrimage and is celebrated by both the pilgrims and Muslims around the world.

Fitrah: Natural human inclination to God and Islamic beliefs.

Hadith(s): A narrative record, or records, of a saying(s) and/or action(s) attributed to The Prophet Muhammad.

Hajj: The greatest Muslim pilgrimage to Islam’s holiest city Makkah in Saudi Arabia, where The *Ka’ba* is situated and which takes place in the last month (Thul Hijja) of the Islamic lunar year. It is an Islamic obligation for all Muslims to perform *Hajj* at least once during their lifetime if they can afford to do so. It is one of the Five Pillars of Islam and is performed over five days. The obligatory rituals involve the *ihram* (ritual of physical purification), circling The *Ka’ba* seven times, *Sa’ee* (the walk) between The Safa and Marwah mountains seven times, drinking *Zamzam* (holy) water, shaving or cutting the hair, spending days and nights in worship in areas neighboring the city of Makkah (Mina, Arafat, and Muzdalifah), stoning the devil (throwing pebbles at three pillars representing the devil and evil) and slaughtering an animal to feed the poor.

Halal: Permissible in Islam.

Haram: Prohibited in Islam.

Heritage Muslims: People who were born and raised as Muslims by Muslim parents.

Hijab: Headscarf and body covering for a Muslim woman.

Inshallah: God willing.

Jihad: Holy war against the unbelievers or the spiritual struggle within oneself against sin.

Jinn: Unseen creatures made from fire.

Ka'ba: The Sacred House of God in Makkah, Saudi Arabia.

Kafir: Someone who rejects God, The Prophet Muhammad and Islam.

Madhab: School of Islamic thought/jurisprudence (Malki, Shafi, Hanbali and Hanafi)

Mahr: Dowry (marriage gift).

Muharram: The first month of the lunar Islamic calendar.

Murtad fitri: Natural apostate.

Murtad milli: Community apostate.

Ramadan: The ninth month in the Islamic lunar calendar. All Muslims are requested to refrain from eating, drinking and having sexual relationships during the entire month of Ramadan from dawn to dusk.

Riddah: Rejection or turning away (from the faith).

Saheeh: Authentic or sound (interpretation of The Quran and Hadiths).

Salwar Kameez: Loose-fitting trousers and a loose long-sleeved tunic top to the knees, traditionally worn by people from the Indian subcontinent.

Shahadah: The Muslim declaration of faith ('There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the (Last) Messenger of Allah'), one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

Shariah law: The Islamic legal system that is based on The Quran and authentic Hadith teachings.

Shuyookh: Muslim Sheikhs/Imams/Scholars.

Thul-Hijja: The last month in the Islamic lunar calendar.

Ummah: The global Muslim community.

Umrah: The non-mandatory visit/pilgrimage performed by Muslim pilgrims to The House of God (Ka'ba) in Makkah in Saudi Arabia, which may be performed at any time of the year and is performed in less than a few hours. The obligatory rituals involve the *ihram* (ritual of physical purification), circling The *Ka'ba* seven times, *Sa'ee* (the walk) between The Safa and Marwah mountains seven times, drinking *Zamzam* (holy) water, and shaving or cutting the hair.

Wali: Male Muslim guardian who is responsible for those under his care.

Wudu: Ritual washing for the daily prayers. This involves the washing (in order) of the hands, mouth, nose, face, arms, the wiping of the head and ears, and washing of the feet.

Zakat: One of the five pillars of Islam. It is obligatory upon all Muslims to give 2.5% of their wealth and assets each year (in excess of what is required) to the poor.

Chapter I

Introduction

1.1 Research Aims, Objectives and Questions

The primary objective of this study ‘British Muslim Converts: An Investigation of Conversion and De-Conversion Processes to and from Islam’ was to investigate and analyse the various motives, experiences, challenges and elements involved in conversion and de-conversion processes to and from Islam, the creation and development of a new British Muslim identity and the reasons why some people abandon Islam after converting to it. During my time working in London’s Regent’s Park Mosque (2008-2009), I came across some British Muslim converts who expressed their distress and intentions to de-convert from Islam, as a result of bad experiences and being disappointed with the faith and its members. However, some were hesitant about doing so, as they feared negative consequences from the Muslim community. At the same time, I had come across Muslim converts who were happy in their lives and had managed to find solutions to the personal, social, religious and identity problems that other converts continued to suffer from and were unable to solve. Due to this, I found it important to study the lives of different converts in London in order to find out why they converted to Islam, what they hoped to benefit from their conversion and why the outcomes and consequences of an Islamic conversion were different for different people.

This thesis is based on a qualitative semi-structured interview study and narratives provided by a sample of thirty-four British converts to Islam living in London, which explores the entire conversion journey for each individual from childhood to the present. Each conversion to Islam is unique and it is important therefore to recognise the process as a variable phenomenon. The time it takes someone to convert varies, alongside the context, social matrix, motives, personal needs and aspirations. In this study conversion will be considered as stages of identity development and/or transformation. The study highlights the main factors and elements that contribute towards a more positive and beneficial Islamic conversion experience within a western geographical context alongside a balanced British Muslim identity, which is needed to

improve the personal and social wellbeing of converts during a problematic political time for Muslims.

Aside from addressing an academic audience, this thesis addresses both Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain, as it provides a platform from which the participants have been able to communicate/voice their experiences and opinions to create a greater awareness of their motives for conversion and de-conversion. The study allows readers to view the conversion journey from the converts' own personal and intimate perspectives to avoid bias, and provide a better understanding of their experiences and points of view, alongside the emotional, psychological and social implications of a religious conversion. People possess a store of social knowledge, which enables them both to act and provide accounts, such as explanations or justifications, of their actions and decisions (Chomsky, 1966). Interpreting conversions from the converts' point of view accepts conversion as a continuous unfolding process, in which active and passive, conscious and unconscious, individual and social forces may act either sequentially or together to shape individuals' identities and religious change. The study investigates how converts today negotiate and construct British Muslim identities, and how Islamic values are integrated into their everyday lives according to their understanding of Islam and being British. Because of post-colonial, political, anti-terrorism and contemporary geopolitical issues surrounding the social and cultural integration of many new Muslims in Britain, along with the increase in Islamophobia, British media representations of Islam and radical Muslim converts, this thesis is responding to an important social need, as many converts are often isolated and culturally disconnected from British society. This may cause various problems, especially if they join isolated Muslim communities and adopt a new identity, culture, worldview and, in some cases, new extreme political and/or religious opinions, which may be problematic on both a personal and social level. The purpose of the research was not so much to test a specific hypothesis but to attempt to interpret what an Islamic conversion means for individuals, what it involves and how being Muslim affects and changes people's lives. The study also focuses on the challenges and crises converts experienced, which were found to be mainly linked to their various understandings of Islam that encouraged some individuals to later pursue a path to de-conversion, which resulted in negative consequences for them, both personally and socially.

Having studied Arabic and Islamic studies in Umm Al Qura University in Saudi Arabia, I became aware of the variety of different scholarly opinions and interpretations of The Quran and Hadiths (narrative records of the sayings and actions attributed to The Prophet Muhammad), which helped me to understand why converts are drawn, or directed to, particular interpretations, and how new Muslims perceive and understand The Quran. As a fluent Arabic speaker, I managed to identify a number of problematic misunderstandings converts had with regards to the translation of various Quran verses and Hadiths that made their lives difficult and encouraged them to leave or consider leaving Islam at a later stage. This raises the important question as to what proportion of the new Muslim community is fully aware of the meanings of Quran verses and Hadiths if they do not know Arabic, have not acquired sufficient knowledge about Islam, and are not familiar with the works and teachings of western Muslim scholars. This study highlights the problems, consequences, challenges and influences of the Islamic education they receive throughout the conversion and identity development process, which determines their lifestyle and type of Muslims they become. Therefore, it was considered important to incorporate relevant Quran verses and Hadiths in this study to contextualise, locate and explain the motivations behind certain actions, methods of integration, problems, challenges, attitudes, opinions, decisions, views and understandings. The study found that their understanding of Islam shaped their national-religious identities and how they wished to be presented and known to others as British Muslims. Some converts perceive their conversion to be a *return* to who they originally were, as a result of previous beliefs and natural inclinations to Islam, whereas others perceive their Muslim identity as a new identity.

It is suggested that if awareness is created of the challenges and problems converts face in their conversion and de-conversion journeys, they will be able to receive appropriate and necessary support from their families, friends and Muslim communities and obtain what this study found to be a broad and sufficient Islamic education based on the teachings of The Prophet Muhammad's biography and western Muslim scholars, such as Abdullah Quilliam and Hamza Yusuf. This is also presented in this study as a unique and original finding, making it different to previous studies, as it has been demonstrated how an adequate Islamic education can greatly improve the lives of western converts and Muslims in general. Therefore, this study proposes and anticipates that obtaining an Islamic education based on the positive experiences of the participants will help converts to integrate their Islamic beliefs into British society and live with a balanced

national-religious identity without needing to compromise on their most important personal, religious and British values. It is also anticipated that this will gradually help to eliminate the fear and feelings of being threatened that non-Muslims currently experience with regard to Muslims in Britain, which may contribute to a more peaceful, tolerant and transcultural society.

Previous researchers who have studied the phenomenon of British Muslim conversions focused on different aspects of the conversion journey, which made them different. Earlier studies on British Muslim converts include the ethnographic research of Ali Köse (1994), who studied why and how non-Muslims (most of who were Christians) embrace Islam in an age of secularism. He argues that the main motive for conversion was the intellectual and spiritual search for meaning, alongside the rejection of the moral permissiveness or materialism in society. Maha Al-Qwidi (2002) explores the reasons for conversion and found many similarities in results with Köse's study, and proposed that conversion is a gradual psychic process. She emphasises the influence The Quran may have on individuals, alongside their 'natural' search for the true meaning of life. Kevin Brice (2010) produced a statistical report by using quantitative research methods in the form of online surveys for British Muslim converts. He estimated their numbers in Britain based on the demographic information he collected, and highlighted key awareness points related to marriage, identity, Islamic dress, and social and personal challenges. Leon Moosavi (2011) interviewed British converts to Islam over a five-year period in North-West England, and rather than exploring motives for conversion, he focused on Islamophobic behaviour. Most of his participants sensed and feared the presence of Islamophobia – clearly motivated racial and religious abuse – they had suffered, or had anticipated, on a regular basis. Yasir Suleiman (2013) produced a report for Cambridge University that explored the conversion journeys of female Muslim converts in Britain (and later on male Muslim converts in 2016), by analysing interview narratives and observational data taken from an organised three-day symposium. The report highlights some of the main challenges that they face in their lives and explores the relationships they have with heritage Muslims. All researchers agreed that the conversion journey was an on-going process of self-exploration and identity development, and claimed that the majority of converts were active, rather than passive, in their processes.

This study is an academic contribution to the works of this small group of western Muslim sociologists studying British conversions to Islam. It extends previous studies of British Muslim converts by analysing both the conversion and de-conversion processes, which renders this research and its findings as a new and original contribution to knowledge. It was considered important to explore converts' de-conversions from former faith groups and communities before their conversion to Islam, as it gives the reader an idea of the types of problems, obstacles, sacrifices and risks some individuals had to take in order to become Muslims, gain the anticipated benefits from an Islamic conversion and follow what they believed to be 'the right path'. De-conversions from Islam, a subject which to date has not been academically or demographically researched, were also important to consider and study, as they can result in individuals being at risk of abuse, stigmatisation and other negative acts perpetrated on them by their erstwhile and more radical Muslim group members. Although previous studies have found standard and common conversion motives and issues people face as Muslims, information on de-conversion is scarce and not discussed in depth.

The study looks at this journey from both a macro and micro-sociological point of view. A macro-sociological approach takes into consideration the wider society in which an individual converts to Islam and a micro-sociological approach involves a deeper qualitative study, which analyses individual human behaviour, personal social circles, how individuals respond to various environments, interactions and experiences, and what emotional and psychological factors influence them. Due to this, it was considered important to include a brief introduction to colonial/imperial history and ideologies, Orientalism, racism, the diaspora and treatment of Asians, Arabs and Africans and how it resulted in the immigration of many Muslims from different ethnicities to Britain and the creation of new British Muslim communities (see 4.2.1). The colonial context was considered important in this study, as it explains where the immigrant Muslims came from, how Islam spread in Britain, where various biases, discriminations and attitudes towards immigrant Muslims are rooted and how the first British Muslim identities were created and developed in a new post-colonial western environment. This is an ongoing issue today, as heritage Muslims and converts alike continue to find ways of negotiating and balancing their hybrid national-ethnic-religious identities in order to fit into mainstream British society and live on comfortable and peaceful terms with others, despite the negative global political climate associated with Muslims. The thesis also

highlights and explains how imperialist ideologies, racism and Orientalism have continued to influence modern day media portrayals of Muslims and attitudes towards them and highlights the current political climate in which people convert to Islam and in which Islamophobic attacks are on the rise since the war on terror was declared after 9/11 and since the British government established strict anti-terrorism policies after the London attacks of 7/7. The anti-terrorism policies resulted in many innocent Muslims being targeted, arrested, searched and placed under surveillance, which created a climate of fear and suspicion among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. However, despite this Brice (2010) reports that conversions to Islam in Britain are on the continuous rise, which makes it interesting for researchers and people to find out what motivated individuals to convert to Islam during a problematic period of time.

The introduction also includes a brief overview of the first English converts to Islam, how they implemented Islam in Victorian society and how they were affected by immigrants and their travels to Muslim countries. It can be argued that conversions to Islam in a post-colonial context were and continue to be considered as being somewhat problematic if White converts in particular join heritage Muslim communities and become discriminated against, as a result of being associated with the cultures, practices and beliefs of 'less civilised' people, terrorists and previous biases, attitudes and racial stereotypes that had been attributed to the early foreign Muslim immigrants. Therefore, the thesis discusses how western converts are influenced by post-colonial British (heritage) Muslim identities and whether or not they made the efforts and managed to find new, subtle, peaceful and successful ways of integrating Islam into their everyday lives and societies.

Previous conversion theories have been based on western psychological and sociological perspectives of various cults, Christianity and religious groups other than Islam, which made it difficult to find a suitable and neutral framework to use to study British Muslim converts, as the procedures and elements involved in an Islamic conversion are different to those of other faiths. Some other conversion frameworks and theories discussed in the literature review were also either too limiting, focused on one aspect of the conversion journey, such as missionary influences, or did not include a stage that considered any possibility of a de-conversion. It was eventually found that Lewis Rambo's (1993) seven conversion stages (context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, consequences), alongside John Lofland and Norman

Skonovd's (1981) six motifs of conversion (intellectual, mystical, experimental conversion, affectional, revivalist and coercive), Helen Ebaugh's (1988) four stages of de-conversion (doubts, seeking and weighing alternatives, a turning point and establishing an ex-role identity) and Glynis Breakwell's (1986) four identity formation principles (continuity, uniqueness, feeling confident and in control of one's life, and feelings of self-worth or social value) were relevant, suitable, and together allowed for a broad approach to the subject. The chapters were all based on the order of Rambo's model, which is critically assessed, alongside Ebaugh's stage order for its usefulness and effectiveness in studying Islamic conversions in the conclusion. The concept of the Islamic *fitrah* (natural human inclination to God and Islamic beliefs), which includes intellectual and theological reflection, is also taken into account and explored in the pre-conversion and conversion stages, alongside eastern and western opinions and attitudes towards various experiences and elements in the conversion journey that will help the reader to understand and analyse the developments. The experiences of any de-conversions fall into Rambo's 'consequences' stage.

Lewis Rambo's (1993) framework, which is based on the psychology of religious conversion developed in a Christian context, is primarily used as the foundation of this research to help study, analyse and stage participants' data and conversion experiences, as it was considered the most suitable, neutral, flexible, relevant and realistic framework theory to use, owing to its capacity to assess the context, identity development, common themes and the emotional, intellectual, religious, psychological and social issues experienced. However, during the course of the research it was found that the stages and/or their sequence did not apply or were not relevant to the experiences of all Muslim converts. Therefore, in order for it to be suitable for the study of Muslim converts it was deemed necessary to modify the framework according to the empirical findings of this study. It is anticipated that the modified framework proposed by this study will provide a theoretical background, which may serve as a foundation for future research in the subject area.

This thesis will attempt to answer these four main questions that have been extracted from the aims of this study, which are:

1. What are the anticipated benefits and positive elements that encouraged the start and continuation of an Islamic conversion journey?

2. What constitutes a comfortable and balanced British Muslim identity and lifestyle for westerners?
3. What are the main problems and challenges new Muslims face that can lead to de-conversion?
4. Is Lewis Rambo's stage model, alongside Helen Ebaugh's de-conversion stages appropriate for the study of conversion and de-conversion to and from Islam?

1.2 Muslims and Colonial History

According to Islamic tradition, Islamic conquests began with the emergence of The Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, after he received a revelation from God. He established a unified state, which, under both his leadership and the thirty-year reign of the first four Caliphates who were his successors, saw a century of rapid expansion of Muslim power (Sicker, 2000). The early rise of Islam and Muslim conquests established sharp opposition and hostility between medieval European Christendom and the Islamic world that stretched from the Middle East to China and India across central Asia, North Africa, Italy, Spain, Turkey and the Pyrenees (Gibbon, 1996). The Muslim conquests brought about the collapse of the Persian Sassanid Empire and the Christian Byzantine and Roman Empires that had weakened as a result of a fragile economy, incompetence of leaders, and size of armies that led to the establishment of Islamic states in their place. However, during the eighteenth century the Muslim Mughal Empire weakened and collapsed at the hands of the expanding British Empire, while the Ottoman Empire, the last surviving part of the Muslim Empire, was also defeated by the British and its allies in the aftermath of the First World War.

According to most scholars, imperialism occurs when a strong nation takes over and rules a weaker nation or region and dominates its economic, political and cultural life through colonization. Britain's colonising ambitions can be seen as early as the fifteenth century when the British East India Company was established in 1599 for trading purposes. The political growth of power and significance of an imperial empire is through the amount of land that a nation has conquered and controlled, alongside a strong economy, and by 1670 Britain had colonies in Virginia, Bermuda, Jamaica and Barbados amongst others. The British East India Company had established various companies along the Eastern coast of India for 150 years during the Mughal era, which

greatly helped the economic growth of Britain, enabling efficient trade of valuable raw materials, food and minerals via seaports (James, 1997). Following the defeat of Napoleon and France in 1815, Britain enjoyed a century of almost unchallenged dominance, resulting from a successful policy of free trade, and the country expanded its imperial holdings around the globe, mainly in post-Mughal India, Asia and Africa. In the late nineteenth century, colonial additions were made in the Middle East, when the British Empire was the largest in the world in terms of its colonies, landmass and population, and its power, both military and economic, was unmatched.

Edward Said (1994: 9) uses the term imperialism broadly to describe any system of domination and subordination organised with ‘an imperial metropolitan centre’, a high area of income and profit, and a ‘periphery’, consisting of areas of low income and profit. He states that while imperialism involved the practice, theory and attitudes of a dominating centre ruling a distant territory through politics and money, colonialism referred to the physical ‘taking over’ and implanting of settlements on a distant territory by military force or other means. The word ‘imperialism’ became common in the 1870s and was used with a negative connotation by writers and philosophers such as Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin (Lenin, 2010). They opposed the imperial policies of people such as the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, Christopher Columbus and the Crusaders, as they claimed that imperialism was used to represent capitalist greed that was associated with evil political powers, aggressiveness, domination, slavery and economic control over one group of people by another. They also claimed that colonialism was based on ideas of superiority, authority, wealth and unequal human relationships, and that it exploited valuable resources of the nation that was conquered (Painter and Jeffrey, 2009: 170–175; James and Nairn, 2006). The concept of ‘White supremacy’ was introduced during the colonisation process in the seventeenth century, centring on the belief that in many aspects White people (excluding White Jews) were superior to people of other races, and that they should politically, economically and socially rule non-Whites (Wildman, 1996).

Some people have argued that imperialism was justified, for example, John Hobson (2005: 154) who claimed that the earth should be governed, influenced and developed by races that can do this work best, that is, White people, who had developed strong economies, were the most powerful in politics, were able to introduce technologies and public transport, and improve the building of roads and infrastructure. Communication

also became much more advanced with the invention of the telegraph, which contributed to an expansion of economic growth, alongside Europe's advance in military technology and weaponry, such as machine guns and chemical weapons that gave European populations an advantage over their opponents in less-developed and poorer countries who continued to fight with arrows and swords (Adas and Stearns, 2008: 54–58).

Edward Said (1977) analysed the works of various Orientalists, such as Balzac, Baudelaire and Lautréamont, arguing that they helped to shape a societal fantasy of European racial superiority and provided a biased portrayal of the Orient. Nineteenth-century Orientalist painters, writers and other artists were commissioned by elite Europeans and North Americans to depict patronising, prejudiced and biased perceptions of Africa, the Middle East, East Asia, Islam and foreign cultures, and had their works displayed to the western public who were educated and influenced by them. Other scholarly critics (Ibn Warraq, 2007; Halliday, 1993:145–163) have also opposed these art forms as being stereotypical and portraying people in a negative way, presenting African, Arab and Muslim societies, in particular those found in deserts, tropical environments, mountains and forests, as uncivilised, static and undeveloped, unlike societies in the West that were ascribed as being far more developed, rational and superior in all aspects. They also agreed that these artists deconstructed the reality of what they found, wrote it anew and did not portray the Orient in its full glory or fairly, but rather with an imaginary imperialistic vision of how they wished the East to be perceived. Colonisation was thus perceived to be a 'civilising mission' on account of the racist and anti-Islamic attitudes of European imperialists and their deep desire to westernise the world and according to Said, an 'us and them' binary social relationship was created that divided the world into the 'Occident' and 'Orient', in which 'the East' was inferior to 'the West'.

One of the main tools used by imperialists was cartography, the art, science and technology of 'making maps' to serve political means (Bassett, 1994: 316–355; Harley, 1989: 2). For example, Europe's division and occupation of Arab Muslim (Middle-Eastern) territories belonging to the Ottoman Empire began after its fall in the First World War (1914–1918). In 1949 the Commonwealth was created, comprising countries that were ruled directly or indirectly by Britain. Some of these countries became self-governing while retaining Britain's monarch as Head of State and shared

the same history, language, culture and national identity (Painter and Jeffrey, 2009). The colonial era started to end by the late 1950s during the period of the global Cold War when Britain and France withdrew from the majority of their colonial territories, as a result of bankruptcy from the world wars and anti-colonial uprisings. By the mid-1970s most Muslim territories had gained independence and established independent nation-states, but the Islamic ideal of Muslims speaking one language (Arabic) and belonging to one *Ummah* (the global Muslim community) has continued to exist and has been a central demand of Islamic movements. The concept of the *Ummah* calls Muslims not only to unite across national boundaries but to place Islam above all national and other identities in their everyday lives. Despite the *Ummah*, however, the influences of colonialism have continued to shape the economies, politics and societies of Muslims in their countries, on account of the spread of colonialist languages, literature, culture, ideas of social hierarchies, nationalism and educational institutions that have endangered the socio-cultural roots of indigenous peoples who have struggled in the post-colonialist era to establish a new identity (Milton-Edwards, 2006:17; Duranti, 2006: 487; Ismail and Ismail, 1991:58). The ideology that colonisers are racially and socially superior also appears to be significant in Asia and the Middle East where 'Whiteness' is still prized today. It is an important element many people consider when choosing a marriage partner, to produce fair and beautiful children (Perry, 2004).

Black Africans in particular were placed at the bottom of the racial hierarchy after Asians and Arabs, and were thought by the colonisers to be physically inferior, backward and barbaric, best used as slaves for labour. This led to the African Diaspora and Africans' forced involvement in the slave trade during the eighteenth century. Crops such as sugar cane, tobacco, coffee and cotton required an unlimited and cheap supply of field labourers and strong backs to assure timely production for the European market, and African slaves, men and women alike, offered the solution (Hazell, 2012; Hall, 1994; Davidson, 1961). Abolitionists, feminists, Quakers and protestors in both Britain and the United States fought for the freedom of slaves, which eventually led to Britain's abolition of the African slave trade in 1808 but it was not until 1838 that slavery, as a practice throughout the British Empire was abolished, and the United States followed suit in 1865. However, this resulted in a shortage of labourers, which prompted the contracting of servants who consented to work for European employers in return for a wage that was better than the wage they received in their homeland (Sheridan, 1994). Despite the legal abolition of slavery, Africans in America and

Europe continued to suffer from discrimination and racism, especially during the Great Depression in the 1930s when they faced unemployment of over fifty per cent in comparison to thirty per cent of Whites. Africans were given the most dangerous, dirty and unpleasant jobs in return for wages that were at least thirty per cent below those of unskilled White workers. As a result, poverty triggered a rapid rise in prostitution and crime, as many resorted to theft to put food on the table (Watkins, 2009).

In the nineteenth century, workers from colonial countries settled in Britain to achieve a 'better material life' despite the long working hours and the hostile attitudes of much of the British public towards immigration and ethnic groups. Many of these early immigrants were Muslims who were recruited as sailors by the British East India Company for enterprises trading mainly from the Indian subcontinent and Yemen, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 for trade. They were regular visitors to ports such as Liverpool, which resulted in the establishment of the first Muslim communities in these places. They often took local women as wives, opened mosques and businesses, such as Indian takeaways, and eventually became British citizens, having families, and integrating their culture and way of life in various towns and cities. They attempted to create a new identity for themselves that combined British values, Islamic beliefs, values and morals and various Arab and Asian cultural practices in a western society, which was not always easy (Fisher, 2006). It can be said that immigration has changed the ethnic composition of Britain; by the early twentieth century there were over 70,000 Indians living in Britain, many of whom were recruited to join the British army and to help ease the labour shortage that resulted from the Second World War (ONS, 2010). Post-colonial Muslim immigration greatly contributed to the economy, especially after the Great Depression, owing to the opening of new businesses and the availability of cheap labour jobs and skilled workers who helped to develop and build urban towns and cities. Post-colonial immigration also contributed towards the spread of Islam in Britain, and the growth of the Muslim population, as a result of high birth rates, which national statistics have shown are higher than those of non-Muslims (Kerbaj, 2009).

1.3 The Global War on Terror

Alongside the colonial and racial attitudes that the Muslim immigrants faced from the host society, the 'war on terror' that was declared by US president George W. Bush to

‘defend civilisation’, as a result of the 9/11 attacks on the US in 2001, contributed greatly towards shaping a more negative opinion about Muslims, which increased their suffering as a minority group in the West, as they became labelled as potentially dangerous people (Chossudovsky, 2005). The term ‘war on terror’ was primarily focused on countries and Muslims associated with Islamic terrorism organizations including Al-Qaeda, who were claimed to be responsible for the attacks, which led to the quick invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 in pursuit of Osama Bin Laden and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Somalia in 2006 and more recently the air-strike attacks in Syria against ISIS (a.k.a. Da’esh, a self-proclaimed Islamist State of Iraq and Syria) in March 2016.

British and American Muslims alike became increasingly discriminated against, which led to a public depiction of Muslims as either being terrorists or supportive of terrorism (Sardar, 2002: 51). The religious and cultural distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim part of British society was also increasingly exaggerated, which created a new dilemma for Muslims who felt victimized by the new anti-terror government policies. They also had to deal with the new and various types of Islamophobia and racial discriminations that occupied the centre of British public space alongside the heightened pressure, threats and consequences that came after the more recent 7/7 suicide bomb attacks in 2005 in central London, which targeted civilians (see 4.2.3). As a result, a climate of fear had been created among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, which triggered various security and social problems including regular attacks on those who appeared or were known to be Muslims. It can thus be argued that the continuous ‘war on terror’ both outside and within a western context is a continued imperialist ideology and effort to civilize a ‘non-civilised nation’ in order to ‘improve’ the society and establish harmony, which encourages people to accept restraints upon Muslims in order to safeguard their own security. Muslim individuals and organisations have since made the effort to present Islam in a more positive and peaceful manner to the British public by organizing Islamic awareness events in order to help decrease the numbers of attacks, misunderstandings and hostility towards innocent Muslims.

It can also be argued that Orientalist stereotypes of the cultures and values of the Muslim and Eastern world have served, and continue to serve, as justification for the ongoing colonial ambitions and imperial endeavours of the American and European powers. For example, Muslim Arabs in the Middle East continue to be perceived as

valuable oil suppliers, which was another reason behind the invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example. Crimes shown in the media, crude drawings and caricatures of the Islamic world, The Prophet Muhammad and Arabs also continue to be presented in such a way as to make the Middle East vulnerable to military and public aggression. For example, this perception was exacerbated when a member of the Islamist group ISIS cruelly filmed himself beheading British aid worker Alan Henning in Syria in 2014, as a way of punishing British Prime Minister David Cameron for his British Foreign Policy in Muslim countries. Another incident is when Muslims retaliated and attacked those who offended Islam, as demonstrated in January 2015 when masked Muslim gunmen killed cartoonists and members of staff working for the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris that published offensive images of The Prophet Muhammad.

1.4 Early English Muslim Converts to Islam

Conversions to Islam also contributed to the rising Muslim population in Britain. A notable early example was the Englishman William Henry Quilliam, a Liverpool solicitor who embraced Islam in 1887 and ultimately became responsible for something of a religious revolution in Britain, as he inspired many other English men and women to convert as well (Geaves, 2010). Quilliam came from a conservative Christian background and had a Victorian, upper-middle-class upbringing. A trip to Morocco in 1887 proved critical in his religious journey after he was attracted to the social life of Moroccan Muslims. The Oriental culture at the time was also of interest to other Europeans, who converted to Islam as a result of being attracted to the social lifestyle, fashions, furnishings, architecture, literature and an Islamic way of life, and who viewed Islam as a rational religion (Neumueller, 2012: 58). However, as a result of the negative and biased Orientalist depictions of Arab and Middle Eastern societies, Victorians perceived the conversion of someone of Quilliam's class and background to Islam to be a great insult and betrayal of the prestigious society he belonged to.

In 1889, Quilliam bought a terraced house, converting it into Britain's first mosque and Muslim institute with its own printing press and orphanage. He attracted nearly 500 followers, many of whom were highly educated, aristocratic and prominent individuals, as well as others from the working class, through his successful *dawah* campaigns (the practice or policy of preaching, proselytising and inviting people to Islam) and ways of

integrating Islamic beliefs and British values. Muslim converts such as Quilliam primarily looked for similarities between Islam and Christianity to make Islam more socially acceptable and to build bridges between both communities so as not to dislocate western culture (Ansari, 2004:15). The challenge of the first English Muslims was to reproduce Islam in a new cultural space, which led to the first western Muslim communities being established in Liverpool, Norwich, Manchester and London that promoted and encouraged the belief that Jesus was not a son of God but a prophet like Muhammad. For some converts, being a Muslim was presented as being a 'better Christian', and their message was delivered in a vocabulary familiar to British understanding. For example, the Woking mosque built in 1889 was referred to as the 'Muslim Church' and The Quran as the 'Muslim Bible'.

According to Ron Geaves (2010: 292), most of Quilliam's followers were people who rejected capitalism and had religious and intellectual doubts regarding Christian teachings. Quilliam believed that English Muslims adopted the faith because they believe it to be true, and he encouraged them to hold on to their western identities and cultures as a way of showing the world that it is possible to be both Muslim and western at the same time. He also demonstrated that Islam was primarily a religion of the mind, soul and heart, and that it was possible to live in an Islamic manner without needing to join a Muslim immigrant community. As a result, English converts freed Islam from the strong Arabian culture attached to it and presented it as a universal religion, which encouraged other people to convert and brought Muslims from different cultures together in one society. This prevented the isolation of both converts and other ethnic Muslims from the mainstream British Muslim society and encouraged Muslims to live in peace together. The involvement of English Muslims in the *Ummah* benefited heritage Muslims (people who were born and raised as Muslims by Muslim parents) in the sense that they were the main bridge of communication between them and the rest of British society. The early White English Muslim identity was perceived as a strong and unique identity by both heritage Muslims and non-Muslims alike, despite the negative image people had of immigrants and the Orient, as it displayed a personal choice to convert and commit to Islam; which made many converts more sincere and devout Muslims than those raised as Muslims from birth.

Lady Evelyn Cobbold, daughter to the seventh Earl of Dunmore, fell in love with Islam, the Arabic language and Arab culture during her family travels to Egypt and Algeria,

places that influenced her thoughts and beliefs. She said:

I am often asked when and why I became a Muslim. I can only reply that I do not know the precise moment when the truth of Islam dawned on me. It seems that I have always been Muslim. This is not so strange when one remembers that Islam is the natural religion that a child left to itself would develop. Indeed, as a western critic once described it, 'Islam is the religion of common sense' (Jawad, 2013:46).

Lady Evelyn is known as the first English woman to perform the *Hajj* pilgrimage (an obligatory pilgrimage to The *Ka'ba* (the sacred house of God in Makkah, Saudi Arabia) during the last Islamic lunar month of *Thul-Hijja*. This is one of the five pillars of Islam and needs to be performed at least once in a lifetime) in 1934, and was an influential character who also portrayed a balanced British Muslim female identity of which she was very proud (Jawad, 2013:49).

It is considered an important religious duty for Muslims to create an awareness and encourage the spread of Islam among non-Muslims in the West to guide them to what they believe is the right path (Quran, 41: 33); however, the intentions, techniques and strategies employed in the *dawah* process have often differed among people. For example, inviting people to learn about Islam so they can embrace it as a way of life and belief is perceived by many heritage Muslims as a challenge rather than a good deed, especially in western countries where conversion numbers are displayed as trophies (Suleiman, 2013: 4). *Dawah* is often ineffective for many Britons if they cannot see how Islam can be integrated into their everyday lives without having to adopt a Muslim culture and make drastic changes with which they are not comfortable or prepared for.

Marmaduke Pickthall was the first English Muslim to translate The Quran and make it accessible in English to non-Muslims. He converted in 1914 after visiting the Middle East and Turkey, and later moved to India (Shaheen, 2004; Pickthall, 1937). His translation was published in 1930, entitled *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran*. However he stressed that the word of *Allah* (the Arabic term for 'The One God'), that is, The Quran, could not be fully translated and knew, as someone who had mastered the Arabic language, that it was better for people to learn Arabic to understand its full meaning. Pickthall's translation was considered by traditional Muslim scholars to be a

pure and authentic source of work, as previous translations had been written by Christian missionaries who were known for their anti-Muslim bias and prejudices (Kidwai, 1987; Sale, 1880). For example, Alexander Ross, chaplain to Charles I (r. 1625–49) and the first Christian to embark on the translation process, subtitled his work in 1649 as ‘newly Englished for the satisfaction for all that desire to look into the Turkish vanities’ (Elimam, 2013: 11–12). It was claimed by Muslim scholars to be a poor representation of the meaning of The Quran, as Ross did not speak Arabic and his interpretation relied on Andrew Du Ryer’s problematic French translation, a language in which Ross was not fluent. According to George Sale (1880), Du Ryer’s translation is full of mistakes on every page and contains frequent transpositions, omissions and additions. Muslim scholars, including Pickthall, also found the English translations of Orientalists such as Richard Bell, who published a translated Quran in 1937, to be problematic, as he changed the order of the verses that altered the original meaning (Elimam, 2013: 11).

Pickthall claimed that he came across inaccurate accounts of events and lack of faithfulness to the intended message in non-Muslim interpretations and translations of The Quran, including criticism of The Prophet Muhammad and his Companions that was found in many of the footnotes. He produced a more objective translation in a language understandable to a wider audience at the time, and broke down prejudices in the process. He understood that there was an obligation to know the meaning of The Quran, and successfully provided a more tolerant image of Islam through his translations and interpretations to oppose the depictions of the Orientalists. Both Quilliam and Pickthall believed that peaceful and successful integration of Islam in Britain had to be part of something culturally British (Hadhrami, 1998). Conflicts over translation and interpretation issues often arise between scholars in different parts of the world owing to varying Islamic opinions on Islamic subjects and their context. For example, Pickthall adopted a moderate approach that involved both a rejection of extremism and being too liberal (that is, diluting the meaning of The Quran) in his translations, which benefited western Muslims; whereas the ‘religious’ opinions of the leaders of Islamic fundamentalist political movements, such as Al-Qaeda, The Taliban and ISIS often exaggerated cultural and religious practices, many of which are considered by the majority of Muslim scholars to be extremely oppressive, radical and go against Islamic teachings. Pickthall’s translation and interpretation helped and guided Muslims to integrate their Islamic beliefs within a western society. In general,

though, Muslim scholars are agreed that The Quran is better understood in Arabic: thus translations are provided only as a helpful tool for *dawah*, study and understanding of the meaning of the intended message (Ayoub, 1997: xi).

Such has been the increase in Muslim communities, as well as greater academic interest in Islam and an awareness of the flaws of poor translations, that there has been a growing demand in recent decades for more comprehensible translations and interpretations that are authentic, free from bias and based on the work of Pickthall. Modern day Muslims have struggled to understand Pickthall's early translation of The Quran, which was written in Victorian English, but it has since been simplified into contemporary English, and made available to all in Islamic libraries, mosques and bookshops, alongside the contemporary works of Saheeh International and Abdullah Yusuf Ali that are also considered by Muslim scholars to be neutral, free from sectarian bias, linguistic mistakes and political annotation.

The works of Quilliam and Pickthall have greatly contributed to Islamic teachings, and have left an intellectual legacy in terms of how Islam can be understood and implemented in different cultural societies. They are used up to the present day and have attracted many people to the faith. However, despite the positive changes that these works have made on Islam, they have been unable to overcome the bias and prejudices that many people continue to have towards Islam and Muslims. As a result, modern western scholars, such as Hamza Yusuf and Timothy Winter, strive to present Islam in a more balanced manner than it is portrayed by the media, to promote and regain the particular intellect and Islamic understanding that had flourished among earlier converts and which had established social harmony and ethnic co-existence. Their aims are to bridge the gap between Muslim communities and mainstream British society, encourage integration and to shape an Islam based on universal Islamic principles, human rights, moral conduct and British values.

More recently, there has been an increase in the level of public interest within the media regarding conversion to Islam, with high-profile conversions of well-known and famous people, such as boxer Mike Tyson and journalist Lauren Booth (Tony Blair's sister-in-law), increasingly covered and discussed. Yet this has often been looked upon negatively following the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks, both of which have had a large impact on how the British public perceive British converts. For example, a recent

Channel Four documentary entitled *My Son the Jihadi* (October, 2015) alongside *My Brother the Islamist*, aired on BBC Three in April 2011, provided very negative, biased and stereotypical representations of modern-day White British converts to Islam, as they focused on a minority of converts who join radical Muslim groups and become extremists. Another example can be found in the film *Four Lions* that was released in cinemas in 2010 and provided a comedic representation of a supposedly typical, brainwashed, irrational and radical Muslim convert who joins Asian Muslims in plotting suicide bombings and creating martyrdom videos. Regular news articles on Muslim converts' involvement in extremist groups and attacks have fostered negative stereotypes and prejudice towards converts, who are often identified by their Islamic dress and Islamic opinions. However, despite such negativity, people who join Islam make a personal decision, seemingly uninfluenced by such stereotypes or prejudice.

According to a global report by Pew Research on the future of world religions, Islam is the world's fastest-growing religious group. 'While the world's population is projected to grow thirty-five per cent in the coming decades, the number of Muslims is expected to increase by seventy-three per cent – from 1.6 billion in 2010 to 2.8 billion in 2050' and 'will likely surpass Christians as the world's largest religious group' (Lipka and Hackett, 2015). The UK Census 2011 report also shows that while most people who associate themselves with a religion are Christians, Islam is the fastest-growing religion in Britain. Between 2001 and 2009, the Muslim population increased almost ten times faster than its non-Muslim counterpart (Kerbaj, 2009), reaching an estimated 2.7 million by 2011 (ONS UK Census, 2011), that is, some 4.8 per cent of the overall population. The figure has almost doubled since 2001, when the Muslim population was an estimated 1.5 million (ONS UK Census, 2001). The number of mosques in Britain has also risen to accommodate the increasing number of worshippers. An updated online database in May 2014 (UK Mosque Statistics, 2015) lists 2,349 locations in its mosques directory: of which around 1,600 are official mosques, Muslim prayer rooms and spaces shared with other faiths. Forty-five per cent of mosques are reported to be Sunni; 5.8 per cent Sufi; 4.2 per cent Shia; 2.8 per cent Salafi; and 1.8 per cent Ahmadiyya. Mosque managers were found to be mainly of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin.

The White Muslim population count in the 2001 Census was estimated at 61,000, which implies that by 2010, according to Kevin Brice's (2010) report, the number had almost doubled. This, which is currently the only extensive demographic report available on

British converts, found that London accounts for almost forty per cent of the Muslim population in Britain and over fifty per cent of its White and Black converts to Islam. British converts are estimated to make up four to five per cent of the Muslim population in Britain, and the number is rising continuously. However, organisations such as Solace and The Quilliam Foundation are also reporting an increase in the numbers of Britons leaving Islam, as a result of not being able to cope with life as Muslims in Britain.

1.5 Organisation of Chapters

Chapter II, the literature review, sets out scholarly theories from previous studies on identity and religious conversions. It explores the theoretical meanings of conversion and de-conversion, and discusses the various scholarly frameworks and models used to analyse identity formations, conversion and de-conversion journeys.

Chapter III explains how the data was collected and analysed. A general discussion of fieldwork strategy, reflexivity and the progressive development of the semi-structured interviews are provided.

Chapter IV discusses the start of the conversion process, participant experiences that begin with childhood, and the context in which a religious conversion occurs. The chapter also explores the types of problems individuals may face in this stage.

Chapter V explores the quest and encounter stages of the conversion journey. It differentiates between the types of seekers, how individuals attempt to solve their problems and crises, and their attitudes towards God and religion. *Dawah* techniques and influences are also discussed.

Chapter VI analyses how individuals interact with Muslims to gain a broader understanding of the faith. The influences Muslims have on potential converts in this stage are investigated alongside any observational research and attempts individuals make to pursue Islamic knowledge before making the decision to convert.

Chapter VII explores the commitment stage and any resulting de-conversion issues from a former religious group. Reactions of the non-Muslim society, family members and friends are also examined, alongside any positive experiences and/or resulting consequences, such as, disownment.

Chapter VIII focuses on the development of a Muslim identity and lifestyle changes. It considers the negotiation of faith, race and a national-religious identity, and how individuals perceive, understand and express it. The social integration of converts in Muslim and non-Muslim British societies is also explored.

Chapter VIII discusses the common challenges, problems and consequences that arise during their time as Muslims, such as isolation, issues with Muslims, religious difficulties, lack of support, discrimination, social integration issues and Islamophobia.

Chapter X is concerned with significant Islamic marriage and divorce issues among the female participants that led some to leave Islam. Feminism, patriarchy, gender roles and Islamic understandings of marital relationships and rights are explored, alongside the challenges of raising Muslim children.

Chapter XI investigates Islamic education and how it is obtained, implemented into converts' daily lives and used to construct a British Muslim identity. It also explores how their understanding of Islam influences their actions, decisions and motives and suggests an Islamic educational procedure, based on the experiences of all the participants that may contribute towards an enjoyable conversion experience.

Chapter XII highlights the main issues, challenges and hardships that encouraged individuals to either consider disaffiliation or disaffiliate, as a result of not being able to cope with life as Muslims. The social and personal consequences resulting from apostasy, along with scholarly opinions on the subject, will be explored, alongside disaffiliates' attempts to move on with their lives and remove the elements of their former Muslim identities from their British identity.

Chapter XIII presents conclusions drawn from the significant findings that were extracted from the participant narratives, and highlights major themes and issues. Suggestions for further research are also made.

Chapter II

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The study of religious conversions has been prevalent since the early twentieth century. Although many researchers have undertaken different religious conversion studies within sociological and psychological frameworks, there have been only a few rigorous empirical studies of the experiences and processes of conversion and de-conversion to and from Islam in particular. In this literature review, traditional religious conversion is explored in terms of its nature and theoretical meaning, its personal and social significance for converts and in terms of conversion and de-conversion as processes of identity change. Accordingly, I have chosen to concentrate on the theories and frameworks of specific scholars relevant to these concepts who offer a deep understanding of the phenomenon of conversion to and from various religious groups, and each focuses on different aspects of the processes.

2.2 Theoretical Approaches to Religious Identity Formation

Modern studies consider identity as a process of ‘becoming’ rather than simply ‘being’ (Sanders, 2002; Dillon, 1999: 250; Frable, 1997), as it can shift over time because of personal experiences, a change in context, beliefs, worldview and social positions. While some scholars focus on the links identity structuring has with society and the individual’s relationship with others (Howard, 2000; Turner, 1978), other scholars (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Cahill, 1986) highlight the on-going processes, selections and negotiations of identity constructions alongside the elements, factors, gender implications and processes that contribute to the construction of an identity and distinct personality. The characteristics by which someone is recognised are often perceived as their identity, which reflects their own sense of self, uniqueness and affiliation with a particular society or group (Peek, 2005: 216–217). It was considered important to understand the motives, benefits and causes behind an identity transformation to make sense of the verbal, physical and mental changes of an individual, who may be adopting a new identity, shedding an old identity, or altering an identity to better suit a lifestyle

and belief (Vyran et al., 2003: 381).

The use of the term ‘religious identity’ to refer to the identification of an individual with a religious tradition and beliefs was first introduced by Hans Mol (1979, 1976) and later expounded by Jeffrey R. Seul (1999). These scholars argue that religious beliefs often shape the daily lives of individuals alongside their behaviour and attitudes, and greatly influence how people perceive themselves, their society and the world, making it a major part of their identity. Daniel Moulin (2013: 5) suggested that religious identities are constructed by individuals drawing from, endorsing, or opposing, established religious traditions, their systems of representation and forms of recognition. Identities are often constructed across contexts in which being a member of a faith group means different things to different people, and so religious identities are represented in various ways, either via the use of religious symbols such as wearing a cross or *hijab* (headscarf and body covering for a Muslim woman), or via their character (Jacobson, 1997; Ajrouch, 2004). Scot McKnight (2002) claims that conversion is a process of religious change and identity formation, sometimes more sudden than others, and acknowledges that identity change can happen over different periods of time, ranging from days to years. Chana Ullman (1989: vii) defines religious conversion psychologically as ‘the occasion of a dramatic shift in a person’s life and in core elements of the self’ whereas James Downton (1980) opposes this and, like Glynis Breakwell (1986), believes that individuals prefer to make gradual and subtle, rather than abrupt, changes to their lifestyles so they can continue to belong in a society where the love of family and friends is found.

Studies of religious identity development in the psychological tradition (Rich and Schachter, 2012; Schachter, 2005; Marcia, 1980, 1966) use Erik Erikson’s (1968) Freudian adolescent identity development theory, which posited adolescence – and its accompanying psychosocial ‘identity crisis’ – as a critical time in the human lifecycle. The development of an identity is an ever-evolving process determined by experiences, relationships, beliefs and genetics that form who an individual is at a given time (Erikson, 1968). Like Sigmund Freud (1923), James Marcia (1966) and Lewis Rambo (1993), Erikson believes that the crises and conflicts individuals experience throughout their lifetime, especially in the adolescence and young adulthood period, greatly contribute to the development of a new identity.

Erikson's (1958) theory model of psychosocial development has eight stages that analyse the nature of crises because they involve the psychological needs of the individual (psycho) that conflict with the needs of society (social). According to his theory, successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and characteristic strengths that help to deal with and solve crises, and failing to complete these stages may result in a reduced ability to complete the others and a more unhealthy personality and sense of self if left unresolved.

Erikson's model was found to be not entirely suitable as a framework for this study as it involves a detailed analysis of children's physical, emotional and psychological behaviour in the first four stages. Nevertheless, the model was valuable in that it helped to create a better understanding and analysis of the later stages, particularly from stage five 'Identity versus Role Confusion', which involves adolescents attempting to understand who they are to form an identity they will build on as they get older. Adolescents will consider their own beliefs, education, religious upbringing, family, heritage, gender, society, friendship groups, future profession and who they aspire to be. Some of these elements may be accepted, while others are rejected, such as cultural and religious beliefs. A religious identity is often formed from childhood, and associated with the parents' religion or close friends in the adolescence stage. However, later in life individuals may abandon their parents and friends' religion if they find it lacks logic, or may explore other faiths that may better suit their beliefs and understanding of the world. It is suggested that the changing socio-cultural situation is encouraging individuals to develop a unique identity based on their aspirations, rather than on their parents' identity, which was the norm in previous generations. The relationship between parents and adolescents is therefore important in determining what identity individuals will choose to have. For example, if the relationship involves abuse and a lack of trust, individuals may be more likely to adopt other identities that are not associated with the beliefs, culture and mindset of the parents. Religious or secular schooling and university education also greatly influence the ways in which people think, analyse experiences, and understand themselves and the world (Graham, 2006; Hunsberger et al., 2001).

Once individuals have decided on the identity they are comfortable with, they move on to the next stage of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, 'Intimacy versus Isolation' in young adulthood, where they will form strong friendships with those who have similar identities and interests. This stage is known to Rambo (1993) as the

‘interaction stage’. If individuals struggle to find suitable identities at this stage they will have issues regarding their future and who they feel they are, which may lead to isolation, instability and psychological problems. Therefore, the identity formation stage is deemed to be a crucial stage in life. James Marcia (1966) later refined and extended Erikson’s model, focusing mainly on adolescent development, a time when people begin to mature, experiment with identities in a variety of life domains, think independently and apply reason. This study draws on aspects of Erikson’s and Marcia’s studies; the focus, however, is not solely on the adolescence stage but also on the identity development of young adults who decide to convert and adopt a new identity after coming across a new faith group.

A self-chosen identity is based on an individual’s beliefs, ideas, aspirations, understanding of the world and attitudes. As a result, many different identities can come together in one person and it is up to the person concerned to decide how he or she wishes to negotiate and/or represent them all as one. Individuals may also be influenced by both their culture and religion that may have conflicting values, which makes the integration of them in one identity a difficult task. Identity integration theorists, such as Catherine Amiot et al., (2007), and Veronica Benet-Martinez and Jana Haritatos (2005) suggest that the more individuals perceive the different elements of their identities to be compatible, the higher the level of identity integration will be, as it protects the psychological wellbeing of individuals and gives them social confidence.

A religious identity is based on the beliefs and practices held by individuals that they wish to represent in their actions, physical appearance, attitudes and opinions. However, not all people with religious identities are true believers; many are connected to political, cultural or ethnic social groups that use religion to reflect and justify various attitudes and practices. True believers attempt to represent their faith in all aspects of their lives, whereas those who are not will often portray an outward physical identity that signifies their membership of a particular community. Kevin Vyran, Patricia Alder and Peter Alder (2003) suggest that various situational, personal and social identities are invoked, based on the specific costs and rewards associated with those identities, and that these are the motivating factors behind identity transformation. This is commonly found in political or religious communities, where converts need to adopt a specific culture and lifestyle to belong and receive continuous support. Nancy Ammerman (2003) argues that religious identities are actively constructed by individuals and groups

in our social world, in addition to being defined, challenged, accepted, or rejected by other people, communities and institutions. In some cases, the actions and thoughts of others can create social influences that can affect the identities of individuals, especially if the reactions are negative, which pressures some people to either change or live with 'closeted' identities if they feel rejected and unsafe.

Abraham Maslow's (1943) studies of human behaviour produced a theory that was presented as a hierarchy of general needs to explain healthy human growth and development stages. Maslow used the terms 'physiological', 'safety', 'belongingness' and 'love', 'esteem', 'self-actualisation', and 'self-transcendence' to describe the stages that human motivations generally move through. His theory suggests that the most basic level of needs have to be met before individuals are able to move on to and desire the next stage, and that this may happen during different periods of individuals' lives. Maslow, along with Erikson and Marcia, emphasises that individuals need to be accepted in their families, communities, social groups and country, and be loved, supported and wanted to grow in confidence and reach the self-actualisation stage in which they settle with identities they are happy with and are able to freely express without anticipating any negativity or being discriminated and unfairly labelled by others. It is suggested that acceptance is crucial for individuals to have the full freedom, choice and confidence to express their new identities.

Glynis Breakwell's (1986: 24) model identifies four identity principles that guide the identity structure of an individual over time, and which changes according to the situation of the individual. They are (1) continuity across time and situation; (2) uniqueness or distinctiveness from others; (3) feeling confident and in control of one's life; and (4) feelings of self-worth or social value. The continuity stage allows individuals to find similarities between their identity and the new social identity to be integrated. For example, individuals who were raised as Christians may anticipate that some of their own beliefs and characteristics will also apply to Muslims in general. This self-anchoring process will enhance the continuity principle of identity, providing that a psychological bridge can be formed between past, present and future identities. However, if individuals become disappointed after conversion, it is likely that they will suffer from a loss of self-esteem and return to their former identity. If the experiences are positive, the individual will go to the third and fourth stages where the new identity is no longer perceived as being new and foreign, but instead becomes an increasing part

of the 'self', and will develop a stronger sense of personal control and identity. Breakwell argues that the identities are context-dependent, meaning that they change according to the environment in which the individual is in, which makes it more complex, as individuals continuously need to move between multiple social identities (such as being female, a mother, a wife, and a teacher), of which one is the primary and dominant identity. For some people, this may not be an issue, depending on how they negotiate their identities in different contexts, whereas others who struggle with this may suffer psychologically and emotionally.

Vignoles, Chrysochoou and Breakwell (2002) later proposed two additional identity motives, namely belonging, which refers to individuals' need to maintain feelings of closeness to a community and acceptance by other people, alongside a meaning or purpose to their life. Breakwell proposes that, if satisfied, these six principles will facilitate the integration of different identities and will allow individuals to move forward and establish strong, healthy and grounded identities that are accepted by those around them.

This study examines the identity processes using Breakwell's model as a theoretical framework, as it was perceived to be the most relevant for studying and analysing the formation and integration of both a religious and national (British Muslim) identity in a variety of contexts. The six principles in total are examined in relation to their relevance in the conversion journey, alongside some common elements found in other theories mentioned, such as experiencing a crisis, that will add value to the analysis and contribute to a better understanding of an Islamic conversion and formation of a religious identity. This framework is relevant to the information provided by the participants and fits well with Rambo's (1993) stages of conversion, which will be used to analyse the conversion journeys.

2.2.1 Postcolonial Identities

Although this thesis does not focus on the development of nationalism and postcolonial identities among heritage Muslims, it was found necessary to understand how converts perceive their British identities throughout the conversion journey and whether colonialism and heritage Muslims influenced their understanding of how a Muslim

identity is presented and how to live as Muslims in the West.

In the years since postcolonial migration began, British national identity among Muslims has been transformed by the rise of multiculturalism (the preservation of different cultures or cultural identities within a unified society, as a state or nation) in Britain (Gilroy, 2004; Hall, 2004), which has produced three generations of British-born Muslims belonging to various ethnic minorities. Pakistanis and other South Asian Muslims make up the majority of the Muslim population in Britain that has grown in recent years, together with refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and, more recently, Syria (Khomeini, 2015). The rapid growth of the Muslim population has created a fear among traditional Britons concerning the future of Britain and their culture.

With considerable immigration after The Second World War, Britain became an increasingly ethnically and racially diverse state that led to the establishment of race relations policies that reflected the principles of multiculturalism (Favell, 2001). Ed West (2013) claims how immigrants prefer to stick together because of racism, fear of racial violence and bonds of community, and argues that if diversity enriches and strengthens communities there is no need for them to integrate, as if they do so this will reduce diversity. In 2011 the British Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that in many cities today, despite the growing cultural diversity, the social barriers between different ethnic groups have persisted, as racism and multiculturalism are perceived as forms of tribalism that promote the isolation of individuals from mainstream British society based on their racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic characteristics. He claimed that British Muslims in particular must subscribe to mainstream values of freedom and equality, as the doctrine of multiculturalism has 'failed' and will be abandoned due to decreased amounts of cultural and religious tolerance. He mentioned that different communities would be able to live according to their own values and traditions as long as they stayed within the law to help defeat Muslim extremist ideologies and values that lead some to engage in terrorism and the oppression of others (Kirkup, 2011).

Stuart Hall (2000) claims that increasing diversity within national societies needs to accommodate different sets of demands by various cultural groups that have different policies regarding equality, which poses a question of whether cultural difference should be restricted to the private sphere or whether it should be publicly recognised

and have a place in political life. Feminists (for example, Phillips, 2007) have argued that some ethnic cultures in Britain promote patriarchy and a more 'backward' attitude towards women and are therefore not welcomed or tolerated. Religion is another challenging point, the question being how far secularism can allow for the participation of religious minorities in the public sphere (Habermas, 2005). It is suggested that multiculturalism has led to many identity crises faced by Muslim immigrants in the complex conditions of diversity, as they struggle to balance multiple identities and avoid being stereotyped and identified as terrorists and problematic citizens. Parekh (2005, 2000) described Britain as a community of communities, a post-nation in which there are freedoms to express various cultural and religious values and beliefs. However, it is argued that multiculturalism only works if the demands, expressions and visibility of ethnic groups are not 'too' different and rejecting of the values of the host society (Ahmed, 2004). Women wearing *burkas* (the traditional Arab and Asian face veil that may either cover the entire face or reveal the eyes only), for example, challenge the cultural values of the nation, which may result in hostile consequences. Other cultural practices deployed by some Muslims that go against modern western values of personal freedom and human rights, such as honour killings, female circumcision and forced marriages, are also perceived as unwelcome and require the intervention of western laws. However, there are advantages that arise from living in a multicultural society in that it helps people to communicate and learn about different traditions, beliefs and worldviews. This type of intellectual development encourages people to respect and tolerate other groups, which makes them less racist and discriminative.

According to Jeff Lewis (2008) transculturalism, which is defined as 'seeing oneself in the other' (Cuccioletta, 2001:1), contrary to multiculturalism, is rooted in the pursuit to integrate and define shared interests and common values across porous cultural and national boundaries. It can be tested as a means of 'thinking outside the box' of one's homeland and becoming more 'open minded' and educated regarding human life. This would allow for a 'chameleon' sense of self, as individuals could implement many national values without losing their cultural core element in their personal identity. Conceptions of transculturalism are far better at capturing the mutual influence of different cultures on each other than multiculturalism, as they acknowledge the 'hybridity' of postcolonial identities. Therefore, it is suggested that attitudes towards multiculturalism and transculturalism affect the daily lives of people, and their successes and failures reflect on people's views of each other. Noha Nasser (2004) talks

about the way hybrid identities and communities are constituted in postcolonial landscapes and cities by the building of mosques, for example, and other buildings that have cultural design features as a means of redefining and acknowledging the presence of the 'other'. She uses the term 'Kaleido-scapes' to describe the landscapes of migrant groups as a hybrid urban morphology that combines local customs with global or imported elements. An example is that of Edinburgh Central Mosque, which represents a meeting of two different traditions; Highland castle architecture inscribed with Islamic art. The rapid establishment of ethnic stores and exotic halal restaurants have also changed the appearance of traditional British high streets and have contributed towards hybridity in new cultural forms. Bhikhu Parekh's (2000) report *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* has affirmed the idea of Britishness as a plural identity that celebrates difference. Transculturalism is praised by those who believe that social harmony can be achieved by cultural integration, coexistence and creating hybrid identities, as it will help to combat issues that arise from isolated communities, such as terrorism.

It can be argued that the integration of modern-day Muslims is an easier task than it was in the nineteenth century when immigrants were not treated with fairness and equality. They struggled to get used to a new culture and suffered mentally, physically and emotionally as a result of the colonial wars, the destruction of their home lands, their Diaspora, personal sacrifices for a better life abroad and racism, alongside a change of scenery, weather, diet and daily routine. In an attempt to resolve integration issues, early Muslim immigrants built mosques and re-established familiar social and cultural activities in the new host society in order to 'feel more at home' (Kurien, 1998; Rayaprol, 1997). It may be argued that religion can assume greater importance for immigrant and community identity in the West than was the case in their homelands, where religion may have been taken for granted or been less important. The coming together of Muslims as a minority society and on religious terms often lessens the problem of ethnic and national differences between Muslims, as they are brought together through shared worship. However, as the Muslim population increased in Britain, this minority group has been split into ethnic communities and is losing its community values, as western concepts of social categorisation according to wealth and education, alongside racial hierarchies, are implemented and applied. As a result they have had to deal with different types of circumstances and experiences than Muslims who were born and raised in a western society. The post-colonial strangers were treated with hostility, which continues until the present day and is apparent in Islamophobic

attacks, racial abuse and ethnic discrimination or conflicts, especially in small 'White' rural towns (Moosavi, 2011; Tomlinson, 2008). Studies have highlighted that the countryside was, for many people, 'the last bastion of old-fashioned Englishness' that needed to be preserved from the encroachment of the 'evils' of late modernity (University of Leicester, 2011).

It can be seen that Muslims have been undergoing identity transformations since the end of colonisation. The westernisation of new generation British Muslims has caused many to reject various traditional and religious practices that are considered to be 'backward' by the West, and are instead drawn to the new and more 'superior' cultural and scientific systems that appear to be more fair, modern and logical. This is often problematic for members of the older generation who fought to preserve their culture and identities. However, the majority of others continue to negotiate cultural, religious, ethnic and western values in their identities to create one 'hybrid' identity that allows them to integrate and be, in most cases, both productive British citizens and good Muslims at the same time.

The concept of 'hybridity' has become a main focus in studies of postcolonial identities, to be found in, for example, the works of Homi Bhabha (1994), Stuart Hall (1996) and Paul Gilroy (1993). The study of hybridity in contemporary theory and specific societies is linked to globalisation, multiculturalism, religion and ethnicity and its relationship to colonialism/imperialism. In the nineteenth century, hybridity emerged as an important dimension of postcolonial cultures in the West. Gilroy (1993) argues that the slave trade and immigration of Africans who introduced their culture to the host society has been significant to cultural renewal in Europe. Bhabha (1994), however, perceived immigration to be the contamination of imperial ideology, culture, aesthetics and identity by natives who were striking back at imperial domination. In *Black Atlantic* (Gilroy, 1993), an expression of a hybrid identity, which emerges from those who are both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' at the same time, Gilroy emphasises that hybridity can be perceived in subjective ways and that, despite the appalling treatment of Africans by European colonisers, many African immigrants continue to be influenced by western culture and way of life and continue to experience racism and discrimination. Here it should be noted that Kevin Brice (2010) reported an increase in the number of African converts to Islam, which may highlight the need for an identity that is not associated with their history and ethnicity. However, the racism is often accentuated when they

become Muslims, as it is the interplay of identity axes that determine the level of oppression people might face. Various scholars have debated why certain communities highlight and develop religious identities rather than other forms of personal identity. Timothy Smith (1978: 1175) suggests that religion is positively correlated with identity formation, especially among groups that have lost a large part of their identity as a result of colonisation, which may imply that identity achievement is highly related with the internalisation and outward portrayal of religious commitment that gives a group considered 'less privileged' and 'politically and racially weak' a significant amount of authority and power in the establishment of a religious community.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory on hybridization explains how multiculturalism leads to the emergence of a new and improved cultural form. Like Hall and Gilroy, he does not see colonialism as a past, but something that constantly intrudes and transforms the present. An example is found in modern-day British Muslims who abandon traditional clothing, for example, in order to leave behind the 'foreignness' of their former and original identities to be recognised as better, more westernised and integrated versions of postcolonial immigrants. However more traditional Muslims attempt to find ways in which they can live a cultural lifestyle, even if that means confining their lives within the walls of an ethnic community if they fail to find ways of integrating and practising their culture and faith in mainstream British society.

2.2.2 The Relationship Between Religion and Ethnicity

It has been acknowledged by social scientists that there exists a correlation between religion and ethnicity, depending on whether a person perceives ethnicity subjectively or objectively (Oppong, 2013). For example, membership of a religion that is characteristic of one's ethnic group is often associated with the degree of one's ethnic identity (Reitz, 1980). Max Weber (1961) emphasised the importance of religion for differentiating groups of people within nations, as they had different values, ideologies and beliefs, and Timothy Smith (1978) supports this by saying that religions of immigrant groups play an important role in their development of social identity and communities. According to Harold Abramson (1979: 9), religion is invariably an aspect of the ethnic group and claims that it could be the main foundation for ethnicity. He also claims that religion could be one of many ethnic foundations that many ethnic groups

are linked to, and that religion and ethnicity may refer to the same, usually marginalised, tradition. This study focuses on Islam being a religion that many ethnicities are linked to.

The relationship between religion and ethnicity provides different varieties of ethnic-religious or national-religious identities, some of which prioritise religion, while others prioritise nationality or ethnicity. The relationship between religion and ethnicity is often a negotiation between the two. Hugh Heclo (2007) claimed that an ethnic or national group may emphasise religious beliefs as a particularly important attribute: for example, according to many North Americans, a belief in God is an essential requirement for being 'truly' American. Abramson (1979) and Smith (1978) claim that religious communities could eliminate ethnic differences to bring different nations together. A prominent example of this may be seen in the annual *Hajj* pilgrimage in Makkah that gathers over two million Muslim worshippers from around the world. The early Muslims who accepted Islam as a way of life joined the Muslim *Ummah*, which is regarded as a global community of believers that surpasses the borders of ethnic differences. Many Muslim scholars who oppose nationalism supported and defended the concept of the *Ummah* after seeing how nationalism is an egoistic, immoral and material philosophy that caused wars, colonial exploitation and global corruption.

Traditionally, religion played an important role in British society (Beckford, 2010; Smith, 1978), however it was made redundant in the modern world as new secular and scientific systems were developed to replace traditional religious beliefs. The rise of the nation-state and national identities eventually replaced religious ideologies and encouraged a dramatic decline of Christian believers in Britain (see 4.2.2). However, scholars such as Kenichi Ohmae (1995) assert that globalisation now symbolises the end of the nation-state, as this has resulted in the loss of many strong cultural identities that are in many cases associated with race, and that instead nationalism is associated with a feeling of devoted attachment and loyalty to a country.

In *White Nation*, Ghassan Hage (2000) mentions how 'Whiteness' indicates a discourse of nationalism rather than race. The notion of a racially inclusive multicultural national identity was seen to challenge the 'Whiteness' of 'Britishness' (Ahmad and Sardar, 2012: 123). White British Muslim converts who wear Islamic clothing are perceived to have lost the fundamental elements of a 'true' White British identity and have moved

down in the social hierarchy. They are categorised as culturally ‘other’, despite their heritage, as Islam is traditionally associated with ‘non-Whites’ (Suleiman, 2013; Brice, 2010). This shows how race and religion are interrelated, as different beliefs are associated with various ethnic groups. Adopting the religion and/or culture of another ethnic group is often frowned upon by patriotic Britons, as this is perceived to be a betrayal and an outward rejection of a major part of their heritage and culture. To avoid racial problems and abuse, some White converts prefer to join ethnic Muslim communities to be able to live in an Islamic manner. They may learn a new language, such as Arabic or Urdu, and dress in traditional clothing to feel ‘more Muslim’. However, it is suggested that, depending on how individuals understand Islam and choose to present themselves to others, alongside the cultural elements of an identity they prefer to abandon or negotiate, they may be able to create their own western version of a Muslim identity that is less, or not, problematic to others.

It can be argued that co-existence and the ‘coming together’ of different races is needed to overcome divisions and create a harmonious society free from racial discrimination by embracing the sacrifices found in each society and the positive contributions they have made, and make, towards the world.

2.3 Theoretical and Sociological Approaches to Conversion

Contemporary studies have explored conversion in sociological terms, reflected in the theoretical contributions of Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian (2014, 2005, 1999), where conversion is seen as the term for all forms of religious change, whether physical, mental, psychological, emotional or intellectual. Rambo (1993) examined a variety of disciplines – including anthropology, sociology, religious studies and psychology – to establish why people convert. His main focus lay in attempting to understand the factors that contribute to conversion, alongside the effect of the individual’s decision on his or her society. Rambo created his own framework of seven interlinked conversion stages to explain his theory: (1) context, (2) crisis, (3) quest, (4) encounter, (5) interaction, (6) committing and (7) consequences. These stages emphasise the complex set of factors that can affect the individual’s decision-making process, such as marriage, commitment, or the need for spiritual security and social belonging.

The American philosopher William James described conversion as follows: ‘To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion and to gain an assurance’ (James, 1902: 196). Kenneth Pargament’s (1997: 32) definition of spiritual conversion involves ‘the search for significance in ways related to the sacred’. These two quotes are based on the search of ‘The Divine’ or ‘God’, and are usually applied to the active seeker. The search may start from an emotional crisis, such as a death in the family, or from an intellectual quest driven by curiosity and determination to ‘seek the truth’, ‘know The Creator’ or seek the ‘purpose of life and human existence’. Individuals who find answers in religion and via a connection to God through prayers are more likely to achieve peace of mind, a goal to work towards, and a different perspective of the world and life, which contributes to the regeneration of the spiritual self and reformation of morals, character and identity.

Individuals have specific needs or reasons that drive the conversion process: spiritual, emotional, social, intellectual, psychological or political. The search for what is deemed significant to individuals shapes the journey of converts. It will influence the type and sources of educational literature they will read, the type of people they associate with and the communities they would like to join. The ‘search’ refers to the pathways and processes that individuals take to reach their destination. Meredith McGuire (1997: 71) defines conversion as a process of religious change, which ‘transforms the way the individual perceives the rest of society and his or her personal place in it, altering one’s view of the world’. Usually people adopt new identities and lifestyles once they convert to a religion, as it requires commitments to worship, rituals and moral obligations.

2.3.1 The Islamic *Fitrah*

Muslims believe that people are born pure and free of sin, in a natural state of being otherwise known as the *fitrah* that causes one’s subconscious to lean towards a spiritual belief in God (Al-Qwidi, 2002: 71). In her study of converts Maha Al-Qwidi (2002: 257) states: ‘Most of the converts felt that they had returned to their original, but unknown, faith, rather than having had their basic religious identity transformed.’ For many, this is assumed to be the main reason that explains their decision to convert to Islam, as they perceive themselves to be returning or ‘reverting’ back to the natural state of being. This helps to explain why Muslims refer to new Muslims as ‘reverts’ to Islam

rather than ‘converts’, as it is believed they are returning to their ‘true selves’ and to the original state that God created them in as believers. From an Islamic perspective the conversion journey is a form of guidance provided by God for the individual, and the events that happen within the journey are a matter of predestined fate to help lead the individual back to the truth; ‘He found you lost and guided you’ (Quran, 93: 7). Aisha Bewley (1998: 7) defines the *fitrah* as being ‘the first nature, the natural, primal condition of mankind in harmony with nature’. The concept of the *fitrah* is mentioned in The Quran (30: 30): ‘So direct your face toward the religion [of Islamic monotheism], inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the *fitrah* of *Allah* upon which He has created [all] people. No change should there be in the creation of *Allah* [Islamic monotheism]. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know.’

The concept of the *fitrah* or destiny is also found in Christianity, which demonstrates God’s will to guide who He wills to the right path (Ephesians 1: 11–12). Christians, like Muslims, believe that God is the sovereign master of one’s fate or destiny, otherwise known as ‘providence’ and has given people a free will to make their own choices after knowing or being aware of the right from the wrong. The Jewish faith, however, has no strong doctrine of predestination. Many Jews, including those who are Orthodox, affirm that since free will exists, by definition one’s fate or destiny is not preordained. It is held as a tenet of faith that whether or not God is omniscient, nothing interferes with mankind’s free will.

2.3.2 Missionary Influences

Scot McKnight (2002: 88), alongside others (such as Vyran, Alder and Alder, 2003) base their theories of conversion on the strategies of missionaries that are shaped by the potential benefits of a conversion. Although this study is based on individuals’ perspectives of the conversion journey, not that of missionaries, it was found that missionaries played an important role in the lives of some Muslim converts who were given *dawah*. It may be argued that missionaries usually assume that the people they preach to are ‘lost’ or ‘troubled’, as they do not follow the same religion or any religion. Therefore, to attract them to their faith group it is important that they provide them with the potential benefits of joining. However, some missionaries may provide false hopes, either intentionally or unintentionally, and promise solutions to converts’ problems as

an attempt to gain new members. This can be detrimental to the wellbeing of individuals who convert, only to find later that they have been let down by their group members.

Sarah Ahmed (2010: 32) draws on the challenges of those who are made to believe that happiness is associated with particular social ideals, beliefs or objects, by taking part in what is claimed or deemed to be 'good' to make others happy, that is, God, or a missionary who may want individuals to convert out of sincere beliefs and intentions, or for the purpose of receiving community credit for managing to persuade westerners to convert. Ahmed argues that certain ideas and objects, such as marriage, a connection to God, solutions to problems, family and community membership, are perceived as 'happy objects' that are anticipated to contain the promise of future happiness. These objects therefore symbolise the 'good life', and the life people should strive for. In this case, and according to missionaries, to achieve this happiness, one must be willing to convert and surrender to God. Happiness here, however, is subjective, as the missionary's experience of being a 'happy' Muslim, especially if he or she is a heritage Muslim, will be different to the experiences westerners may have of life as Muslims. People who are perceived as being troubled are often approached and requested by missionaries to give up their 'happy objects', such as alcohol that is *haram* (prohibited in Islam). Ahmed claims that happiness is often a promise that directs people towards certain life choices and away from others, and that happiness is promised to those willing to live their lives in the 'right way'.

William Bainbridge (1992) and Chana Ullman (1989) agree that individuals experiencing deprivation, depression, loneliness and vulnerability are more likely to convert more quickly than others in order to feel a sense of belonging. Bainbridge (1992) provides two alternative sociological conversion theories: strain and social influence theory. According to strain theory, people passively join a religion to satisfy conventional desires that have been frustrated, transforming deprivation into a virtue. This assumes the convert's passivity to be 'an object to be acted upon by external or internal forces' (Bainbridge 1992: 178). Social influence theory claims that people join a religion because they have formed social attachments with individuals who are already members, and also because their attachments to non-members are weak. This theory agrees with that of Chana Ullman's (1989: xix): 'Their transformation was not due to the religion itself, but to a person, who in most cases was an authority figure or a part of the religious group they wished to join.' Social influence differs from one

religion to another, according to the preaching methods and the intentions behind those who convert, or who attempt to convert people to their group or religion. Also, it cannot be assumed that converts who wish to satisfy conventional desires are passive and submissive to social influence and preaching; rather, they may wish to satisfy other areas in their life such as spirituality, which makes it important to investigate the influences a religious group can have on an individual that then leads them to convert.

Some scholars argue that potential recruits to new religions and cults are not only passive but are brainwashed into converting (Zablocki, 1997; Richardson, 1991; Anthony, 1990; Barker, 1984; Solomon, 1983; Pilarzyk, 1983). However, conversion has now more commonly become a micro-sociological field of study and contemporary social science research adds specificity to the interconnection between the emotional, physical, psychological, cognitive and moral dimensions of mental change and religious growth (Gallagher, 1990; Downton, 1980; Richardson, 1980; Straus, 1979, 1976; Gordon, 1974; Johnson, 1959). Micro-sociology, which focuses on an individual's entire personal conversion journey, can be used to understand the processes and events that trigger sudden or dramatic religious experiences.

The conversion process for passive converts, who are likely to convert quickly, is shown from a dynamic psychological perspective, which involves unconscious psychological and sociological forces (Gillespie, 1991; Ullman, 1989), whereas active seekers are converts who play a conscious, healthy and active role in their conversion journey, and who are likely to convert more slowly than passive converts (James, 1902). Rambo (1993) found that only a minority of those converting during adolescence and young adulthood had seriously investigated the group before joining and that many had converted temporarily to experience a different lifestyle. These theories are relevant to the study of Muslim converts, as some passive converts may base their decisions to convert on persuasive *dawah*, curiosity and peer pressure, while active converts often take their time to study Islam and explore the religion before committing to it. Brian Zinnbauer and Kenneth Pargament (1998) studied the differences between long and slow conversion processes, and found that the speed of spiritual transformation was not as important as the factors and outcomes of the process. Finding a connection with God is important to most active seekers, but positive changes within the self occur when the search for spirituality is satisfied, or when faith itself influences the development or improvement of the moral aspect of the individual's life, behaviour and attitudes.

2.3.3 Western Conversion Theories

Donald Taylor (1999) explains his theory of the meaning of conversion in three parts: 'inward', 'outward', and 'awkward' conversion. 'Inward' conversion implies the notion of moving away from an inferior to a superior tradition, based on both the convert's perspective and those in the receiving tradition. 'Outward' conversion focuses on the perspective of a group that an individual or 'apostate' leaves behind and does not acknowledge the individual's change as being conversion. 'Awkward' conversion explains conversion through marriage. Here, marriage provides a link between different religions as a prerequisite to conversion and conversions via 'gatekeepers' to subdivisions/different sects of a religion. Gatekeepers determine the sincerity and intentions of the individual who wishes to convert, which can be done, for example, via religious knowledge tests. Taylor's theoretical perspective is relevant to my study, as a number of participants had left another religion or group to join Islam. It is therefore important to acknowledge this de-conversion process, and explore it by means of analysing various experiences, attitudes, challenges and social consequences to establish whether these factors had any significant effects on the rest of the conversion journey.

Christopher Lamb and M. D. Bryant (1999: 12) emphasise the importance of recognising sociological and institutional dimensions: 'Conversion is not just a personal spiritual awakening, it is also an entry into a particular religious community'. Becoming a member of a religious community is sometimes a challenge for converts, owing to the cultural and racial issues and/or conflicts of values that may be involved. As a result, some prefer to practise their faith and negotiate their identities in their own environments and comfort zones, away from the pressure of other members. The process of identity negotiation usually takes place when individuals seek and act to represent themselves to others in a specific way, and in the ways in which they want others to see and recognise them (Chen, 2010; Gee, 2000; Jackson, 1999). However, those who wish to join a religious community and adopt a specific way of life and a traditional Muslim identity must be prepared physically, emotionally and mentally for what is expected of them as members. Accordingly, some converts may spend some time observing new communities before they make such a commitment, while others may already have support from friends in the community or have lived in the neighbourhood for a while, which may make it easier. Here, however, it is important to

acknowledge that not all converts are seeking a religious way of life, as some, for example, may join a religious community solely for the purpose of marriage.

John Lofland and Rodney Stark's (1965) conversion 'world saver' model, based on the Christian Unification Church, describes the following steps: (1) a person must experience enduring and acute tensions; (2) this experience must occur from a religious problem-solving perspective; (3) this results in self-designation as a religious seeker; (4) the prospective convert encounters the movement at a turning point; (5) an affective bond is formed with one or more converts; (6) extra-cult attachments are neutralised; and (7) the convert is exposed to intensive interaction to become an active and dependable adherent. However, Arthur Greil and David Rudy (1984) tested this model and revealed some serious empirical problems, especially with its more deterministic elements. It was also very limiting, as the framework is based on specific guidelines that do not suit everyone. Based on this, John Lofland modified the model with Norman Skonovd (1981) and focused on the 'motifs' that seemed to characterise conversions rather than the conversion process itself. These six motifs are: (1) intellectual conversion; (2) mystical conversion; (3) experimental conversion; (4) affectional conversion; (5) revivalist conversion (crowd conformity); and (6) coercive conversion (by external pressure to convert). Lorne Dawson (1998) notes that this new model is useful in identifying the different experiences of conversion within the study of new religious movements and provides more flexibility. Therefore, this study will take the six motifs into consideration to see if there are any common patterns to be found in the emergence of these elements in the participants' Islamic conversion journeys.

James Downton's (1980) conversion model is more specific and tailored for a group of converts who have issues with society to begin with. It portrays a more positive and successful conversion experience, rather than a negative one that features challenges and hardships along the way. Henri Gooren (2010) studies the conversion journey as a holistic conception, also building upon the framework of Rambo. Gooren offers a simple five-stage framework to analyse the interplay between the individual, religious advocates, and the various factors of conversion: (1) pre-affiliation, (2) affiliation, (3) conversion, (4) confession, and (5) disaffiliation. Perceiving conversion as a 'career', rather than as a single event, acknowledges it as a process that takes time; moreover, the 'confession' stage involves the challenges of 'coming out' and informing people of their new identities, while the 'disaffiliation' stage illustrates that conversion is not always a

positive experience. This suggests that reaching the disaffiliation stage is likely, if the religious conversion was found to be unsuccessful or unsuitable for an individual.

Rambo's framework (1993) gathers all the important aspects from each of the previous conversion frameworks, models and stages, which allows each stage in the conversion journey to be analysed from both a more neutral and subjective perspective. It can thus be said that Rambo provides a useful framework for interpreting identity changes as experienced by the participants in their conversion journeys, and for understanding the changes individuals go through in different contexts, experiences and situations.

2.4 Theoretical and Sociological Approaches to De-Conversion

Interest in the study of religious de-conversion processes has greatly increased since the 1970s. Merlin Brinkerhoff and Kathryn Burke (1980: 249) argue that 'religious disaffiliation is a gradual, cumulative social process in which negative labelling may act as a "catalyst", accelerating the journey of apostasy/de-conversion while giving it form and direction'. Religious de-conversion is usually described as an individual's abandonment of a religion to which he or she belonged. The term 'de-conversion' is used by many (Harrold, 2006; Jacobs, 1987) but other terms include 'disaffiliation' (Bromley, 1988; Albrecht and Bahr, 1983; Brinkerhoff and Burke, 1980); 'defection' (Davidman and Greil, 2007; Wuthnow and Glock, 1973); 'dis-identification' (McGuire, 2002); and 'disengagement' and 'apostasy' (Altemeyer and Hunsberger, 1997; Brinkerhoff, Merlin and Mackie, 1993). De-conversion, however, is the most commonly employed term, because of its association with 'conversion' and 'converts' (Streib and Keller, 2004). Its process involves 'the loss of faith and rejection of the [religious] community' (Caplovitz and Sherrow, 1997: 31).

A number of sociologists (for instance, Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler, 2007; Rochford, 1989) have looked at why people leave their religion, and what the motivating factors are behind that decision. Research suggests that there are two types of de-conversion processes. The first is involuntary and can be found where expulsion will occur if there is a lack of conformity with the group (Wright, 1991; Rochford, 1989; Kim, 1979). The second, which is more common, is voluntary withdrawal (Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler, 2007; Jacobs, 1987). The latter, but not the former, is relevant to this study, as it is not

permitted in Islam to force someone to de-convert from Islam, even if they are not fulfilling obligatory acts of worship. De-conversion from Islam, or from another religion or group prior to Islam, is thus based on an individual's personal choice.

William Shaffir (1997) identified the causes of discontentment in the growth of religious doubts that exist from an early age, as well as a sense of rebellion and resistance to the imposition of a constricted lifestyle, while Christian Smith et al. (2004) point out that religious value systems do not magically appear in the offspring of religious parents, but require active transmission. Therefore, if parents fail to instil their religious values in their children, it is likely they will abandon religion as they get older, especially if the beliefs do not make sense to them. It has become difficult for parents to raise their children within a religious lifestyle, as modern society is drifting away from a 'backward' religious way of life and is heading towards secularism. Young people often struggle to deal with the concept of God and an afterlife, reasoning that these are myths subscribed to in much earlier times and are no longer valid. Rather, it may be argued that the real objective world of contemporary young people is understood through science, which relies on reason, logic and empirical knowledge (Musacchio, 2012). Events such as natural disasters, war, illness and deaths may also encourage individuals to lose hope and belief in God and adopt a more scientific worldview. Others who believe in God are likely to start searching for a more logical and suitable religion during adolescence and early adulthood.

'Ritualists', or 'nominalists', are people who associate themselves with a faith group and attend religious events, such as church weddings and funerals, but do not believe in religious teachings or hold religious worldviews (Brinkerhoff and Burke, 1980). Nominalist parents often confused their children as they were growing up in regards to religion, as their actions did not match their beliefs. Others, however, who did not wish to follow their parents' religion, because of intellectual doubt or social factors, secretly disaffiliated themselves from the religion's beliefs but not necessarily its rituals, so as not to cause problems within the family and their community (Smith and Sikkink, 2003; Hunsberger and Brown, 1984). Some theorists (Graham, 2006; Hunsberger et al., 2001) think that religious schools and peer pressure from family and society have influenced the religious or non-religious identity formation of younger people.

Previous studies on de-conversion have often focused on the reasons why people choose

to de-convert (Albrecht and Bahr, 1989; Jacobs, 1987, 1984); or on the different psychological stages which lead to de-conversion (Streib et al., 2009; Streib and Keller, 2004; Barbour, 1994). Heinz Streib et al., (2009) define de-conversion as originating from five stages: (1) loss of religious experiences; (2) intellectual doubt, denial or disagreement with specific beliefs; (3) moral criticism; (4) emotional suffering; and (5) disaffiliation from the community. These stages focus on the various personal and social consequences that a de-conversion has on an individual rather than the effect of their de-conversion on the community. Helen Ebaugh (1988), on the other hand, describes four stages of de-conversion that she identified in her study of ex-nuns, which suggests that, like conversion, de-conversion is also a reformation of the self and a process of identity construction: (1) doubts, (2) seeking and weighing alternatives, (3) a turning point, (4) establishing an ex-role identity. Robert Sampson and John Laub (2005: 33) tended to perceive significant turning points as rare and important events in their research, as they effect the decisions, wellbeing, identity and character of individuals.

While quantitative studies have associated de-conversion with specific demographic factors, such as age, gender, education level, occupation and ethnic background (Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler, 2007), qualitative research involving personal interviews has allowed for more in-depth explanations of individuals' de-conversion processes through personal experiences, circumstances and motivating factors. William Shaffir (1997: 205–228), and Lynn Davidman and Arthur Greil (2007), for instance, studied the emotional narratives of ex-Orthodox Jews and found that disaffiliates were characterised by weak attachments to the religious community and ultra-Orthodox worldviews, while Bruce Hunsberger (1983) found that the majority of de-converts from Orthodox Christianity had interacted with non-Christians who supported them through difficult times (Mauss, 1969). Merlin Brinkerhoff and Kathryn Burke (1980) claimed that intellectual and theological doubt in religious teachings triggers most de-conversion processes. For instance, some Mormons left the church because 'they decided that Mormon teachings were false' after a long process of social disengagement from members of the faith and its religious practices, and instead favoured a more scientific worldview (Albrecht and Bahr 1983: 196). They also found that those exiting the Mormon church knew little about their religion and were rejecting its restrictive lifestyle. Many Christians began the de-conversion process by asking critical questions about various teachings in The Bible and questioning God's existence based on the suffering they have seen in the world (Altemeyer and Hunsberger, 1997). Other

explanations involve social concern: members may lose contact with close friends who were motivating factors in the conversion process; or they may experience bad behaviour, immorality and hypocrisy amongst group members, which leads them to sever their ties.

Studies show that stigmatisation and negative labelling were experienced by those who decided to leave the Mormon church (Albrecht and Bahr, 1989). Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger (2006: 55) found that former American Orthodox Christians, who had turned to atheism as a result of intellectual doubts, were victims of 'permanent separation and ostracism'. Leaving a religion can be so socially challenging that it can force some to conceal that they no longer share the same beliefs as those within it. Therefore the social context linked to de-conversion is very important in determining how and when individuals decide to de-convert from their religion, as this may be perceived as an act of social betrayal and a de-conversion may not be an easy process; (for instance, if disaffiliates live in a Muslim community where members believe in punishing apostates.) Hostile attitudes lead de-converts to anticipate discrimination, emotional and mental abuse, punishment and stigmatisation, all of which can cause them to conceal their de-conversion and become 'closeted disaffiliates', sometimes for many years (Chaudoir and Fisher, 2010). Ahmed An-Na'im (1986; 2014), however, notes that The Quran does not state any worldly punishments for apostasy and that various Hadiths are ambiguous on the subject (Temperman, 2010: 184).

The concealment of individuals' beliefs and 'true' identities may have serious negative effects on emotional, psychological and physical health, that is, severe depression, illness and anxiety (Saxena and Mehrotra, 2010; Cozby, 1973). Closeted disaffiliates are prevalent in heritage Muslim communities, as reported by the Council of Ex Muslims in Britain. As the fear of stigmatisation may encourage the majority of disaffiliates to become community disaffiliates, or to conceal their beliefs, which prevents them from becoming open disaffiliates, it is vital to investigate how social processes help to motivate factors in the de-conversion process. Susan Namini et al., (2010) discovered that individuals' well-being is higher when they are in a supportive religious environment which meets their needs, and Gary McDonald (1982) found that when social support is present, people struggle significantly less against stigmatisation.

The complexity of the contexts and different types of circumstances in which de-conversion occurs before or after being a Muslim therefore requires analysis, along with the types of compromises and negotiations made, which some individuals employ with their families to avoid any harsh consequences. Thus the consequences of de-conversion may often play an important role in individuals' identity transformation processes and state of mind, whether emotionally, physically or psychologically, which is why it is important to investigate how de-converts feel and perceive de-conversion as another journey of identity construction. The choice that is made is usually for the ultimate benefit of their wellbeing, despite the difficult, emotional journey it may often entail.

2.5 Summary

The studies discussed in this literature review highlight many theories, issues and debates on the study of religious identity formation, conversion and de-conversion. The majority of scholars approach conversion from a sociological and/or psychological perspective, which is generally defined as a gradual change of lifestyle, identity and beliefs based on the free will of the individual. It may certainly be argued that the conversion process is complex and that many factors can motivate an individual to convert, just as an array of transformational experiences exist that are unique to that individual.

The most common reasons found behind a religious conversion identified in previous studies, and ones which will be addressed in this research, are: intellectual doubts, friends, missionary influences, and emotional and psychological issues rooted in individuals that lead them to seek social belonging and an identity. The study found that developing a strong identity was the most important factor in the conversion process, alongside finding problem-solving solutions to their crises. From an Islamic point of view, other factors include the *fitrah*, a quest for salvation, an escape route from an immoral society, a purpose for converts' existence, security, spirituality, and the search for something 'superior'. All factors are important in their own right, as each holds a degree of significance for individual participants, which, in turn, allows the reader to gain a deeper insight into what they are seeking and what this means to them. Religious conversion not only involves a new relationship with God, but also the entrance into a community, which may require a number of cultural changes for individuals, such as dress code. This may be alienating or prohibitive to their integration into non-Muslim

British societies, and problematic in developing a post-colonial religious-national identity that satisfies both societies.

The de-conversion process amounts to a further self-reformation journey that some converts undertake. The way in which individuals choose to de-convert from a faith group can heavily impact upon their wellbeing, as it may result in abuse, stigmatisation and exile, alongside the existence of closeted disaffiliates who choose to conceal their identities for the purpose of their own safety. This highlights the huge impact which society may have on the mental, emotional, physical and social life of individuals.

It may be argued that converts and de-converts need to make personal choices on the types of compromises and negotiations required, regarding the representation of their religious identities, to live a peaceful life. However, because identity processes are concerned with how individuals choose to reform their sense of self in dialogue with social systems of representation, the way they represent themselves may cause social rejection and harm. This explains why some people prefer to be closeted disaffiliates, regardless of the challenges and hardships that may arise from living with a hidden identity. The formation of a religious-national identity often goes through many stages of change before individuals settle on one with which they are comfortable and happy. The end result is often a representation of who they feel they really are or always were.

Chapter III

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

To better understand the nature of conversion and de-conversion from Islam, this study explores the narratives of thirty-four British Muslim converts in Greater London who varied in age, length of time being a Muslim, religious background, ethnicity and educational level taken from semi-structured qualitative interview sessions. This thesis aims to provide a deeper understanding of the identity formation processes alongside the causes of the challenges and hardships they face and, where relevant, disaffiliation.

Maha Al-Qwidi (2002: 107) states:

The study of conversion to Islam must include the following four components: the cultural, social, personal, and religious systems. For conversion to be understood in all its richness and complexity the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and religious studies must all be taken into account; otherwise an examination of conversion will remain one-dimensional.

Based on this suggestion, the thesis analyses the narratives from a sociological perspective, but takes into account the various religious, social, cultural, emotional, intellectual, psychological and physical factors involved to project the point of view of the convert.

3.2 The Research Design

I chose to use Lewis Rambo's (1993) framework of seven conversion stages to study the conversion journeys of the participants. The stages are: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences, alongside John Lofland and Norman Skonovd's (1981) six conversion patterns/motifs: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalistic and coercive, to analyse the transformations that happen over time in individuals' lives that eventually lead them towards an Islamic

conversion. Ali Köse (1994) found in his study that some of Lofland and Skonovd's conversion motifs were identified in conversion journeys, for example, intellectual doubts in a previous religion, which also made them relevant to the converts in this study. Each stage in Rambo's framework may be seen as a particular element or period during that process of change. His model is not rigid and allows for all accounts of conversion data to be thematically categorised into stages, unlike other frameworks that are limiting and do not include stages that take into account the negative experiences, consequences, and disaffiliation experiences of some individuals. Rambo's framework also offers a wider and more comprehensive scope for the appliance of Islamic beliefs and theories on conversion. Each stage sets the appropriate foundation for the next, so that they link together as a collection of life experiences that individuals encounter during their development periods. Glynis Breakwell's (1986) theory was also used as an approach to study identity formation, and how individuals become attracted to certain elements during the conversion journey that become a part of their new identity.

Demographic data, such as age, gender and educational level, was gathered to help contextualise the sample and to see if any common patterns emerged. However, the most suitable research method for this type of study was found to be the use of qualitative, semi-structured interviews that provided richer and more detailed data than was obtainable from quantitative and demographic research methods. This allowed participants to expand and elaborate on answers, which highlighted other important issues and elements for consideration, alongside their ability to express their feelings and attitudes towards them.

Sociologists recommend the use of qualitative research methods that analyse individual cases in detail to better understand conversion processes and to provide a more dynamic account of the experiences that often differ from one person to the next (Denscombe, 2007; Patton, 2002; Punch, 1998; Manstead and Semain, 1996; McCracken, 1988: 9). The use of thematic questions in semi-structured interviews provides a framework guide that makes it easier to follow and obtain the necessary and needed information. The results are then thematically and demographically analysed to produce statistics, narratives and case studies.

The use of narratives creates a broader awareness of the processes that are involved in religious conversion journeys and also gives the reader an opportunity to gain a deeper

understanding of the conversion and identity development stages, how they are negotiated, and how they differ from others. This is important, as it will help the reader to comprehend the development of an individual's religious identity, which is often misunderstood and misinterpreted by others. For example, some scholars (such as, Zablocki, 1997; Richardson, 1991) argue that potential recruits to new religions and cults are passive and are brainwashed into converting, whereas Kate Zebiri (2007) found in her study of British Muslim converts that the reality is very different.

This qualitative research employed a cross-sectional design, which involved the collection of data from a single group of participants at a single point in time (Bryman, 2008: 49). I opted for a cross-sectional design to enable me to interview a suitable number of people within a specific time period. Furthermore, this research is concerned with current attitudes, so arguably a longitudinal method measuring attitudinal change is not necessary, but it might be a suggestion for future research. To avoid giving a biased opinion in the analysis of data I made sure that I had interviews with a wide variety of people from different age groups, religious backgrounds, ethnicities and education levels. I also preferred to meet them separately so they would be more comfortable when talking about their experiences.

3.3 Interview Techniques

The literature reviewed on identity formation and religious conversion in the domain of both sociology and psychology helped in the construction of the semi-structured interview for this study (see Appendix III). It was designed in a manner that would cover all the topics in a logical order, starting with childhood experiences that led to adolescent experiences, the period before conversion, the conversion period, and the post-conversion period up to the present. I formed a thematic interview based on some previous theories on identity formation and religious conversion to gain a dynamic view of the conversion journey from the perspective of the participant, which allows for a better understanding of the processes involved.

I kept my questions open to record what the participants remembered when asked about their upbringing. Chana Ullman (1989: 11–16) stressed the importance of investigating an individual's family unit and childhood, as she found that various experiences and

events within this period influenced some individuals to convert to a religion later on in their lives. Some participants in this study mentioned their relationship with parents or bad memories, while others mentioned positive memories related to their lifestyles and beliefs. Questions were asked about religious upbringing because Ali Köse (1994) and Larry Poston (1992) suggested that a majority of converts to Islam had either been involved in another religion previously or came from a religious section of society. This period of time is important to explore, as it may explain why some people, for example, want to try and find God again or study different religious theologies. It may also explain their attitudes towards religion and what it means for them, especially during the individuals' adolescence period, a common time for identity experimentation and change (Marcia, 1966; Maslow, 1943). Contemporary social science research adds specificity to the interconnection between the emotional, physical, psychological, cognitive and moral dimensions of mental change and religious growth (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980; Straus, 1976; Gordon, 1974) and therefore questions regarding the motives and decision to convert were asked to see if the participants were active or passive converts. The search for truth played a dominant role in the conversion journey, so participants were asked about what led them to Islam or how they became aware of it. Kevin Vyran, Patricia Alder and Peter Alder (2003) and Scot McKnight (2002) state that external influences from faith members and missionaries may have a significant impact on identity transformation and so it was important to find out if the participants had been given any Islamic knowledge and *dawah* that had affected them as a result of their intellectual, emotional and psychological issues.

Questions were asked about the post-conversion process and the reactions of friends and families, which sociologists such as Eileen Barker (1984) found important, as it impacted on the emotional wellbeing of converts. In her study on the Unification Church and its members, better known as the 'Moonies', Barker addresses the emotional and mental issues associated with joining a new religion. V. Bailey Gillespie (1991) and Irwin Barker and Raymond Currie (1985) defined religious conversion as being a break from one's former identity that involves a radical change in one's beliefs, personality, ideas, worldview, behaviour, attitudes and values, and so questions were asked about how Islam had changed them as people and how it had impacted on their lives, their worldviews, attitudes and their relationships with others. The participants' perceptions of their former lives were interesting to note, as it has been previously suggested (Ullman, 1989; Heirich, 1977) that converts tend to denounce their lives

before conversion to glorify their present salvation.

The final stage involved questions about the hardships and consequences and how they dealt with them along with any considerations to de-convert. Those that had de-converted from Islam were given the space to explain how they had reached the decision of no longer wanting to be Muslims, and the order of questions followed Helen Ebaugh's (1988) four simple stages of de-conversion identified in her study of ex-nuns, which suggests that, like conversion, de-conversion is also a reformation of the self and a process of identity construction: (1) doubts, (2) seeking and weighing alternatives, (3) a turning point, and (4) establishing an ex-role identity.

The information provided in previous theories, studies on religious conversion, and in the pilot studies helped me to extract eight primary themes for discussion and elaboration in a semi-structured interview. These stages are based on Rambo's (1993) framework, and include Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) six conversion motifs and Breakwell's (1986) six principles of identity formation, as an attempt to study the conversion journey comprehensively.

The stages are:

1. **Background/context.** Information on the person's religious upbringing, family, childhood experiences, social status, adolescence, education and circumstances.
2. **The pre-conversion process.** Influencing factors that triggered an interest in a religious conversion, such as coming across information about Islam by chance, religious or intellectual doubts, crises and curiosity.
3. **Quest.** The search for God, a problem-solving solution, spirituality, the truth, the purpose of life, an identity, another lifestyle and peace. This stage explores the ways in which an individual searches for one or some of these elements.
4. **Encounter.** This stage explores the individual's initial awareness and knowledge of Islam, the types of Muslims they first met, and the impacts of direct and indirect *dawah*.

5. **Interaction.** This stage investigates the relationships individuals established with Muslims, any efforts made to obtain an Islamic education, experimenting with Islamic practices, observing Muslim communities and sitting with Imams and scholars to ask questions.
6. **The conversion.** This stage explores the turning points in their lives that encouraged them to convert, the *shahadah* (Islamic testimony/declaration of faith ‘There is no God but *Allah*, and Muhammad is the (Last) Messenger of *Allah*’) process and how they informed friends, family members and previous religious societies or social groups of their new beliefs and how they dealt with their reactions.
7. **Life as a Muslim.** This stage explores the various social, identity, educational and personal challenges converts experience within Muslim and non-Muslim communities, alongside the positive aspects of being a Muslim.
8. **De-conversion.** The de-conversion process, its challenges and consequences are explored here for those who were unable to deal with their hardships as Muslims and chose to disaffiliate. This stage investigates the implications of disaffiliation, and how it affects an individual emotionally, socially, physically and psychologically. Identity re-construction processes are also discussed, alongside post de-conversion experiences.

3.4 Sampling Methods: Fieldwork

The majority of participants were found in London’s four largest mosques: East London Mosque, Regent’s Park Central Mosque, Finsbury Park Mosque and Wembley Mosque. Each had recorded a high number of conversions and provided *dawah* programmes, conversion certificates, Islamic classes for new Muslims, and sermons and lectures that were given in Urdu, Arabic and English for the majority to understand. Kevin Brice (2010: 9–11) found from his survey results that London accounts for over fifty per cent of Britain’s White and Black converts to Islam (sixty-two per cent of whom are female converts in their mid-twenties). It was important to get a study sample from a variety of different cultural contexts, to understand conversion journeys from different age, race, educational, social and gender perspectives. This helps to provide a more dynamic

account of conversion journeys, as opposed to focusing on one particular ethnic group, gender and age group.

Aside from personally approaching people in the mosques who appeared to be converts, on account of their fair skin complexion and Islamic dress, I was able to gather a number of people for the study who did not know each other personally and who were from different racial backgrounds via snowball sampling, which helped to provide unbiased results. Snowball sampling was important in this study, as I had initially found it easier to identify converts based on my own racial understanding of religion. Those who looked European and wore Muslim dress were perceived by me to be converts, and this may have influenced my study sample to a certain degree, as I may have mistaken non-White British converts in Muslim dress for heritage Muslims. Some women who had heard about my study from a friend or colleague contacted me directly via email, and volunteered their time for an interview, as they felt they had something valuable to contribute to the research. Many participants wanted to share their experiences and stories so that Muslims and non-Muslims alike would have a deeper and broader understanding of who they are, why they chose to convert, what they went through as Muslims, how they perceived their national-religious identities and their personal opinions on extremism in order to combat stereotypes.

The majority of interviews took place during the second year of my research (2013–2014) and I stopped at thirty-four interviews, as the results indicated that I had reached a saturation point in responses and patterns of behaviour and experiences were emerging. The saturation of data is a term used in sociology to emphasise the fact that the researcher has reached a point in the analysis of data that the sampling of more data will not lead to more, new or relevant information. Hence, when the interview results have no unexplained phenomena or gaps in them, saturation is achieved (Seale, 1999: 87–105). Each interview lasted between thirty to ninety minutes and the participants were given the opportunity to choose the place for the interview, that is, various London cafés and mosques. Face-to-face interviews were advantageous in this study, as the participant's body language, hesitations, silences, style of speaking, voice tone and emotions contributed to a better understanding of their experiences.

The interviews were voice-recorded with the permission of the participants and later transcribed, which allowed for a better record of accurate data. Voice recording also

allowed me to focus on the participant during the interview sessions instead of being busy with writing. The interview procedure was carried out according to the British Sociological Association's guidelines and Kingston University's ethical guidelines. Much of the subject matter of the semi-structured interview, especially when it concerns de-converts, is sensitive, so it was important to guard participants against possible adverse effects from Muslim communities by ensuring their privacy and confidentiality. The participants were provided with the standard ethics protocol approved by Kingston University (see Appendix I), alongside the assurance that the tapes would be destroyed after transcription and that they would be given pseudonyms to protect their identities, privacy and confidentiality. I did not reveal their areas of residence or names of local places so people cannot guess who they are, and this helped the participants to feel comfortable and made them more willing to share their stories. A few participants, especially those who had de-converted from Islam, had agreed to an interview if it was done through Skype to ensure their safety and privacy.

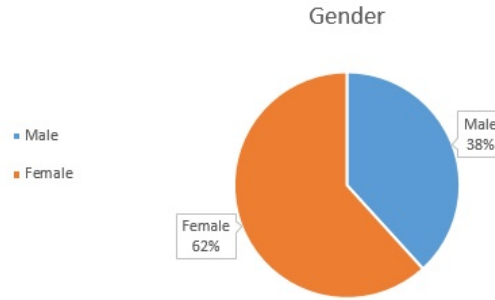
All the participants were informed that the research was for academic purposes and were briefed on how their data would be used and stored in a password-protected database separated from another database that included their contact details. The aims and purpose of the study were explained, alongside the main benefit of their participation, which was to create an academic and social awareness of British Muslim converts and to provide a personal insight into their conversion journeys, identity changes or transformations, challenges and lives. Another benefit anticipated from this study is the increase in social and personal support converts may receive as a minority group, which was a motivating factor for a few participants who hoped this study would encourage some positive changes.

3.4.1 The Study Sample

The thirty-four participants were asked at the start of the interview for basic demographic information to give the reader an idea of who they were. The statistics are similar to those found in Kevin Brice's report (2010). (The interview data is provided in Appendix IV (CD)).

Table 1.1

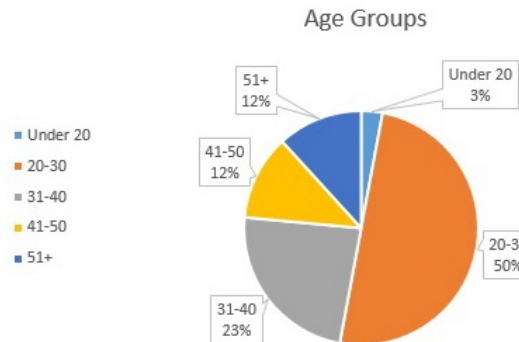
Gender	Number
Male	13
Female	21



It was easier to find female converts than male converts, as they were easily identifiable by their appearance, and there were more female converts in the mosques and new Muslim social circles that I visited.

Table 1.2

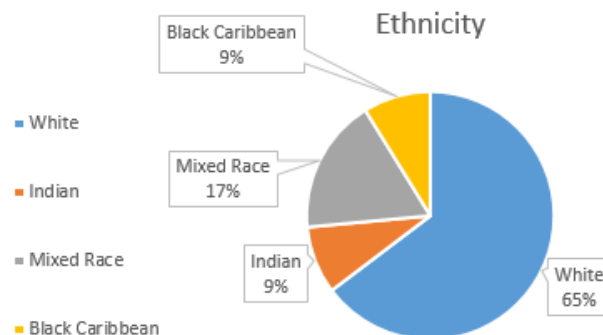
Age Group	Number
Under 20	1
20-30	17
31-40	8
41-50	4
51+	4



The majority of participants in this study were between twenty to thirty years of age, making up fifty per cent of the overall study sample. Only one teenager participated, together with four people who were over the age of fifty-one. The statistics support Kevin Brice's (2010) findings of the average age of converts being twenty-seven years.

Table 1.3

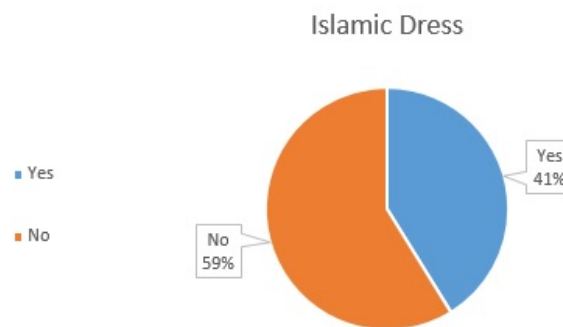
Ethnicity	Number
White	22
Indian	3
Mixed Race	6
Black Caribbean	3



Sixty-five per cent of the participants were White British, which is a higher percentage than the one found in Brice’s report (2010), however statistics for mixed-race converts were almost the same, differing by only one per cent, and no Black Africans or South Asians took part in the study. This shows that it is highly likely that White converts make up the majority of the British Muslim convert population. However, it can be argued that this is because they are easily identifiable as Muslims when they wear Islamic clothing, or are seen praying in mosques, rather than African and Asian converts who are usually mistaken for being heritage Muslims.

Table 1.4

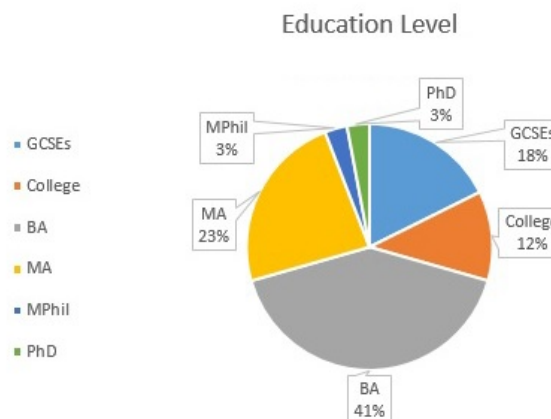
Islamic Dress	Number
Yes	14
No	20



Of the fourteen female participants who wore Islamic dress, eleven were women who wore a mixture of modest clothing, the *hijab* and *abaya* (the long and loose black cloak worn by many Arab women in the Gulf region) and two decided to cover completely and wear the *burka*. Those who decided not to wear Islamic dress provided various reasons for not doing so, such as wanting to avoid Islamophobic abuse, negative labelling, being able to integrate as Muslims in a non-Muslim society, and out of consideration for their families.

Table 1.5

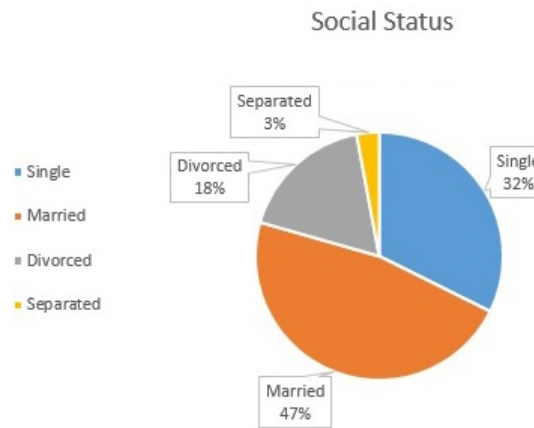
Education Level	Number
GCSEs	6
College	4
BA	14
MA	8
MPhil	1
PhD	1



The majority of participants had at least a Bachelor’s degree (41%), which suggests that most converts are well educated, contrary to many media portrayals that present converts as being uneducated, vulnerable and easily manipulated individuals (Doyle, 2011).

Table 1.6

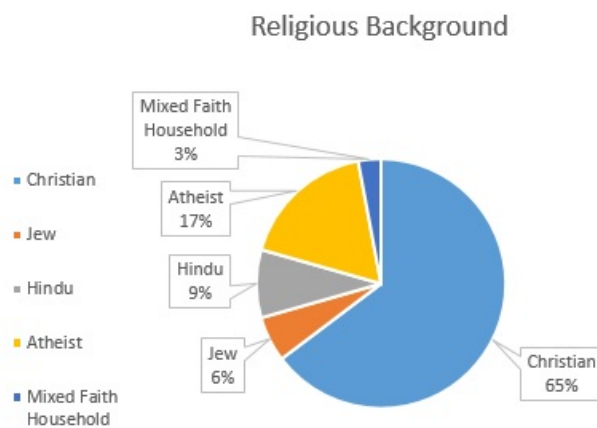
Social Status	Number
Single	11
Married	16
Divorced	6
Separated	1



The majority of the participants were married, comprising more than twice the number of divorced participants, while those who were single made up almost a third of the study sample.

Table 1.7

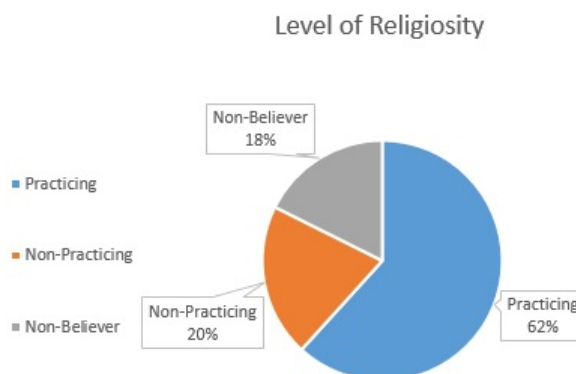
Religious Background	Number
Christian	22
Jew	2
Hindu	3
Atheist	6
Mixed Faith Household	1



The statistics above present data about religious belief, background and upbringing prior to the participants’ Islamic conversion. Twenty-two were raised as Christians, two were raised as Orthodox Jews, three were Hindus, six had no religious upbringing and one came from a mixed faith household. Some of the Christian participants were previously Catholic, Quaker, Anglican and Orthodox; all were categorised as being Christian, as the different Christian sects were not considered relevant to this study.

Table 1.8

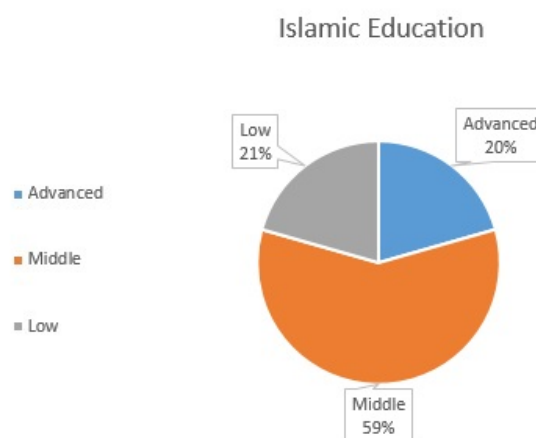
Religiosity	Number
Practising	21
Non-Practising	7
Non-Believers	6



Participants were categorised as being practising, non-practising and non-believers prior to their conversion to Islam. Those who were atheists were categorised as non-believers; those who were religious as a result of having had one or two religious parents, visited religious places, took part in rituals and had religious beliefs, were categorised as practising; and those who were raised in religious households but did not go to church, attend rituals, pray and/or live by religious rules were categorised as non-practising. Seven out of the twenty-two Christians were from non-practising households.

Table 1.9

Islamic Education	Number
Advanced	7
Middle	20
Low	7



This statistic reflects the level of Islamic knowledge obtained by the participants prior to and after conversion. The participants were classified in three educational groups: advanced, middle and low.

Advanced: The advanced participants studied the four schools of jurisprudence, Arabic, Islamic history, Hadiths and Quran interpretation, and were able to differentiate between Muslim sects and cultural practices via university studies, independent research over a period of a few years, and extensive Islamic and Arabic language courses. Two of the nine advanced learners did not learn Arabic.

Middle: These participants had a general understanding of Islam gained from books, websites, lectures, news, events, magazine articles, missionaries and Muslim friends.

Low: These participants had little knowledge of Islam and only knew about Islamic teachings and Muslims from what they had seen or read in the media. They later obtained most of their general knowledge from Imams, basic Islamic books, websites or Muslim friends and missionaries.

Table 1.10

Sect	Number
Sunni	15
Shi'ite	1
Sufi	2
Salafi	6
N/A	10

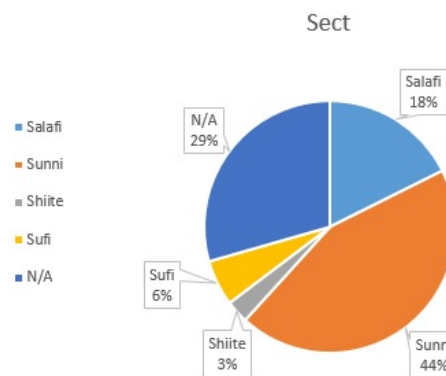
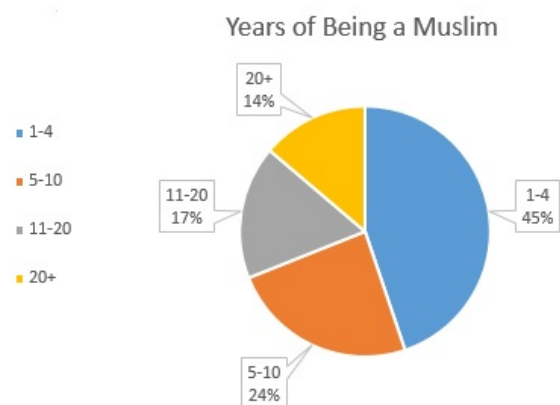


Table 1.10 shows the number of participants belonging to different sects as a result of the Islamic education they had received and the Muslims they knew. Fifteen participants identified themselves as Sunni Muslims, six were Salafi Muslims, one participant was a Shi'ite Muslim, two participants were Sufi Muslims, and ten participants did not associate themselves with any Islamic sect, saying they were 'just Muslims'.

Table 1.11

Years of being a Muslim	Number
1-4	13
5-10	7
11-20	5
20+	4



The study found that almost half the participants had been Muslims for less than five years, and that only four participants had been Muslims for more than twenty years. This might indicate that despite the increase in Islamic conversions among young Britons, it is unlikely that many of them will remain Muslims for life.

3.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity, an important tool or element of qualitative research is a concept developed in a sociological context by Anthony Giddens (1991) and Jürgen Habermas (1985), referring to an individual's awareness that they are shaped by social structures and relationships, including those in the research field, and to the process of reflecting on the consequences of this for their research. Diane Watt (2007: 82) mentions that the researcher is the primary 'instrument' of data collection and analysis, and so reflexivity is deemed essential. Reflexivity has long been a critical issue in qualitative research in which interviewers make great efforts to establish strong relationships with their participants in order to delve deeply into the subject matter. Norman Denzin (1997: 27) claims that the problem of reflexivity lies in the ways in which our subjectivity becomes entangled in the lives of others, which makes it an important concept to consider because of the threat to the accuracy of the qualitative research outcomes.

The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events, which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self (Giddens, 1991: 54).

The importance of being reflexive was initially used and is often discussed and acknowledged within feminist social science research in particular (Harding, 1995, 1992; DeVault, 1990) and feminist discourses recognize that knowledge and understanding are contextually and historically grounded, as well as linguistically constituted. Being reflexive is perceived as an exercise through which meanings are made rather than found (Mauthner et al., 1998). In reflexivity the data analysis methods, the researcher, the method and the data are interdependent and interconnected. Feminists particularly focused on the extent to which similarities or differences between researcher and researched in characteristics such as gender, race, class and sexuality

influence the nature and structure of research relationships (Edwards, 1990; Ribbens, 1989; Finch, 1984). It was considered important how the researcher interprets her data, whilst bearing in mind that the validity of her interpretation is dependent on being able to demonstrate how it was reached (Mason, 1996). This usually involves examining and reflecting on the role she plays in the analytic process and the pre-conceived ideas, views, emotions and personal assumptions she brings to the analysis of her data that might affect her interpretation of the participants' words and narratives or how she later writes about them. Therefore, situating ourselves socially, emotionally and intellectually in relation to respondents is an important element of reflexivity in order to produce a more accurate analysis.

Research experts (Russell and Kelly, 2002; Finlay, 2003, 2002; Glesne, 1999; Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1988) contend that through reflection researchers may become aware of what could potentially cause biased and distorted analysis. For example, Linda Finlay (2002: 209) encourages the active reflection of the interviewer on certain aspects in the process that may be prone to bias, such as, age, geographic location, gender and religious beliefs, in order to enhance the trustworthiness and accountability of the research. It is also suggested that the interplay between the multiple 'hybrid' personal and social elements and how they intersect with our personalities are considered during the analysis of data. For example, in this case, it was important to reflect on how my gender, educational background, religious beliefs and ethnicity may influence the analysis of data and my position as a researcher and how I hear or see things.

The theory of intersectionality was introduced by the feminist Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), which refers to how different social processes interact to produce both complex identities and forms of discrimination. Intersectionality involves various ethnic, biological, social and cultural categories, such as gender, race, class, religion and other axes of identity that interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, and which contribute to injustice, multiple dimensions of social disadvantage and social inequality both socially and in the analysis of data (Macionis and Gerber, 2011: 310). An example of this complex interplay between the researcher and participants in this study might be where religious male converts have refused to be interviewed because I am a woman or because I am not considered religious enough to interview them on account of me not wearing a *burka*. On the other hand, as a researcher, I was more reluctant to interview people who had been charged with acts of terrorism, due to feeling vulnerable as a

woman in their presence.

Feminists also tend to make a standpoint in qualitative research by attaining or ‘giving voice’ to women and/or more vulnerable and marginalised groups and privileging the participants’ accounts in their research, which often stems from a desire to react against male-dominant research in various fields, for example, in which women’s views may be devalued or disregarded (Mauthner, 2002, 1998). However, this can be an issue if the researchers have a tendency to over-emphasize, prioritise or romanticize women’s voices and subjectivities, as it will fail to take into account or acknowledge the researcher’s own analysis.

3.5.1 Situating Myself

I considered exploring the lives of British Muslim converts after working in London’s largest Islamic centre (2008-2009), and meeting many people who had complained about the difficulties of being new British Muslims. As someone with a hybrid British Arab Muslim identity and a background in Arabic and Islamic studies from Umm Al Qura University in Saudi Arabia, I found that I was able to identify various problems in some of the participants’ understanding of Islamic teachings and tradition. This meant they were less able to make use of resources within Islamic tradition to help them cope with and overcome some of the difficulties they were facing, such as social isolation that was the result of belonging and living in a Muslim community that is strongly shaped and influenced by South Asian cultural traditions alongside disruptions in their relationships with their pre-conversion social networks. Therefore, having a broad understanding of various scholarly translations, opinions and interpretations of The Quran and Hadiths helped me to analyse the ways in which people understand religion and become different types of Muslims, and recognize which Muslim sects or schools of jurisprudence they followed.

The aim of the study was to provide honest and unbiased findings that would reflect the experiences participants had with Muslims and Islam to identify the source of the problems. The study was perceived by many participants as a bridge of communication between them and the Muslim community, and therefore it was crucial to convey an honest account of all their experiences to help Muslims, non-Muslims and Muslim organisations find ways of helping converts to solve their problems and avoid many of

the hardships. I made the interviews as comfortable and as informal as possible and the participants were made to feel as valuable assets to the study, not merely as a source of data, and they were told that they could skip any questions with which they were not comfortable. Furthermore, as a woman, I agree with the feminist viewpoint and believe the Muslim female voice constantly has to assert itself in a male-dominated world, both in traditional Muslim and non-Islamic environmental contexts, and although I did not ignore the hardships men experienced, I found it more interesting to highlight the issues women have with Islam and being Muslims on account of the vast media coverage of the oppression of Muslim women, their roles in Islam, and feminist issues. My tendency to privilege the women's accounts resulted from a desire to react against various cultural practices and scholarly teachings in which women's opinions and views are devalued and disregarded. Overall I believe that I managed to capture the voices of the participants in this research, told their stories and produced accurate accounts of their lives to the best of my ability by being reflexive and preserving and defending the originality of their contribution to knowledge, regardless of how I felt about their views and opinions. It was noticed that the readers' confidence in this work increased, as a result of me being able to reflect on my own position as a reflexive researcher.

I was identifiable as a Muslim by my *hijab* and made it very clear to the participants that the data was required for academic research, and that I would not be offended by their responses regarding the issues they had with Islam and/or Muslims. I noticed that being a Muslim woman was an advantage for the majority of the participants who were women also, as they felt more comfortable talking to me about intimate and private matters that they may not have been able to tell a male interviewer. They also felt happy that I could relate to them and understand the various issues they had as Muslim women in society.

I was also pleasantly surprised at the level of trust and honesty I found among some of the participants, who shared intimate accounts of abuse they experienced in their communities, families, marriages and any involvement they had in criminal activities. Tea and coffee were offered to the participants and a general friendly conversation was held before the start of the interview. I allowed them to ask me questions about myself, which helped participants to relax. It was harder to break the ice with some of the male participants; however, as the questions started to flow I noticed that they were becoming less reluctant to answer and more keen to share their stories. The majority of male

participants were also comfortable knowing that I understood their perspectives and Islamic terms and this helped them to elaborate further on their personal experiences.

In this study I referred to Muslims as being ‘converts’ to Islam, despite the fact many felt that they were ‘reverts’, that is, returning back to their original identity.

3.5.2 Pilot Study

Because of the complex nature of qualitative research, it was important to find an effective way of maintaining a neutral standpoint in the interview processes, and so to test and examine my role as a reflexive researcher I carried out a pilot study (see Appendix II) on two British female Muslim converts. Other aims were to deepen my understanding of the research process, address any potential issues in the analysis of data, and see how a semi-structured questionnaire-type interview would work.

In the pilot study I found that the first draft of the interview questionnaire was not entirely successful because many of the questions I had listed were limiting and irrelevant to potential participants. To improve the questions and their relevance, they were categorised into stages/themes, which provided a guide for participants and myself to prevent the conversation from drifting away from the purpose of the study. The participants were given the chance to direct the flow of the conversation within the guide, which opened an opportunity for the flexibility of questions in each stage, and helped to collect a more personal and exploratory scope for answers to produce a non-biased conclusion or theory.

I found that being a Muslim researcher helped the participants to open up more, as they knew I would be able to understand what they were talking about from an Islamic and cultural point of view that perhaps a non-Muslim would have struggled to make sense of. The narratives were used to situate the individuals and frame their identities, as they entailed a sharing of the self, which allowed for a more personal understanding of their issues. The use of stories as ‘entry points’ to research contributes to knowledge and signifies the authenticity of myself as the researcher and the findings, as they come from the accounts of the participants rather than from my own understanding or interpretation of their experiences and conversion journeys.

3.6 Challenges with Interviews

During my search for participants I came across some ex-Muslim converts who did not agree to take part in the interviews and share information about their experiences with a Muslim because of their fear of being exposed or judged. Others held feelings of anger and resentment towards Muslims, and did not wish to speak to any after their disaffiliation. Therefore, to a certain degree, despite the many advantages of me being a Muslim, my religious identity had been an obstacle and influenced the overall sample and the gathering of data from Muslim apostates, which highlights intersectionality issues during this stage. Finding de-converts from Islam was also an issue, owing to apostasy being a sensitive subject, and this led many to conceal their disaffiliation for safety and privacy reasons. I received four email responses from ex-Muslim converts who were members of the Council of Ex Muslims of Britain (CEMB) and who were willing to volunteer their time for an interview. Despite having the support of the CEMB and verifying that the research was genuine and for academic purposes, I was not able to obtain more than four responses. I also approached Solace, a British charity organisation that helps troubled female Muslim converts, in order to find people who were considering de-conversion, as a result of their hardships.

During the interview process, I felt I had to step out of my identity and discard my Muslim beliefs and cultural and religious understanding to have an unbiased sociological standpoint, which was a challenge. I also strongly suggest that had I worn a *burka* to interviews, as some very religious male converts had preferred, I would not have been able to gather many participants or receive the same open responses that I managed to obtain from the sessions, which emphasises the importance of choosing the right clothes to wear as a reflexive researcher, as well as the role dress plays in attracting specific people. Approaching very religious male converts was an issue, as many refused to be interviewed by a woman and especially a woman who did not cover her face, so I placed an advertisement (see Appendix I) for interview participants on Facebook group pages related to British converts and also requested the help of Muslim convert organisations, such as Peace Trail, which is run by Lauren Booth, to find male participants. Through this organisation I managed to interview seven male volunteers. It took a few weeks of approaching, socialising and talking to people to gather a suitable and enthusiastic study sample for the study.

Some of the stories were painful to listen to, and at times it was difficult to separate my own emotions from the narratives. To overcome these feelings and prevent them from becoming a part of the analysis, I made notes of what the participants believed or assumed to be the causes of their difficulties, alongside how I perceived them to avoid including my personal views in the study findings, which would not have done justice to the narrative. Corrine Glesne and Alan Peshkin (1992: xiii) claimed that learning to reflect on your emotions, behaviour and thoughts, as well as on the phenomenon under study, creates a means for becoming a better reflexive researcher and producing more accurate results. I also managed to avoid much bias by having my work checked by my supervisors and others to make sure that I was writing in a neutral sociological manner, analysing only the views of the participants. I also took regular breaks from writing so that I could read the material in a fresh manner each time in order to identify any biased personal opinions that may have been included in the analysis. Moreover, separating my Islamic views and opinions by referring back to The Quran and Hadiths that supported many participant claims helped me to understand how western converts understood Islamic teachings and implemented them into their lives. Some Quran verses, for example, were understood differently by various people, as a result of them having different cultural values, characters, intellectual and educational levels and amounts of logical reasoning, and this made each narrative unique.

3.7 Data Analysis

As I read through the data, an emerging set of themes and patterns became increasingly evident, and I used Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) thematic data analysis guidelines to study the interviews. Their framework is based on six steps of thematic analysis, which are: (1) familiarising yourself with your data (transcribing); (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes and (6) producing the report. Significant common themes were extracted, categorised, analysed, and made into chapters and sub-chapters in ways that attempt to do justice both to the elements of the research question and to the expectations and preoccupations of the interviewee.

I found that a thematic analysis was the most flexible, appropriate and fair method for this type of study that is based on a large collection of data, as it helps to identify and

analyse established and meaningful themes and patterns, and avoids grouping individuals into specific categories that might encourage bias, assumptions, discrimination and stereotyping. A table set out below of relevant and likely themes derived from previous studies and the interview data was created in an attempt to seek the main factors and experiences, both positive and negative, that contributed towards the conversion journey, so that the causes of significant changes, identity developments and de-conversion might more easily be identified and grouped. New findings continued to emerge until I felt that a saturation point in the data had been reached. The narratives and patterns were then studied, analysed and developed during the writing of short memos, which led to the extraction of appropriate sections from the narratives to support the analysis. From here the chapters started to develop from the themes created alongside ideas and explanations that were supported by previous theories mentioned in the literature review.

Table 1.12

Theory Generated Themes	Potential themes likely from a first look at the data
Context, childhood and religious beliefs, religious parental upbringing	Educational/family background
Adolescence, crises and identity issues, religious intellectual doubts	Level of religious involvement and belief in God, doubts
Community, race and identity	Personal thoughts on their upbringing
Problem-solving solutions	Abuse, crises and critical events
Religious and non-religious seekers	Islamic awareness and interaction/relationships with Muslims
Advocate strategies, missionary groups, Muslim encounters, influence of religious partners and friends	Interaction with Islamic literature and Muslims, media, <i>dawah</i> , university
Consequences of a religious conversion, identity issues, stereotypes	Daily minor and major issues. Consequences, challenges of being a Muslim, media, family reactions
Community and belonging, identity negotiation, race, discrimination	Muslim community issues, non-Muslim community issues and belonging, Islamic

	and Arabic education issues
Identity construction, dealing with the implications of a religious identity, the interplay between religion, ethnicity and culture and how Islam is understood by different people	Marriage, gender issues, children, religious commitments, race, Islamophobia, culture
Isolation, emotional problems	Positive outcomes, moral gains
Apostasy. Apostasy in Islam, de-conversion process	Reasons/causes for de-conversion, bad experiences with Muslims, marriage, racism, isolation, lack of support
Fear of harm, abuse, stigmatisation, identity issues	Closeted, open and community disaffiliates. Child custody issues, 'coming out' and moving on

3.8 Summary

In this chapter I have provided a critical and reflective discussion of my research strategies and reflexive methods. The primary data, theories and frameworks used to analyse the data have been discussed in both the literature review and this chapter, and together they have made it easier to recognise and categorise similar responses and extract themes in a chronological manner. Although the sample group for this study was relatively small and by no means accounts for all Muslim converts and de-converts in Britain, it is suggested that the statistics gathered and qualitative interviews undertaken provide rich data and new information that may contribute to a deeper understanding of the conversion and de-conversion processes to and from Islam. The study sample was limited to individuals who had spent most of their lives living in London, and so Muslim converts living in other cities and communities may provide different information and experiences of the conversion journey.

Chapter IV

Pre-Conversion Period

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore the first two of Lewis Rambo's (1993) stages, which are the context in which conversion occurs, and the various types of crises experienced that lead to a search for God or a solution to converts' problems. It will also explore attitudes to religion prior to conversion, and what attracts different people coming from different environments and backgrounds to Islam. This chapter's particular focus is the attempt to demonstrate various development processes of the start of a religious conversion, identity, and any significant turning points found within them that trigger a personal interest in Islamic beliefs. Conversion processes vary from person to person, as different situations, contexts, experiences, factors, reasons and elements contribute to individuals' decisions to convert to Islam in a western society.

Almost every route to Islam is different, and it is important to analyse every aspect, so that the causes of the challenges individuals face in their experiences can be identified. Participants gave a brief overview of their life stories from childhood to the present, which offered much description, reflection, detail and analysis with regard to their decision-making processes. This offered a deep insight into their lives and experiences. Excerpts from the interviews are included in the following chapters (the number in the brackets that follows the interviewee names refer to their interview number in Appendix IV (CD)).

4.2 The Big Context

Context has been made the first stage, as it structures and shapes the nature and status of individuals' conversions and gives the reader a clear idea of the types of issues and challenges that may result from a conversion within a particular environment. The big context is defined by macro-sociologists as being the set of large-scale and widespread social circumstances and/or processes. Every conversion is placed within a multi-faceted big context that embraces the geographical, political, social, economic and

religious domain in which a person is living at the time (Gration, 1983: 157–163). In this study, the big context refers to the postcolonial, multicultural and secular British society as a whole, which includes the current socio-political climate linked to Islam and Muslims.

4.2.1 Conversion to Islam in Postcolonial Britain

It is suggested that Muslim converts challenge the idea that Islam only belongs to foreign immigrants, and show that Islam may also belong to westerners living in non-Muslim countries and communities. Although British citizens have the freedom to choose their faith, reports (such as Brice, 2010) show that conversions to Islam are perceived as being problematic, both for the government and general public, because of terrorism and poor media coverage with regard to radical Muslims wanting to enforce their religious and cultural ideologies and/or practices in British society.

The spread of Islam and Muslim culture has been considered an issue in Britain since the late nineteenth century, as indigenous Britons have felt that their country has been invaded by ‘inferior’ Muslims and foreigners. Also, the idea of ‘Whiteness’ being superior to darker skin colours is still present in modern-day society and is associated with racist discrimination of immigrants. Therefore, English converts may be stripped of their White privileges by some people who perceive them as being ethnically ‘other’ and ‘not a true Brit’, as a result of converting to a religion that belongs to colonised foreigners, especially if the converts adopt Muslim cultural dress and habits.

It was found in this study and previous studies on converts mentioned in the literature review that many new Muslims do not adopt a postcolonial heritage Muslim identity, or associate themselves with an ethnic group, on account of the poor attitudes they have had to deal with from people who have perceived them as ‘traitors’. It may be suggested that many do not wish to lose their ‘White privileges’ and prefer to privatise their new beliefs. Homi Bhabha (1994) suggested that individuals who adopted various traits and elements from different groups created their own ‘third space’ as an attempt to negotiate their new beliefs with a western identity. He claimed that the occupation of third space hybridity was increasingly common in complex postcolonial societies, demonstrated in the lives and hybrid identities of Quilliam and Pickthall.

The postcolonial dynamic also helps explain why White conversions in particular are celebrated in heritage Muslim communities. They are often perceived as achievements, as White Britons acknowledge the superiority of the immigrant religion that causes them to abandon their western identities and imperialist views that immigrants and Muslims are inferior, insignificant and backwards. It can be argued that White conversions challenge western attitudes towards Islam and the Orient, and as a result many converts feel that their conversions are more valuable to heritage Muslims from a political rather than a religious perspective. Kate Zebiri (2007) mentions how many new Muslims were abandoned by members of their new faith after embracing Islam, causing many converts to believe that the Muslim community was not interested in their adoption of new beliefs, as they were treated as second-class citizens and 'less authentic' Muslims, especially when they were not Muslims for long. It can be argued that Muslim communities may feel threatened by the rise in numbers of White converts, as a result of their ancestors' experience with colonialism and the social damage it caused, whereas others may feel that some heritage Muslim communities, Arab and Asian in particular, are hypocritical and have similar attitudes to the colonisers when they perceive other ethnic groups, including African and Caribbean converts, as being racially inferior, even though they are also Muslims.

Many early converts to Islam were among the poor and former African slaves, a notable example being Bilal ibn Rabah Al Habashi who was freed by Abu Bakr, the first Caliph, and was highly trusted and chosen by The Prophet Muhammad to perform the first call to prayer in Islam because he had a beautiful voice. Bilal rose to a respected position of prominence and high status in Islam on account of his love for God, The Prophet and his people. This demonstrates the importance of racial equality in the foundation of Islam, which brings all ethnicities and types of people together (Malcolm X and Haley, 2001; Muhammad, 1977; Abdul-Rauf, 1977). However, the modern Islamic concept of Muslims being a part of one *Ummah* was not experienced by many new Muslims, who felt that Muslims were racist and more divided than united.

The notion of non-Whites being racist towards White people is known as 'reverse racism' (Norton and Sommers, 2011; Hill, 2008). This study found that to be racist, individuals needed to possess two traits, the first being privileged with regard to wealth, skin colour, status and power, which has social advantages, and the second being free and not a member of a colonised or oppressed race. White people typically occupy

positions of racial privilege, even when they are disadvantaged in other areas; however, with reverse racism in a Muslim community context, the privileges of White people are not acknowledged. As a result, some converts choose to start, or join, a White Muslim community to separate themselves from the prejudices of heritage Muslims. The first English Muslim communities were established in Liverpool (Geaves, 2010), Woking (Hadhrami, 1998; Pickthall, 1937), Norfolk, Norwich (Peerbux and Whyte, 2016) and Leicester (Al-Toma and Hibell, 2010). Film producers Ahmed Peerbux and Sean Hanif Whyte created a film documentary entitled 'Blessed Are the Strangers' (2016) that tells the story of the English Muslim community in Norwich that was created by a group of converts who left London in the 1970s and attempted to create a Muslim village in the Norfolk countryside, before settling in Norwich. The documentary mentions that the Ihsan Mosque in Norwich became the first mosque in the UK (after the mosques established by Quilliam and Pickthall) to be established by English and Caribbean converts to Islam and now has a community of over three hundred people. Recent attempts by British converts to establish more supportive and local communities for converts can be found in various parts of London, Manchester and Brighton.

Therefore, it can be seen that the postcolonial context may have strong psychological influences on the identity development of new Muslims, who may be affected by either Muslim and/or non-Muslim societies, depending on their attitudes and views on colonisation and Islam. The complex aspect here is the creation of a hybrid identity and environment that balances the most important aspects of individuals' sense of being, and who they aspire to be without feeling discriminated, unwanted, victimised and isolated.

4.2.2 Religion in Private and Public Spheres

The social freedoms people are given to practise their faith in a western society is a subject of great controversy. Many people in Britain adopt the western view, which perceives religious belief to be a private matter that is not displayed in public, whereas those with an eastern point of view perceive the following of a religion as both a public and private practice. Anne-Sofie Roald (2001: 10) states that:

Religion in a western context tends to be considered as belonging to the personal

sphere, which might make it difficult for researchers reared in such a tradition to wholly grasp the idea of Islam as a ‘comprehensive system’, as Muslims tend to speak in worldly terms in their discussions with non-Muslims.

A YouGov-Cambridge poll (2012) on British social attitudes found that an overwhelming eighty-one per cent of the 2,027 respondents agreed with the statement, ‘Religious practice is a private matter and should be separated from the political and economic life of my country’ and only six per cent disagreed. Another poll carried out by Ipsos Mori (2012) to investigate the religious and social attitudes of British Christians found that seventy-four per cent believe that religion should be a private matter. It is therefore unusual in the West for people to display acts of faith, such as praying in a public park, and it may make them vulnerable to Islamophobic abuse depending on the political climate of the time.

Many devout Christians have perceived the intolerance shown towards a public display of religious beliefs as religious discrimination and have found this insulting, with one saying, ‘My Christian faith isn’t something that you put on and then take off to go to work’ (Waterfield, 2012). However, the majority of people who follow a faith in a secular society choose to do so in their own religious communities or privately by cultivating a religiosity that does not require them to participate actively in worshipping communities to protect their careers and social lives (Davie, 2007). Others who do not wish or are unable to discard their religious beliefs may leave jobs that go against what they believe in, such as carrying out abortions and gay marriages.

Many sociologists (for example, Cane, Evans and Robinson, 2008) claim that religion should be regarded as a private matter, as it is not based on logic or rationale, thus making it unsuitable for the political sphere. It is also suggested that because of the increase in religious conflicts and wars, many people prefer religious beliefs to be privatised so that people do not publicly spread their ‘problematic’ beliefs to others. The reasons behind the retreat of religion in western social life are diverse, the main one being that secularisation is one of the dominant processes of the modern world that supports a religious retreat from socio-political life. José Casanova (1994) argues that the separation of the state from religious influences leaves civil society as a democratic public sphere in which religious beliefs are privatised. James Beckford (2010: 130) challenges the notion of a return of public religion, claiming that ‘religion has always

been a feature of British public life. It never went away' on account of its involvement in Church of England schools, the military and hospitals. Although religious festivals, such as Christmas and Easter are celebrated by a minority of people in a truly religious manner, that is, in church and worship, many people perceive them to be part of their heritage and traditions that they wish to maintain in the form of social events. Beckford therefore reckons that religion, or elements of it, will continue to be visible in public, regardless of its separation of the state and the decline of believers, as much of British culture remains based on Christian values.

The decrease in numbers of true worshippers means religion has less significance in state matters. The 2011 Census shows that the Christian population of England and Wales fell by four million to 33.2 million in the past decade, and the number of people describing themselves as having no religion rose from fifteen per cent to twenty-five per cent. This shows a big decline compared to the figures of the Census 2001 statistics, in which seventy-two per cent of the population described themselves as being Christian. In Britain there are currently 14.1 million people with no religion compared to 7.7 million a decade ago (Pigott, 2012). The proportion of babies being baptised into the Church of England has fallen significantly from a high of seventy per cent in 1930 to twelve per cent in 2011 (Church of England Statistics, 2011). It has also been noted that the elderly and immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean comprise the largest groups of religious people who attend church services in Britain. Statistics show a substantial drop in religious participation during the mid-twentieth century, leading many to believe that religious beliefs are in irreversible decline. It is also suggested that the spread of secularism has encouraged many people to abandon moral practices and virtues found in religion, such as marriage and chastity, especially after the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

Despite the decline in true believers and social morality, there has been greater interest amongst the public in religious ideologies as a result of the media. According to Beckford (2010), media attention to religions has increased because of significant news coverage on world events, such as wars, 9/11, documentaries covering natural disasters, crimes, festivals, pilgrimages and immigration. These issues have generated greater awareness and form the basis for Beckford's claim of 'republicisation' in the sense of higher visibility. Religious schools, places of worship and organisations such as the *Shariah* (Islamic law) Council and Islamic Centres are widespread, catering for the

needs of different Islamic faith groups. Some sociologists (for example, Herbert, 2013: 22) believe that ‘media dynamics are critical’, and that ‘religion is divisive and threatening amongst the public’. However, although religions have different practices, some more public than others in their form of dress and worship, many are connected via shared values.

4.2.2.1 Private and Public Spheres in Islam

Owing to the conflicting opinions regarding the publicising of religious beliefs in the West, it is important to analyse the postcolonial Islamic context and its place within a wider western social context to assess why Muslims choose to privatise or publicise their religious beliefs, and to what extent they do so. On the one hand, many may be encouraged by multiculturalism and the personal freedom of religion to publicise their beliefs, whereas others may feel unsafe doing so in a society that harbours various degrees of hostility towards Muslims and Islam.

According to Mohsen Kadivar (2005) the terms ‘private’ and ‘public’ are not rooted at the heart of Islamic doctrine and jurisprudence. He claims that the private sphere may be regarded as what is personal or exclusive to the individual; that which one would rather keep concealed from others, such as sins, wealth and family matters. However, in the public sphere nothing is kept secret or rendered inaccessible from others, so, if individuals sin in public or choose to display their beliefs, they have placed themselves in a position where people feel the right to enquire, criticise and question their actions. According to Islamic law, all matters are assumed to belong to the private sphere unless they are proved to belong to the public sphere, such as wearing the *hijab*, performing *Hajj* and/or *Umrah* (visiting The *Ka’ba* as pilgrims at any time of the year. This is not one of the mandatory five pillars of Islam) and praying in a mosque.

Faithful individuals apply Islamic principles to all aspects of their lives, where there is no difference between private and public spheres of thought or action, with the knowledge and belief that God is always watching. Others who are not so faithful may be practising in the public domain only for cultural reasons, or in the private domain to avoid discrimination, for example. Either way, Muslims are not permitted to meddle in the affairs of others or enforce piety and religious obligations upon people. Therefore,

decisions to privatise or publicise religious beliefs are made either by individuals or influenced by the social and religious context. In some Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, religious police are appointed by the government to enquire into matters of the public sphere by patrolling the streets to ensure that Islamic values prevail. This includes the enforcement of punishments for those who sin in public to maintain religious and moral order in society. In an Islamic society where Islamic rules influence the laws of the country, restrictions on the way people dress, act and worship are imposed on citizens, whereas in the West this may happen on a smaller scale in traditional Muslim communities.

4.2.3 The Political Climate

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries the stereotype of a typical Muslim was presented in literary and theological documents as being ‘The Turk’ who was ‘cruel, tyrannical, deviant and deceiving’ (Rana, 2001: 38). Images of barbaric, violent, backward, oppressive and intolerant Muslims, such as those found in the self-proclaimed ‘Islamic’ group ISIS are similar to the early Orientalist depictions of Arabs whose values and cultural practices were claimed to be inherently inferior to western ones.

The western media are largely seen by Muslims as a negative influence. This view is perhaps not without foundation. The traditional Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims as political anarchists and tyrants at home subjugating their women have been disseminated in the media as caricatures and stereotypes. Very often the news that is shown about Muslims centres around negative stories (Ahmed, 1992: 9).

Modern researchers use the term ‘Islamophobia’ to identify the causes and consequences of anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiments within various geographical contexts. Erik Bleich (2011: 1581) explores how Islamophobia is deployed in public and scholarly debates, and draws on research on concept formation, prejudice and analogous forms of status hierarchies to offer a suitable scientific definition. He defines Islamophobia as consisting of ‘indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims’. In 2006, a survey suggested that Islamophobia most likely resulted

from a minority fourteen per cent of the British population with reportedly unfavourable views of Muslims post 9/11 (Pew, 2006, reported in Vellenga, 2008: 466). Yet this perception is challenged by a more comprehensive study on Islam's representation in the British press, which questions whether the media is openly prejudiced against Muslims.

On the whole we did not find a great deal of evidence of extremely negative and generalising stereotypes about Islam. ... Most newspapers were careful to avoid making such claims, at least openly. What emerged instead is a more subtle and ambivalent picture, which indirectly contributes to negative stereotypes. For example, we saw how the British press used the word terrorism (and related forms, such as terrorist) more often in stories about Muslims and Islam than words that actually referenced the concept of Islam (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013: 255).

Recent scholarship has suggested that the news media tends to position Islam as a threat to a British way of life and reproduces established patterns of 'common sense' ideas, which position the religious and cultural values of Muslims and those of 'mainstream' British society in a relation of conflict, which fuels hostility and affects the opinions of people about Islam (Poole, 2006).

The idea that Islam is medieval and dangerous, as well as hostile and threatening to 'us', for example, has acquired a place both in the culture and in the polity that is very well defined [...] such an idea furnishes a kind of a priori touchstone to be taken account of by anyone wishing to discuss or say something about Islam (Said, 1997: 157).

In another analysis of Muslims and Islam in the British press, Brian Whitaker (2002: 55) notes that 'there are four very persistent stereotypes that crop up time and again in the different articles. These tell us that Muslims are intolerant, misogynistic, violent or cruel, and finally, strange or different.'

Tahir Abbas (2000: 65) found that contemporary Islamophobia stems from colonialism, immigration, culture, racism, 9/11 and the global war on terror. The world-changing events of 9/11 and 7/7 led to the establishment of the British government's Pursue Anti-

Terrorism Policy (2015). The aim of this social program was to stop terrorist attacks in Britain by detecting and investigating threats at the earliest possible stage, disrupting terrorist activity before it can endanger the public and wherever possible, prosecuting those responsible. Warren Chin (2001: 194) mentioned that many Muslims in Britain perceived the government's Pursue and Prevent Anti-Terrorism Policy, to stop people becoming or supporting terrorists, as another way of incriminating and spying on innocent people who appeared to be or were known to be Muslims. The motives of British Muslims alongside their patriotism were questioned according to British Muslim political activist Salma Yaqoob in the Stop the War Coalition conference, which took place in Birmingham (May, 2016). Yaqoob went on to say that the US and British government's international military campaign and anti-terrorist laws, including detention without charge or trial had been used unfairly against the Muslim community, with an increasing number of stops, searches and arrests, which led to few convictions.

The Pursue and Prevent Policies also encouraged many Muslim citizens and tourists in Britain to avoid mosques and remove any religious symbols, such as the *hijab* in order to not be identified as Muslims and avoid any risk of Islamophobic abuse. Tell Mama (2015), a public service which measures and monitors anti-Muslim incidents reported that both private and public threats and hate crimes against Muslims soared by 573% since the 7/7 attacks, the majority of attacks being against Muslim women, and reports that Muslims were less likely to be employed. Online abuse via social media platforms towards Muslims also increased, the vast majority being on Twitter and Facebook. In an article in *The Guardian*, Mehdi Hasan claims, 'Since 7/7, anti-Muslim hate crimes have soared. Mosques have been firebombed while headscarf-clad women have been physically attacked. According to the charity ChildLine, Islamophobic bullying is now rife in our schools' (Hasan, 2015).

Chin (2001) argued that rather than minimizing extremism, the anti-terrorism policies helped to exacerbate it and created an unnecessary climate of fear, suspicion and paranoia among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. He also claimed that they helped to propagate an Islamist ideology that played an important role in radicalizing some of the British Muslim youth, including converts, some of who joined terrorist groups such as ISIS, as a result of the frustration, victimization, discrimination and other reasons (MacAskill, 2016), while others attempted to salvage Islam's negative reputation by organising Islamic awareness and *dawah* events. The political climate and policies also

encouraged many Muslims to leave Islam, as a result of the repression and discrimination experienced (Shahid, 2014). Articles about honour killings, male oppression of women and radical Muslim converts, have also contributed to the rise in Islamophobic attacks and a negative view of Islam, which led many people to leave Islam too. It may be argued that the representation of Islam and Muslims in the media has a limited and narrow framework of understanding that has effectively constructed and shaped much public opinion.

A European poll (Zick, Küpper and Hövermann, 2011) showed that forty-five per cent of Britons are not ashamed to admit that they think there are 'too many' Muslims in Britain; forty-seven per cent of Britons perceive Muslims to be a threat; fifty-two per cent believe that Muslims create problems; and fifty-eight per cent associate Islam with extremism. A BBC Radio One Newsbeat poll (Kotecha, 2013) showed that twenty-five per cent of 1,000 eighteen- to twenty-four year-olds questioned in Britain do not trust Muslims as a result of terrorist-related crimes. Converts involved in crime, terrorism and Islamic extremism are newsworthy, and more likely to influence public behaviour and attitudes, especially as recent reports show that Islamic conversions are on the rise in Britain, which heightens public concern (Brice, 2010). It is also suggested that multiculturalism is to blame for the isolation of 'problematic societies' and the lack of integration of immigrants into mainstream British society, as immigrants have been given the freedom to practise their own beliefs and cultures that in many instances are in conflict with British values and laws, which, for example, allow freedom of speech, the freedom to choose a religion, and the freedom and right to be homosexual, all of which are forbidden in many Muslim countries and communities.

The big context plays an important role in determining the outcome and experiences of conversion, especially if there is fear, mistrust and hostility within it towards Islam and Muslims in general. It is suggested, therefore, that converting to Islam in such a social context is not perceived as something 'normal' to do by the public. Catherine Heseltine, a convert to Islam and head of the Muslim Public Affairs Committee said, 'Among certain sections of society, there is a deep mistrust of converts. There's a feeling that the one thing worse than a Muslim is a convert because they're perceived as going over the other side' (Taylor and Morrisson, 2011). This raises the question of why some people are willing to take on the risks and challenges of becoming Muslims, despite being aware of the issues they are likely to face. This knowledge helps the reader to

understand how individuals perceive the world, religion, the society and themselves, alongside how they plan to integrate Islamic beliefs and values in their lives, negotiate a British Muslim identity, and deal with the obstacles and difficulties.

4.3 The Small Context

This section provides an overview of the small context, which in this study is defined as being a set of small-scale social processes and personal circumstances. The small context includes the individuals' social environment, personal relationships with family and friends, religious upbringing, and usually involves personal experiences, intimate desires, problems, crises and turning points during their childhood and adolescence periods that influenced the decision to convert to Islam at a later stage. The majority of participants came from a religious background, although not all were practising, and those who came from non-practising religious backgrounds tended to convert because faith, morality and spirituality were missing elements in their lives. It was interesting to see how, despite their various ages, backgrounds and upbringing, they were able to find different paths to Islam, and how their experiences, doubts and crises inspired them to be Muslims in an anti-Islamic and secular society.

4.3.1 Family Upbringing and the Social Environment

In this study, twenty-two participants were raised as Christians, two were raised as Jews, three were raised as Hindus, one was raised in a mixed faith household, and six had atheist parents. Ten of the participants were raised in religious households, eleven of the participants were raised in non-religious households, even though their parents associated themselves with a religious group, primarily Christianity, seven participants had one parent who was considered religious, while the other parent was either not practising or was atheist, and six participants were raised by atheist parents, although some were later influenced by religious grandparents.

Some participants were raised by their parents in loving, religious households that encouraged religious beliefs and practices alongside good moral behaviour. Lina (22) George (28) and Karen (29) all attended Church of England schools and mentioned how religion was important to them, as it gave them peace and moral principles. They

claimed to be happy children and mentioned how their parents had invested a lot of time into their moral upbringing. Karen's parents, for example, would buy her Christian cartoons and take her to fun religious activities and events, and as she grew older she was not allowed to drink alcohol, go dancing, or have boyfriends, which helped her to avoid issues other participants had, such as teenage pregnancies and drink/drug problems. Karen believed that Christian morals and virtues helped her to avoid a life of corruption, personal destruction and sin. By the time Karen went to university and came across Muslims, she started to have intellectual doubts regarding her Christian theological beliefs. 'I had sleepless nights over it thinking about what I had read [in The Quran] and pondering over what I was taught to be the truth all my life. I was in a complete state of confusion over my beliefs and felt depressed for a while.' It is suggested that individuals tend to follow what they are used to seeing their parents and grandparents follow, until they reach adolescence when they can use their intellect and make their own decisions. It is generally difficult for humans to abandon established ideas, traditions, rituals and customs, and people tend not to think too much about if what they are doing is rational or based on any truth until they are faced with intellectual doubts.

George (28) described his upbringing as being 'typical' because he was raised in a religious Anglican Christian household. 'I don't know of any member of my immediate or extended family who is not a practising Christian. The members of my extended family are also or have been preachers, priests and missionaries.' Hassan (8) and Janet (32) also use the terms 'normal' and 'typical' to describe their English upbringing, even though it goes against what George perceives to be normal, as they were both raised in non-practising Christian and atheist households and did things that 'normal' British people do, such as playing football, drinking, having girlfriends and boyfriends and partying. It is interesting to note how behaviour can be perceived as 'normal' if it is consistent with the most common behaviour of individuals found in the society, so if an individual's behaviour goes against what is considered to be 'normal' behaviour, it will at once be considered to be abnormal. Although it is difficult to define normality, as it is a flexible and subjective concept, it is usually perceived to be something 'good', while abnormality is seen to be 'bad' and may have social consequences, such as exclusion and stigmatisation (Bartlett, 2011: xi). Hussein (31) was raised in a Christian community where he was used to attending church every Sunday, and Robert (14) claimed that being a Quaker instilled valuable moral lessons in him that led him to

believe that serving God and others was more important than serving himself. This indicates that a caring and loving environment is essential for individuals to enable them to lead a peaceful, spiritual and religious lifestyle.

4.3.2 Problems and Crises within a Religious Context

This section addresses various issues that arise in the lives of participants that either causes them to question their religious beliefs or to explore them. It also analyses their personal experiences of religion, alongside any turning points and their personal needs and desires to find answers to their questions and solutions to their problems.

Previous studies by Rambo (1993) and others (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966, 1980; Freud, 1923) have included a substantial number of study samples who experienced crises that led them to a religious conversion or a search for a new identity. It is suggested that the context in which a religious conversion occurs is greatly influenced by different social, personal and religious factors, alongside that which individuals perceive to be a crisis. A crisis is subjective, as different people have various attitudes towards how they view, are affected by, and feel, about negative experiences. For example, some people may perceive them as ‘bad luck’ or ‘fate’. Crises in this study vary from being intellectually confused by something that calls into question one’s fundamental orientation to life and religious beliefs, to abuse and being emotionally and physically affected by worldly affairs such as war, natural disasters, deaths and illnesses that may trigger questions and an interest in God and religion. The findings support the work of Chana Ullman (1989), John Lofland and Rodney Stark (1965) and V. Bailey Gillespie (1991) among others, who have evaluated the great contribution of emotional factors to religious conversion journeys, which have stemmed from individuals’ childhood experiences. Such issues were considered to be turning points in their lives. It should be noted, however, that for some participants a significant crisis was not mentioned as a turning point in their journey.

Although some participants claimed to have had happy childhoods, the fact they were unable fully to discuss or accept the concept of God and Jesus being divine distressed them. George (28), for example, was told by a priest and his family that his doubts about the Christian faith came from devil and that he should ignore them. Janet (32) also had issues with Christians claiming God was a human being, and Maria (5),

although she enjoyed reading The Bible, always felt uneasy about people saying that Jesus was the son of God, and was not allowed to discuss this issue at home. Ahmed (1), Hassan (8) and Jack (27) also felt uncomfortable praying to a ‘Crucified/Dead God’ and questioned Christ’s divine superiority over ordinary human beings. Another issue that troubled Hassan was the Christian belief that babies are born with sins that they take from their parents, which he found to be unfair, whereas Islam rejects this concept (‘And no bearer of burdens shall bear another’s burden’ (Quran 35: 18).)

There have been instances where individuals experienced a crisis when doubting religious teachings, whether they were raised by one or two religious parents and this is a common cause of atheism. For some individuals, an upbringing without a religious foundation to explain the purpose of life was considered to be a problem and triggered a crisis in their development of an identity and lifestyle. ‘It often bothered me to think that we are living on this earth with no purpose and of course because I didn’t believe in God I never linked the purpose of life with religion’ (Hassan, 8). Religious doubts and cognitive concerns can cause frustration and distress, especially when individuals cannot find convincing answers to their questions about the faith they are told or expected to follow by their parents and community because they do not understand it themselves. Reema (13), for example, felt distressed because her religious Hindu mother did not know how to defend her beliefs by providing logical answers to her questions and, like Alia (15), struggled to make sense of them. Mariam (11) felt that the Hindu gods in her home were useless because they did not respond to anything, and when she questioned her mother about this she would become angry with Mariam for insulting the gods and their religion. Alia recalled an incident from her childhood when she accidentally broke a statue of a god and expected the god to fix himself; when he did not, however, she started to have doubts about his powers and her beliefs.

Turning points in childhood and adolescent experiences play an important role in conversion journeys, as individuals may have witnessed an event that triggered new opinions about their faith, or felt they did not belong in their community, as the beliefs held within it went against their own. Children also have a tendency to question and rebel against things that do not make sense to them. Pierre Bourdieu (1980) proposed a ‘reflexive sociology’, in which one recognises one’s biases, beliefs and assumptions in the act of sense-making. He suggested that humans have the ability to reflect on their beliefs, upbringing and worldview and find an intellectual and logical meaning for it all

(Navarro, 2006: 15–16). The human need to understand beliefs and religious concepts from a logical perspective was apparent in many of the participants.

As a child, Ryan (18) often wondered why people belonged to different religions, which made him question why he had to believe that being a Jew was the right thing in life and that everyone else who followed other beliefs were wrong. He spent most of his youth as a practising Jew, not because he believed in Jewish teachings but because he was compelled to do so, even though many of the practices and rituals made him feel uncomfortable. It was troubling for some to know that there was absolutely no freedom of choice in religion, and that they were expected to believe what they were taught with no questions allowed. Some of the participants' responses indicated that religious parents who have poor relationships with their children, or who have pressurised them to conform to their ways of life and beliefs, are more likely to have rebellious children who become closeted disaffiliates, atheists or convert to other religions. Their responses also indicate that those who search for a new, loving, moral and disciplined society that would play the supporting role of family, such as Hafsa (25) and Henry (24), who had poor and limited relationships with their families, are likely to be attracted to the security found in friendships, religious groups and other communities.

For some participants (Maria, 5; Lauren, 20; Sonia, 26; Janet, 32) belonging to a religious group was a part of a social, cultural and ethnic identity rather than a system of belief, where there may be forms of social pressure to uphold, for example, White Christian traditions and cultural practices. Zaynab (30), for example, often wondered why her parents did not go to church, as they called themselves Christians. She felt marginalised because she did not conform to the practices of the Christian environment she belonged to. 'I was different to my friends at school, as most of them were brought up with Christian values whereas I wasn't and it would affect their behaviour, for example they would say grace at lunch times.' This raises the question of why people present themselves as Christians, Hindus, Jews or Muslims but do not fully commit to following the faith. It can be argued that many people may not hold religious beliefs, which is considered a personal matter, but that the public display of actions, such as attending church at Christmas, confirms the individual's membership of a particular society. Sara (3) mentioned that after her parents divorced she stopped going to church, as it was associated with a family outing rather than worship and belonging to a community, whereas Janet (32) claimed that her parents were originally non-practising

Christians but nevertheless ‘good people’, who found it important to involve their children with church weddings and funeral ceremonies so that they would always be a part of the community where they could find social support. Presenting religious practices as a part of British culture confused many of the participants when they were growing up, especially if the parents did not believe in God or Jesus, or follow religious rules. Others, such as Ahmed (1), Fatima (2) and Luke (34) became confused when they were raised by parents who held different beliefs. Ahmed (1), for example claimed that his non-religious Christian parents implemented a lot of Buddhist practices into their daily lives, which created confusion, while Fatima had a Muslim father but was raised as a Christian by her mother. Other participants, such as Mark (33), believed in God but discarded other religious beliefs such as prophets, heaven, hell, angels and the devil.

John Lofland and Norman Skonovd (1981) state that emotional stress arising from issues such as divorce and personal problems may lead to a search for answers in a religion. Divorce introduces a massive emotional and psychological change in the lives of children or adolescents, as they live with one parent, are torn between different households, and witness arguments and fights (Foulkes-Jamison, 2001). Sara (3) became depressed, as she felt her parents’ divorce was her fault and Omar (10), the eldest of his siblings, was expected by his mother to take on a higher degree of responsibility in the home because he had an irresponsible father whom he resented. He recalls his experience of looking after his family as being ‘hard’ and ‘stressful’. Some people blamed God for their unhappiness, and challenged the view that God is loving and merciful, while others who did not believe in God blamed their parents. Many individuals including ones with atheist parents (for instance, Hassan 8) struggled to believe in a God who spreads love in His creation, while confronting and experiencing the evil and disasters in the world that the same God allows to happen. ‘Many people think that God (if He exists) would want to maximize human happiness and that God is bad or non-existent since he does not do so’ (Davies, 2006: 160). Adam’s (17) parents preferred a more scientific worldview, because, for them, a secular education offers more benefits, such as a better understanding of worldly events and natural disasters, and provides better opportunities for employment, higher salaries and a social status than being religious does.

Two cases of major emotional crises (Mark, 33; Luke, 34) were linked to family illnesses and deaths, which were blamed on God. Experiencing family deaths during

adolescence raised questions regarding the purpose of life, especially when the deceased had a religious burial. The significance of religion in an individual's burial might encourage some people to think more deeply about the meaning of life, death, and what happens subsequently within a religious context. Luke (34) had a troubled adolescence because his younger brother died in a car accident, which caused him to lose faith in God's mercy and become an atheist.

It was found that the participants who relied on God for help were more likely to blame their parents for their emotional crises. This often contributed to strengthening a spiritual connection with God and helped individuals to cope. Lauren (20), for example, had suicidal thoughts on account of being emotionally and physically abused throughout her childhood by her alcoholic father who had psychological issues, and this caused a divorce. She also claimed to have had an existential crisis in high school that depressed her, and began questioning the meaning and purpose of life. Vivian Vignoles, Xenia Chrysochoou and Glynis Breakwell (2002) claimed that searching for the meaning of life was apparent in many cases of identity change, as individuals attempted to get to know their purpose in life and who they were. Pursuing a spiritual perspective to life has been a way in which some individuals have dealt with crises.

Hassan (8) mentioned that although his parents were atheists, they raised him to have Christian values such as brotherly love, kindness and forgiveness, while his Christian grandparents taught him about God and Jesus. Zaynab (30) and Janet (32) also claimed that their parents were good people despite them being non-practising Christians. This suggests that some people believe they do not need to follow a religion in order to be good and moral people. According to the Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics (Childress and Macquarrie, 1986: 401) 'religion and morality are to be defined differently and have no definitional connections with each other. Conceptually and in principle, morality and a religious value system are two distinct kinds of value systems or action guides.' Moral philosophers, (for instance Paul and Elder, 2006; Rachels, 2002) argue that morality is based on common sense and reason and that it is difficult to obtain morality from religion when punishments prescribed for adultery, blasphemy and other sins, such as being a non-believer, are considered ethical. Although the secular world has abandoned much religious morality, and individuals have committed religious sins such as pre-marital intercourse and adultery without any punishment being prescribed, many individuals continue to be influenced by religious, primarily

Christian, moral teaching that has been passed down generations that sets moral standards relating to important world issues, such as war, murder, abortion and rape. Muslim scholars have unanimously agreed that the purpose of the revealed books has always been about inner purification, morality, the continuation of good qualities and practices and abolishment of bad practices (Sulaimani, 1986: 5–64).

It can be suggested that many orthodox Jews and Hindus who hold strong religious beliefs prefer to live in their own communities, which makes raising children in a religious environment with the same values an easier task, regardless of whether or not the children hold the same beliefs. ‘Everyone around me were Hindus. There were some Indian Muslims in my local school but we were not allowed to mix with them’ (Mariam, 11). The influences of secular values alongside the beliefs and practices of other faith groups are often perceived as a threat to the cultural and religious values of various communities. It was interesting to see in Mariam (11), Leyla (7), George (28) and Karen’s (29) cases that their parents were keen to preserve their religious values and beliefs by keeping their schooling and social life within the walls of their own communities to reduce the chances of them being ‘corrupted’. Nevertheless, this study shows that these individuals were more likely to become rebellious or encounter other faiths that sparked their interest later in life.

Adolescence and young adulthood is suggested by Chana Ullman (1989: 199–210), Erik Erikson (1968) and James E. Marcia (1966) to be a likely time for people to have intellectual doubts regarding their upbringing, childhood beliefs, lifestyle, identity and worldview changes, and to explore other options until they find one that is in agreement with their own beliefs and understanding of the world. The religious conversion of a parent, such as Leyla’s (7) father (who converted from Christianity to Judaism to marry her mother), may also make individuals more open to the possibility of converting to a religion or social group of their choice later on in their lives, should they find its beliefs, benefits and lifestyle more suitable.

It was considered important to focus on the smaller social and religious context, as it would show in the conversion stage if there was an element of continuity in the process from one identity to another one regarding beliefs, lifestyle, environment and values. Participants’ accounts of experiences and turning points help the reader to identify the personal needs and desires of the individuals who are seeking spirituality, love, answers,

or other elements that they felt were missing in their lives.

4.4 Problem-Solving Solutions

Many Sociologists (such as, Bainbridge, 1992; Ullman, 1989; Lofland and Stark, 1965) note that psychological frustration and lack of self-esteem are essential preconditions for conversion to a religion, alongside a belief that a religious solution is best. Rambo's (1993) theory about crises being a trigger for religious conversion journeys may be supported in instances when they significantly contribute to the development of faith in individuals, and are times when God's existence and power to solve problems is often explored. Individuals who already had a strong belief in God sought comfort from a crisis in prayer, which gave them emotional and spiritual strength. However, despite the rising numbers of Islamic conversions reported by Brice (2010), Roy Baumeister (1986: 170) claims that religious conversion as a form of solving an adolescent and young adult identity crisis in the modern age is something of the past and is today not seen as something usual. This is because the decline of religious faith, activities and experience among young people in a developing secular society has deprived them of a means of solving such crises and seeking a way out within a religious context.

To generate meaning and purpose, individuals need to actively look for resources that offer growth and development to solve problems or enrich life (Dawson, 1990). Spirituality, for example, is often presented by religious scholars as conceptually representing every individual's personal search for the meaning of life; however, it is not always within a religious context. While every human is argued to be spiritual, only some are religious (Harris, 2014). Therefore, it may be argued that religious doubts do not always trigger a conversion journey, but this study has found that doubts powerfully influence individuals to explore the concept of God, the meaning of life and faith.

There are various ways in which individuals seek solutions to problems within a religious context, which often starts with a previous belief in God, awareness of other faiths, or via encounters with religious group members who tell them that via prayer God can help solve their problems. Rebecca (23) who was an atheist considered religion as a final solution, after being told by Muslims that Islam could help her overcome her emotional and drinking issues. 'I tried alcohol support groups and counselling but they

didn't work.' In most cases, if individuals are satisfied with the answers given, it can be a turning point in their lives and the start of a religious conversion journey. 'As relationships between family and I broke down, I was a rebellious teenager, establishing a relationship with God became of importance' (Alia, 15).

The article, 'Religion and the Problem-Solving Process' (Pargament, et al., 1988: 90–104), which is based on a study of 268 medically ill, elderly and hospitalised patients, and how they responded to measures of religious and spiritual coping, identified three coping styles in the religious problem-solving scale, which are collaborative, self-directed and deferring. The scale measures the application of religious beliefs in everyday actions and decisions. Kenneth Pargament (1997) concludes that one of the most common ways that people cope with trauma is through the comfort found in religious or spiritual practices. This collaborative style of religious coping involves an active and intimate communication with God. The deferring coping style involves individuals who rely heavily on God and divine intervention and delegate their stress without taking personal responsibility for the situation. The self-directed style of religious coping emphasises the free will given by God that allows individuals to solve their own problems independently, which is largely viewed as non-religious. Pargament claimed that religion has the transformative power to create radical personal change, which can lead to the 'born again' experience that occurs when the individual begins to feel a spiritual force, identified as God. Therefore, a spiritual transformation can change one's perception of the world, society, attitudes and behaviour, and can be understood as a radical reorganisation of one's identity, meaning, and purpose in life. Spiritual transformations can occur gradually or suddenly, and the time spent in the search for God varies from person to person.

Another study, on how couples deal with the death of a child (Ungureanu and Sandberg, 2010: 302–319), found that an attachment to God is very important in dealing with a crisis, and that the level of spirituality and connection one has to God determines how successful religious coping will be. 'I believed in God very strongly as a young adolescent, it helped me cope with the emotional and psychological problems that were caused by my upbringing' (Lauren, 20). Coping with the help of a religion has been proven to improve stress levels and a developed sense of peace and meaning, while a poor relationship with God or lack of a spiritual connection was related to depression, distress and trauma. Muslims believe in this theory, as it is mentioned in The Quran (3:

160; 13: 28; 21: 83–84). According to the Islamic faith, having patience means accepting what is beyond human control and to completely surrender to the will of God in times of distress and anxiety as a problem-solving solution. However, although it may be seen that religious coping may result in positive outcomes, some studies claim that it can have a negative effect on the lives of individuals, and sometimes leads to greater amounts of stress and depression when dealing with a crisis (Thompson and Vardaman, 1997: 44–51). For example, hardships may be perceived as God’s way of punishing individuals for something they had done wrong.

The study found that if individuals believe in God but are in complete disagreement with their religion from birth, it is highly likely they will explore other faith groups to see which one suits them best. This is usually determined if individuals find the right theological models that offer an entry point, and faith communities that offer security and support. ‘Being a religious person I was naturally curious about other religions and what they believed in’ (Lina, 22). It is suggested that a healthy re-affiliation is needed that requires individuals to turn to something positive that can influence their lives in a better way and act as a bridge between anger, bitterness, depression and hope, which is main the challenge of the quest stage.

Glynis Breakwell’s (1986) concept of continuity can be seen in the majority of cases presented in this section, as individuals begin to identify and pursue potential solutions for their crises and problems. The majority of participants had believed in God during various stages in their lives, and those who were affected by God’s presence, or lack of presence in their lives continued to search for Him and spirituality as a solution. Those who believed in God knew they needed to find a religious solution and answers, as their relationship with Him, or awareness of His existence, shaped a large part of their identity, especially if God was associated with the good things that happened in their lives. However, those who did not believe in God or felt let down by Him were unlikely to explore religion for answers unless they came across a theology that interested them later on. Some participants who had been raised by non-religious parents to have strong values and morals desired to find the purpose of life and an ideology that answered their intellectual questions, increased their knowledge of the world, and encouraged them to improve morally. Therefore, the element or principle of continuity in the pre-conversion stage shows a personal desire to extend and develop former identities into ‘better’ identities. However, the elements that are taken from the former identity are more

clearly defined and identified after an individual's conversion.

4.5 Summary

The various elements and experiences found within contexts that would shape or influence an individual's opinion about religion and God contributed greatly to a better understanding of how and why individuals choose to search for solutions to their problems or crises, and project a deeper understanding of where motives for conversion originally come from. Studying the various aspects of the contexts also helps the reader to understand how the motives and turning points affect individuals' thought processes, how they are developed, and how they are linked to their upbringing. It was also important to be aware of, and analyse, the personal and social implications of being a Muslim in Britain from both a social and personal perspective to get a better understanding of how individuals perceive Islam and in what type of environment they will choose to convert in.

A minority of participants had troubled childhood and adolescent periods, whereas the majority reported that they were raised in loving homes, some more practising in their religion than others who associated their moral upbringing with the teaching of the faith they were raised in. A few participants who came from mixed faith households, or who had a parent who was more religious than the other, faced issues and confusion with their identity, and often felt more pressured by the practising parent to conform to religious practices they were uncomfortable with. People who were raised by atheist parents were more likely to hold scientific worldviews than follow religious beliefs they could not authenticate.

The study findings suggest that difficulties and traumas early in life may contribute to a religious conversion later in individuals' lives. Many people, however, do not experience a crisis that could lead them to a religious conversion, and not all individuals who experience a crisis will be religious converts; rather, it is a mixture of curiosity and intellectual and/or religious doubts that encourage most individuals to explore different beliefs to seek the truth or a more suitable lifestyle and identity. Seeking God was important to some individuals, who believed that He would solve all their problems and only a few participants experienced a major crisis, such as divorce, abuse, death or an

illness that affected their religious beliefs. For some participants, religious doubts became an emotional crisis, but not to the level of it being a life-shattering or devastating experience. The subjectivity of the term 'crisis' suggests that it is not a key fundamental element assumed by Rambo (1993) to contribute greatly to the development of individuals' conversion journeys, but rather an addition to converts' experiences and motives. Participants who experienced religious doubts in their childhood and adolescence years were all able to identify the time period or turning point that triggered their search for God, the truth, happiness, spirituality, or an alternative way of life. It may be argued that the changes in religious beliefs and identities are influenced by how individuals perceive themselves, and how religion contributes and relates to their environment, social circle, morals, success and goals, emphasising the concept of continuity from one identity to another.

Some participants were quick to blame God when things went wrong in their personal lives and in the world, and questioned His powers, especially when their prayers were unanswered. Those who did not blame God blamed their parents for their problems, such as not protecting them from abuse. It was found that some individuals who had a more religious upbringing and held previous beliefs in God were more likely to turn to God and faith group members for answers rather than to advocacy (non-religious) support groups, while others were more likely to come across Islam and Muslims by chance later in life. Vignoles, Chryssochoou and Glynis Breakwell (2002) and Rambo (1993) suggest that humans are naturally inclined to seek beyond themselves for the meaning and purpose to life as a desire for transcendence, however all journeys are different, and individuals seek God and spirituality in different ways and for different purposes. Despite the differences found in their upbringing, values, religions and ethnic backgrounds, the majority of participants believed in God at some stage in their lives.

Chapter V

The Quest for the Truth and Problem-Solutions

5.1 Introduction

According to this study, active seekers may be defined as individuals who intentionally make the effort to explore Islam and/or other religious theologies for the purpose of finding a solution to their crises and problems, whereas non-active/passive seekers are those who were either happy in their previous lives and did not have or acknowledge any significant problems that needed solutions or were unhappy in their previous lives but did not know how to solve their problems. In this study most of the participants in Rambo's (1993) quest and encounter stages were non-active seekers who later became active seekers during different periods in their lives, not primarily in the adolescence period, as many scholars have suggested (such as Erikson 1968; Marcia, 1966), and an awareness of Islam came to them in different ways, either by chance or via encounters with Muslims.

To analyse the solutions individuals consider adopting to alleviate their problems it is important to understand how they deal with religious doubts and crises, what they seek and are attracted to, and the positive results they expect to receive. Maslow (1943) claimed that as people grow up, finding belongingness, love and confidence is important for the development of a healthy identity and that those who do not possess these elements are usually troubled and unsettled. Breakwell (1986) supported Maslow, and in addition stressed the significance of individuals' subconscious or conscious search for answers and the purpose of life to shape their identity, and the way in which individuals perceive the world and present themselves. For example, those who strongly believe in God and the afterlife may be more aware of the way they lead their lives and how this affects their attitudes, beliefs and values than those who do not. The main challenge of the quest stage is to reach a place that helps potential converts to transform the anger, confusions, anxiety, curiosity, depression and other negative emotions into those of hope and peace. For this to happen, individuals must be certain that what they are aiming at or drawn to is something positive that will benefit their lives.

5.2 Non-Active/Passive Seekers

The individuals who came across information about Islam by chance were inspired to research it further during the quest stage, as they were drawn to various aspects of it. Hassan (8), a non-active seeker, claimed that an Islamic video he encountered about the purpose of life by Sheikh Khalid Yasin changed his way of thinking with regard to what he knew about his existence, the world and God. Hassan, like Robert (14), was intrigued by the number of celebrity converts to Islam, many of whom were also non-active seekers, such as Dave Chappelle, Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, Cat Stevens, Ronnie O'Sullivan, Jermaine Jackson and Franck Ribery. Famous people are often perceived by fans to be influential and inspiring, so their conversions are likely to contribute to an increase of people's interest in Islam.

The events of 9/11 and 7/7 contributed greatly to an awareness of Islam and Muslims in Britain, alongside articles that followed about Islamophobia, conversions and Muslim involvement in crime, honour killings and terrorism (Zaidi-Jivraj, 2014; Allen, 2013: 96; Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013;). Some participants became curious about Muslims in the news, as a result of their environmental context, as they lived in areas that did not have any Muslim communities and were unfamiliar with who Muslims were. It can be argued, therefore, that the media may be more successful at drawing people's attention towards learning about Islam in a positive sense rather than repelling them, and that contrary to current accepted opinion the media is responsible for many conversions. For some, however, reading about Islam does not change their negative perceptions about the faith but rather reinforces their attitudes. This might be a result of any previous negative experiences with Muslims, subconscious biases and/or the type of newspaper and material they are reading. For instance, some writers, Muslim and non-Muslims alike, adopt negative anti-Islamic, cultural, biased, personal and political approaches and/or attitudes when interpreting The Quran and Hadiths, which may oppose the claims that Islam is a peaceful, universal and flexible religion.

Participants who came across information about Islam and Muslims by chance found aspects of the faith they could relate to and considered them to be potential solutions to their problems, or opened their eyes to new concepts and worldviews. 'I was attracted to

the simplicity of Islam and how it's built on good things; something I never knew or thought about before because of all the negative stuff I've read' (Hassan, 8).

5.2.1 Tourism and Travel

Some converts, such as David (19) and Maria (5) found Islam and spirituality within the context of tourism, without intending to search for the meaning of life or God prior to their travels. Significant religious and/or cultural travel experiences that held personal meaning were identified as key factors that led them towards a religious conversion journey. This may be because people's natural tendency to be drawn to, and influenced by positive experiences with people, places and communities can, as a result, reform worldviews, a sense of spirituality, behaviour and attitudes.

Ryan (18) and Robert (14) felt positively influenced by Muslims during their time spent in Syria, a requirement of their university course, and in charity trips to Iraq and Palestine. It is interesting to note how these two participants, who were Arabic students, had viewed Islam and Muslims prior to their conversion, admitting that they held stereotypical negative views about the faith. Seeing Muslims living in their own environments, however, inspired them to learn more and question their previous beliefs about the religion. 'The Muslims I met were nothing like the ones I read about in the papers and saw on TV' (Ryan). 'I spent a lot of my free time exploring Syrian culture and getting to know Muslims in their own environment and my view of Islam changed' (Robert). Ryan mentioned how, regardless of the negative political tensions between Muslims and Jews, the family he lived with treated him with respect and helped him with his studies. He noticed that the attitude of the Muslim Syrian family towards him being a Jew was different and more positive than the judging and negative attitudes of his family towards Muslims, and quickly felt drawn to Islam. This shows how someone may gain different opinions of people, depending on the context in which he or she sees and meets them. For example, one may admire and respect Muslims' way of life and traditions in a Muslim country, but not as a foreign minority group that has a poor reputation in a secular western country. Ryan's outlook on the situation highlights the importance of, and the need for, an improved inter-faith dialogue between different religious groups, to establish peace, harmony, security and respect.

It has become easier for people to come into contact with different religious groups and cultures on trips abroad than it was before the nineteenth century, when international travel was associated only with a minority of privileged elites (Travis, 2011: 281). As transport became more affordable in the twentieth century, following the European colonial expansion, discovering the world became more desirable and people were able to challenge negative and biased Orientalist, imperialist and media depictions of Muslims by visiting Muslim countries and forming their own personal understanding of them. It may be argued, therefore, that diversity in travel helps to educate people about life, as they experience other societies, faiths and cultures, which encourages them towards a different way of intellectual, critical and reflective thinking. It may also create opportunities for people to find different and better solutions to their problems, as they explore and enjoy new beliefs, customs and ways of life.

Aisha (4), Maria (5), Sophia (12) and David (19) all claimed to feel naturally drawn to Muslims and their lifestyles, hospitality and attitudes during their trips to Muslim countries. David found that beautiful Islamic art inspired him and his wife to learn about its history, which drew them into a spiritual and religious conversion journey. This shows that the context in which people encounter elements of Islam and Muslims is important and determines the start of a conversion journey, identity formation process, and the way people's opinions are shaped regarding an Islamic way of life.

5.2.2 Dreams

Two of the participants (Reema, 13; Hussein, 31) experienced having had at least one dream that led them on a religious conversion journey. Kelly Bulkeley (1995: 3–11) explained conversion dreams as 'dreams that prompt a profound transformation of religious belief and identity – and have been reported in many different cultural and religious traditions'. Dreams have played many prominent roles in the history of conversion, and were found to be legitimate and important phenomena in a number of previous studies on Buddhists (Ong, 1985; Laufer, 1931: 208–216), Christians (Kelsey, 1991) and Muslims (Fisher, 1979; Von Grunebaum and Callois, 1966). They provided a bridge to connect and synthesise religious elements that had been in conflict at both personal and spiritual levels.

In Islamic history, dreams were often conveyed as messages from God to the prophets. Chapter twelve in The Quran tells the story of Prophet Yusuf (Joseph) who was given the ability to interpret dreams that always came true, making it one of his miracles and a sign of his prophethood. According to Muslim beliefs, good dreams are attributed to God and bad ones to Satan (Parshall 1994: 154). It might be suggested, therefore, and interpreted from an Islamic point of view, that positive dreams about conversion to Islam are a sign of the *fitrah* and guidance from God for particular individuals. Reema (13) had recurring dreams about being a Muslim, despite not knowing any Muslims and having very little knowledge of Islam. ‘I found it very strange that I was having the same repeated dreams of me in a *hijab*, praying and reciting The Quran and I wanted to find out more.’

Hussein (31) did not have any issues with his Christian upbringing until he went to university and met Egyptian Muslims. He claimed to have dreams after he graduated that made him question his beliefs and lifestyle, as he appeared to be a happy Muslim in them and also mentioned that he met Jesus in a dream who told him that he was alive and not dead. ‘I had read verses in The Quran that state Jesus was never killed and that he is alive and will come back to earth during the end of time.’ The religious belief of Jesus returning to earth towards the end of time is found in both The Quran (43: 59–61) and The Bible (Matthew 24:4-28), but Muslims believe that Jesus was not crucified (Quran, 4: 157), whereas Christians believe that he was (Luke, 23: 33; Mark, 15: 25; John, 19: 32–33).

5.3 Encounters with British Muslims

Universities and the religious/Islamic societies within them, workplaces and public environments, were a common place for non-Muslims to meet Muslims, in many instances for the first time. ‘It wasn’t until I started studying at SOAS [School of Oriental and African Studies], where I had access to a library full of books related to Islam and where I came into contact with practising Muslims for the first time in my life’ (George, 28). London is very diverse in its cultures, religions, communities and ethnicities, which makes meeting people from different backgrounds a major element in university life. Studying in such a diverse environment that people may not be used to can trigger confusions that cause individuals to question their identities, upbringing and

religious beliefs when they come into contact with people from different groups and societies. Some begin to see life ‘out of the box’, and new worldly perceptions can drive people to new interests, ideologies and paths. University education aims to develop the intellectual abilities students possess and encourages them to think for themselves and to challenge what they already know. This may be a problem for religious parents who later have to deal with rebellious young adults who have ‘changed their minds’ about what they were raised to believe in. Other individuals (for instance, Robert, 14 and Karen, 29), who were happy with their lives kept their childhood beliefs and values at university and were not so much affected by the social diversity. Their deeper and broader academic studies of different faiths lead them to Islam at a later stage.

Some individuals explored Islam further after meeting or knowing Muslims and/or converts who were friends, family members, or work colleagues, who supported the individual’s quest for answers. ‘I had a few Muslim friends who attracted me to Islam at school in the month of *Ramadan* [The ninth month in the Islamic lunar calendar. All Muslims are requested to refrain from eating, drinking and having sexual relationships during the entire month from dawn to dusk]. I was interested in why they had to fast and I started asking them questions and read about it in the school library’ (Hafsa, 25). This suggests that the chances of individuals converting, as a result of being attracted to the theology, worldview and mindset of Muslims they meet are relatively high, especially if they manage to obtain satisfying answers to their questions and are made welcome into the Muslim group or community. There was also a desire for identity continuity among the participants who became interested in Islam, as a result of having close Muslim friends, as they wanted to belong to a social group in which they, as confident people, could improve morally and develop stronger friendships with the Muslims they knew by sharing and practising an Islamic lifestyle together. This was usually possible and likely to happen if people found the support they needed.

Belonging to groups and communities is a subject perceived by people in different ways, depending on how they understand their roles in them and the benefits they may have, or may anticipate, from their membership. For example, some people choose to belong to ethnic and sport communities, political groups or religious societies for various reasons that may include power, marriage, family and security. While there continues to be discussions among sociologists as to what defines a community, for the majority of people communities imply a sense of belonging, identity and cohesiveness

among a group of people who have shared interests and way of life, regardless of their social status and ethnicity.

Maslow (1943) stated that once psychological and safety needs are fulfilled, a human need for family, friends and social belongingness arises that usually stems from childhood, which is why crises such as rejection, loneliness, lack of acceptance, neglect and stigmatisation can greatly affect the emotional and psychological wellbeing of people. According to Maslow, humans need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance among their social groups, regardless of whether or not they agree with their groups' beliefs and practices, to maintain good social relationships with others. To preserve the status, relationships, identity and sense of belonging in a community, it is important for individuals to remain loyal to the principles and values found within it, even if this means becoming 'closeted' and living with a hidden identity for the sake of their social and personal wellbeing. For example, some people may consider becoming secret Muslims in order to belong to a society they feel happy and comfortable in. This makes either a religious conversion or a non-religious conversion, such as changing one's sexual orientation or political party, a controversial decision that can affect individuals' relationships with others.

For generations, traditional communities served a vital role in supporting community members, events, projects and local businesses, alongside preserving particular values, interests, lifestyles, cultures and beliefs. However, as societies have changed at an ever-increasing faster pace and in a more detached manner, it makes it harder to feel any sense of community that many people crave. The growth in social media and mobile instant messaging applications has affected the ways in which humans have traditionally communicated, interacted and have spent time with each other. Online communication technology has enabled people to expand their personal communities well beyond local perimeters and build relationships with people they communicate with solely through the Internet and never meet face to face. Lauren (20) and Janet (32), for example, who did not at first know any Muslims personally, felt more comfortable 'meeting' and forming friendships with them online to enquire about their faith. Janet said, 'I joined some forums and sites and asked questions about Islam and I would have general conversations with people.'

5.3.1 *Dawah* in Britain

In Britain there are two main ways of giving *dawah* (the practice or policy of preaching, proselytizing and inviting people to Islam): directly and indirectly. Many Muslims do not actively invite non-Muslims to Islam, but may do so indirectly through good conduct, their attitudes, and by subtly talking about Islam and the benefits of being a Muslim; others, however, prefer a direct approach, but may struggle to deal with confrontations, negative comments and reactions, abuse and questions they are unable, or are not qualified, to answer. For some, direct mass *dawah* is a more effective conversion technique that relies heavily on the distribution of Islamic literature and speaking in public about Islam, promoting it as a way of life (Raza, 1991). Muslim missionaries are often trained to proselytise and are sent out by Muslim organisations with literature to places where the majority of residents are non-Muslims to invite people to Islam and create a public awareness of what it is about. Missionaries also attempt to correct and explain any misunderstandings people have about Islam by using various techniques and attitudes that can sometimes have a negative effect on people, which diverts them away from Islam rather than draws them in. According to The Quran, all Muslims are encouraged to give *dawah* in a wise and peaceful manner, and in a way that does not offend or pressurise people to convert (Quran, 16: 125). Muslims, however, do hold different opinions about the faith and use various techniques to spread the message of Islam in Britain.

5.3.1.1 Direct *Dawah*

British right-wing newspapers and television documentaries have often focused on strict, pressurising Muslims who publicly call people to Islam, requesting them to ‘wake up’ and abandon their sinful lifestyles before they get punished by God. Terms such as ‘*Londonistan*’ and ‘*BanglaChesh*’ (relating to Chesham, a town densely populated with Asian Muslims in Buckinghamshire) have been used in the media to describe the invasion of foreign cultures in environments that are heavily populated with Muslim missionaries who are ‘out to radicalize the British Muslim youth’ (Leiken, 2010; Phillips, 2006). The book *Londonistan* criticises the leniency of left-wing government parties with regard to postcolonial multiculturalism that has encouraged the growth of Muslim extremist groups, as a result of ‘administrative incompetence and cultural

weaknesses' (Phillips, 2006). The book reflects the views of a British mainstream journalist and members of the public about the spread of Islam via *dawah* in London.

An example of harsh *dawah* can be taken from the BBC Three documentary 'My Brother the Islamist' (April 2011) that portrayed the extreme views of a young, White British man who converted to Islam, associated with Jihadist fundamentalists, and believed that Britain should be ruled by *Shariah* (Islamic) law. The convert's non-Muslim half-brother created the documentary to learn about his brother's new life and found his *dawah* techniques, commonly used in Britain, to be offensive and aggressive. He received distressing and repeated warnings about non-believers going to hell and being cursed for their lifestyles until they accepted Islam as a way of life. The convert (Richard) is currently serving a six-year prison sentence for preparing acts of terrorism on British soldiers (Malik, 2013). Richard's drastic transformation was of great concern to his half-brother, friends, family and the majority of non-Muslims who watched the documentary, as they found it shocking to witness someone who was considered to be a 'normal' White Briton transform into a radical Islamist in such a short period of time after having received *dawah*.

It is suggested that a lot of street *dawah*, including proselytising group marches, is rejected by the public, as it is perceived as being 'brainwashing' and is often associated in the British media with the likes of Anjem Choudary, Abu Hamza and others who have been arrested and convicted of terrorism. *Dawah* groups do not all have the same motives, but it has been noted that the more extreme groups are likely to provide benefits, such as jobs and accommodation, to disadvantaged people, such as Henry (24), who are socially vulnerable, unemployed, lack qualifications or who are recently out of prison, to attract the 'right type' of members suited for their missions. A young White convert who had joined Islam after being affected by street *dawah* was jailed in 2013 for trying to implement extremist views and *Shariah* law on the streets of London, and had played a prominent role in converting prisoners and regular people (BBC One Panorama: 'From Jail to Jihad', 2014). According to the findings of the documentary, Muslim groups were more likely to adopt extremist attitudes in *dawah* if they were driven and influenced by political Muslim groups, such as ISIS. A recent incident reported in January 2016 (Ng, 2016) also involved a White convert, who helped an Asian Muslim preacher invite people to join ISIS in London's Oxford Street.

Only six participants had converted as a result of direct *dawah* (Sara, 3; Omar, 10; Rebecca, 23; Henry, 24; Jack, 27; Luke, 34). Ahmed (1) claimed that he was given *dawah* by ‘narrow-minded’ political Muslims who had offered him the opportunity to join their groups, but he refused, as he did not agree with their views. His case demonstrates the vulnerability of potential converts, and their likelihood of being approached and recruited by radical Muslim group members. Ahmed believed that White converts were a great advantage for extremist groups and thought the latter would benefit from him converting, because many White converts are not easily identifiable as Muslims, which in turn renders them both potential security problems and valuable agents in extremist group agendas. He claims that it is important for people to have an awareness of this political type of *dawah*, as it helps them to avoid unnecessary social and personal problems by becoming involved in political conflicts and being used as tools to avenge the results of Britain’s foreign policy in Muslim countries.

As many as 1500 White Britons are believed to have converted to Islam for the purpose of funding, planning and carrying out surprise terror attacks inside the UK, according to one MI5 source and security experts say the growing secret army of White terrorists poses a particularly serious threat as they are far less likely to be detected than members of the Asian community (Brice, 2010: 15).

Although Ahmed had already converted by the time he was exposed to street *dawah*, he offered an interesting insight into how he perceived it later as a Muslim. He said that extremists’ attitudes were poor and that they used microphones to shout to the public about how they would be punished for their sins if they did not repent and convert, which often triggered feelings of anger among passers-by.

It was embarrassing for me as a Muslim to watch them speak, as they were dressed in Asian clothing, had large beards and the women had *burkas* on and they were supposed to be representing my faith. It was really off-putting; I didn’t blame the majority of people who just walked away with a bad image of Muslims. I would have too.

Here, Ahmed expresses a growing concern with regard to who represents Islam and Muslims in Britain, and his words imply why many converts do not like to wear Muslim dress because they do not want to be associated with such Muslims. However,

participants such as Henry (24) and Omar (10) were influenced by pressurising missionaries who were keen to have them on board and tempted them with the benefits of belonging to a strong and powerful brotherhood that could offer social security, status and a strong identity. John Lofland and Norman Skonovd (1981) argue that coercive motifs are prone to high levels of group pressure, either from friends, missionaries, neighbours or a Muslim partner, which was also the case for Khadija (6) who was greatly pressured to convert by her Arab husband.

It is common to find missionaries who are ready to volunteer lots of their Islamic knowledge, which may be overwhelming for non-Muslims who show even a slight interest in Islam. Such attitudes often place individuals under pressure, and cause them to abandon their exploration of Islam or conversion plans. As a result, some large and established *dawah* organisations in Britain, such as The Islamic Education and Research Academy (IERA), the UK Islamic Mission and the Islamic Dawah Centre in Birmingham, offer *dawah* training courses to encourage Muslims to spread the message of Islam peacefully and in a non-pressurising manner via lectures, mosque open days, community events, prison, events and university visits. They also distribute free literature, CDs and translated copies of The Quran. The IERA in London is one of the latest global *dawah* organisations committed to presenting Islam to a wider society. The founder, Abdulraheem Green, is a White British convert to Islam and also offers training programs to help people support new Muslims.

More recently it has been seen that direct *dawah* techniques have changed because *dawah* is not always welcome by people who are against the spread of Islam in Britain, and may put missionaries at risk of verbal or physical abuse. A BBC UK poll carried out by the research group ComRes (Karmi, 2013) that surveyed 1,001 Britons aged between eighteen and twenty-four on how they feel about the growth of Islam and Muslims in Britain found that twenty-seven per cent of respondents said they do not trust Muslims. Twenty-seven per cent disagreed that Islam was a peaceful religion, forty-four per cent said they did not believe Muslims held the same values as themselves, and twenty-eight per cent thought Britain would be 'better off' with fewer Muslims. Some critics, however, claimed that the results were biased, as the poll was carried out in a climate of negativity after two African Muslim converts murdered the soldier Lee Rigby in public, which made news headlines for weeks (Dodd and Halliday, 2013). It may be assumed therefore, that street *dawah* will not have a positive influence

on people who have strong hostile Islamophobic views and negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. It was also found that missionaries who live in Muslim communities and have very little interaction with non-Muslims have a low success rate in *dawah* because they cannot deal with the concerns of non-Muslims efficiently or relate to their lifestyles and ways of thinking. It was found that only twenty-eight per cent of Britons believe Muslims want to integrate into mainstream British society and understand western culture (Pew Global, 2011: 17).

Tariq Ramadan (1999) suggests that many Muslims are often confused by the ways in which they present their faith and themselves as a minority group, and often struggle with developing communication strategies for indigenous British people, which is why it is common to find White converts active in *dawah* and sharing their conversion stories and knowledge with non-Muslims alongside the new generation of British Muslims from South Asian and African backgrounds, who are often under the influence of Islamic scholars (Moosavi, 2011; Köse, 1994). It can be argued that *dawah* organisations often involve White converts in their activities, as they can relate to the western culture and mentalities of non-Muslims, which in turn increases the likelihood of people becoming interested in Islam. Preaching strategies have also recently changed to address the fact that Christians have become less practising than previously, and are more reluctant to get involved in religious activities. Scientific approaches to religion and addressing issues that many non-Muslims have regarding Islam have proved to be more successful than comparing Islam with Christianity and other religions, which would be of no or very little interest to many. Khurram Murad (1996) argued that, for public *dawah* to be successful, missionaries should have a strong educational background in Islamic law, The Quran and interpretations of the Hadiths, as well as in science and British culture, so that they are able to answer questions properly and provide suggestions or rational explanations for common issues. Muslims who are active in public *dawah* often fail to promote strategies like those of, for example, Quilliam and Pickthall that integrate Islamic values into British society, thus making Islam less 'foreign' and more acceptable as a way of life.

Rebecca (23) came to know about Islam for the first time via public *dawah*, given by Asian Muslims who handed out Islamic literature and were eager to convince her that Islam was the right way of life and would solve all her problems they assumed she had. Such a method and attitude may be offensive, intrusive and patronising for some people,

and it formed her first impression of Muslims. Sara (3) was told that Islam would make her a happier person, solve all her issues and answer her questions about life; however, she was not interested in reading the book given to her but accepted it out of politeness and read it months later out of boredom and curiosity. She found there were many things she did not know, such as why Muslim women wear the *hijab* and why Muslims fast, which she found fascinating. The book triggered many questions that she later asked her Muslim friends, and subsequently she developed a deep interest in the faith. It is suggested that on account of Islam's concept of the *fitrah*, many Muslim missionaries assume that non-Muslims lead problematic lives, as they have not yet found God or established a spiritual connection with Him, and as a result have been deterred from the path of righteousness. Islam is therefore offered as a solution for any problems missionaries may think individuals have (Islahi, 1978: 89).

Luke (34) was approached by street missionaries and was invited to attend an Islamic awareness open day. Since 9/11, British Muslim organisations have made the effort to educate and positively change the public's understanding of Islam by hosting Islamic awareness events, such as Islam Expo and GPU (Global Peace and Unity Event) to tackle media stereotypes and negative portrayals of Muslims. The events include a variety of lectures given by influential Muslim scholars, Muslims and converts, alongside Islamic and cultural entertainment for children, concerts for Muslim artists, Middle Eastern and Asian food buffets, cultural fashion shows and Islamic art exhibits. Luke mentioned how the missionary's manners drew him and others into an interesting discussion about God, and he kept in contact with the man who informed him of other religious lectures and debates that he was keen to attend.

Scot McKnight (2002) who bases his theory of conversion on the strategy of missionaries shows how the opinions of participants with regard to Islam can be changed, reformed and influenced by missionaries' attitudes and persuasive techniques. The study found that people were likely to be drawn towards the claimed potential benefits, promises of happiness and problem-solving solutions from a religious conversion (see 2.3.2 above) if the missionaries were pleasant and supportive. Some scholars, therefore, (such as Richardson, 1991) believe individuals are brainwashed by missionaries who feed on their vulnerability and insecurities; however, this study and others (Moosavi, 2011; Zebiri, 2007; Al-Qwidi, 2002; Köse, 1994) suggest that this is not always the case. As the study of religious conversions becomes more advanced and

takes into account the interconnection between the emotional, physical, psychological, intellectual, cognitive and moral dimensions of mental change and religious growth (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980; Bromley and Shupe, 1979; Beckford, 1978), it becomes easier to see how religious journeys develop from participants' personal and intellectual perspectives, so readers can see how and if *dawah* affects their judgments. This study found that if individuals were educated and aware of Islamic teachings, street *dawah* would not appeal to them, whereas those who were young, uneducated, disadvantaged and knew very little about Islam were more easily influenced and affected by it, as those who gave *dawah* were often young Muslims who could relate to them.

5.3.1.2 Indirect *Dawah*

Some participant cases show that *dawah* can be effective when it is given through examples of good Islamic manners and conduct. The indirect approach is more likely to be used among people who believe that it would be difficult to preach Islam directly to non-Muslims, as it is a religion that is not only presented in a negative way by the media but is also based on different values, practices and beliefs to that of Christianity, and is unlikely to be accepted easily. Muslims are ambassadors for their faith; however, many do not wish to invite people to Islam directly to avoid unwanted problems and confrontations. 'Psychologically the indirect *dawah* view is certainly a more comfortable means of propagating since there is little chance of confrontation with a targeted individual' (Köse, 1994: 50).

Dawah is also likely to be effective when the person doing the inviting is perceived as a role model who upholds correct Muslim characteristics, morals and British values (Faruqi, 1986: 7–19), which encourages people such as Leyla (7) and Hafsa (25) to explore Islamic teachings. British Imams were regularly approached for answers to questions (Hassan, 8; David, 19) and those who were kind, friendly, welcoming, understanding and patient had profound positive effects on seekers who, as a result, trusted and respected them. This emphasises the moral responsibilities Imams and other Muslims have towards non-Muslims, potential converts and new Muslims in particular, and how positive attitudes may reform people's perceptions of Islam and Muslims. David's (19) memory of the Imam reciting The Quran in a beautiful way in Morocco demonstrates the positive effect he had on his life and spiritual growth.

I was very much attracted to the way the man was reading and I sat on the steps of the mosque just to be able to hear him more clearly. I found the way he read very moving. I stayed listening to the rest of the prayer and afterwards asked the Imam about the recitation we heard and he told us it was The Quran and what it meant. He was really very kind; I will never forget how polite and friendly he was.

George (28) claimed to be touched by what he perceived to be the humility of a number of Muslims he came across, whose behaviour encouraged him to learn more about Islam, and Ahmed (1) mentioned how indirect *dawah* and reading The Prophet Muhammad's biography affected his life. 'The character and behaviour of Muslims even if not practising had affected me in a positive way, and perhaps most significantly by the Messenger's [Muhammad's] combination of a worldly life as a family man with a spiritual life.' Ahmed gave an example of a man who invited him into his home and taught him many things about Islam. To Ahmed, this man possessed the character and virtues anyone would recognise as being excellent and similar to The Prophet, and he felt drawn to his kindness, politeness, generosity, level of knowledge and keenness to help new Muslims. 'I wrote to him and was surprised when he drove several hundreds of miles to visit me and counsel me. From that time I clung to him drinking only at that one fountain of knowledge, not taking from anyone else until he directed me towards them.' Like Hassan (8), Ahmed preferred to be guided by scholars and Imams whom he greatly admired and trusted, and he recommended books, lectures and other scholarly teachings by them because of their character, attitudes, level of intellect and support. Jack (27) mentioned how an Arab Muslim had given him a copy of The Prophet Muhammad's biography to read in prison, taking advantage of the free time he had that allowed him to read it and educate himself about Islam. Such an act may be perceived as a form of indirect *dawah*, as the man did not directly preach about Islam but noticed Jack's interest in his talks to Muslims.

The book moved me to tears on many occasions at the greatness of this man [The Prophet Muhammad] and how he dealt with his situations in the most amazing ways [sic]. I hadn't read The Quran by that time or considered converting, but I grew a love for Muhammad by reading his biography.

Aisha (4) was made aware of Islam by some of her extended family members who converted and became practising Muslims. Their lifestyles and moral conduct inspired her alongside the behaviour of Muslims she met on holiday and the unity of the Muslim families she came across. This demonstrates an attraction to a stable Muslim family unit and a strong grounding in faith and moral principles. Ismail Faruqi (1986) suggested that a good Muslim family example was the best form of indirect *dawah* in the West, where there are many cases of broken homes, a lack of community, and widespread social issues such as alcohol and drug-related problems. Humanitarian charity work carried out in war-torn Muslim countries also inspired some people to learn about Islam, such as Sophia (12) who met her Muslim husband during a charity trip. ‘Their struggles in Palestine to survive were endless but they never failed to pray on time and smile and say *alhamdulillah* [praise be to God] – even for the hardships! There was something real about their lives that I hadn’t felt in my normal everyday one.’ Omar (10) mentioned how his Asian Muslim neighbours would offer their help and cook food for his family during crises, such as when his grandmother died, whereas his non-Muslim neighbours did not. This triggered an interest in Islam and a keenness to be a part of the fairly large Muslim community in his area.

For some participants, Islam is not perceived primarily as a spiritual journey or a belief system, but as a promoter of positive character traits that together create a strong and admirable identity. This suggests that the conversion process is often perceived as a continuation of constructing and discovering a self, an improved personal identity, and acknowledging the positive traits in one’s character and social conduct for a better quality of life. Leyla (7), who encountered Muslims at university, claimed that each of them indirectly taught her something different about the beauty of Islam in their outward display of peace, kindness, social morality and grounded spirituality in prayer, which encouraged her to study the faith. Islamic virtues and ethics also appealed to Ryan (18), David (19), Lina (22), Karen (29) and Janet (32) who all felt the need, after encountering Islam and Muslims, for discipline and spiritual guidance in their lives alongside a moral way of life to commit to. A lifestyle with a clear guide that encourages morality and a connection with one’s inner spirituality and God is attractive to people who wish to follow a logical system that ‘forbids the evil and encourages the good’, extending and emphasising the moral values and beliefs they already possess.

According to Moosavi (2011: 247–286) the term ‘Westophobia’ refers to a Muslim perception of cultural decay in the West, and encourages young Muslims to revive religious values in *dawah* and engage in an affirmation of Islamic identity, which may appeal to those who desire to live in a moral community. Brice’s report (2010) claims that one of the main reasons for the surge in female conversions is linked to individuals who have been fed up with unrestrained consumerism, sexual objectification of women, and soaring immorality rates. ‘I liked the morals found in Islam, as I believe they have been lost in British society and so to experience a moral life again I decided to try life out as a Muslim, as I had nothing to lose and during that time I liked it and decided to convert officially’ (Rebecca, 23). The concept of having something to fear appeals to some converts, who feel they need to consider a superior being when thinking of committing a sin, or when a sin has been committed, so they can ask for forgiveness. The study found that if people are free to do as they wish without considering any negative consequences resulting from their immoral actions, or do not need to ask forgiveness from anyone, their purpose of life, state of being, and morality is in question.

5.4 Summary

This chapter shows there are a number of ways to learn about Islam in various contexts, and demonstrates how various aspects of the faith and Muslim lifestyles attract different types of people. The majority of participants had been on a subconscious or conscious quest for God, spirituality and community. Many were also searching for answers, self-discovery, moral discipline, identity construction, the meaning of life and a solution to their problems. Participants, such as Lauren (20) who had come from religious backgrounds or who believed strongly in God were likely to become active seekers from an early stage and pursue other religious beliefs that better suited their lifestyle and intellect and this led them to Islam (see Chapter VI). The quest stage differentiated between the seekers and non-seekers, and how their journeys were formed. Active seekers made the effort to learn about Islam and meet Muslims, often at university, whereas passive seekers, who were not seeking a religious conversion, came across Islam by chance via missionaries, online, in social groups, the media, during their travels, and even in dreams. The study found that the media in particular encouraged many people to explore and research various aspects of Islam.

An Islamic awareness came to the majority of converts in two forms of *dawah*: direct or indirect. *Dawah* affected different types of people depending on the intellectual approaches, context and attitudes of the missionaries. For example, those who were highly educated were less likely to convert from direct street *dawah* than those who had not completed their education, as street *dawah* is usually given by young Muslims, and therefore is more likely to attract and appeal to those who share the same level of intellectual understanding. Many participants developed an interest in Islam after being affected by indirect *dawah*, which involved a display of unity among Muslim families alongside positive attitudes and moral behaviour from Imams, Muslim friends, colleagues, neighbours, partners and strangers. Positive experiences at the encounter stage encouraged participants to change their opinions about Muslims, and also inspired them to become active seekers in the interaction stage (see Chapter VI) and explore Islam further.

The study illustrates how participants were affected by, and attracted to, specific sections of Islamic knowledge, Muslim characteristics, spirituality, values and behaviour, according to their personal needs, the type of crisis they experienced, and what they were able to relate to in both the material and spiritual sense. This greatly emphasises Breakwell's (1986) theory of identity continuity and modification, which suggests that the participants were not looking for a complete identity transformation, but rather an identity that could solve their problems, give them confidence, and a better quality of life. Some participants were drawn to Muslim groups and communities in which the beliefs, morals and values were already an important part of their western identity. The study found that Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) mystical, intellectual, affectional and experimental motifs were present in the quest and encounter stages that contributed to the participants' decision-making processes.

Chapter VI

Interaction with Islam and Muslims

6.1 Introduction

The main aim of this chapter is to identify the elements of the participants' identities that they perceive to be compatible with a Muslim identity, alongside the new elements they wish to implement in their identity that they believe will make them better people as a result of their interaction experiences. Catherine Amiot et al. (2007) and Véronica Benet-Martinez and Jana Haritatos (2005) suggest that the more individuals perceive the different elements of their identity as being compatible with the elements of another identity, the higher the level of identity integration will be, which will provide individuals with self-confidence and continuity, and will improve their general wellbeing. Erikson (1968) claimed that the 'Intimacy versus Isolation' stage in his theory plays a leading role in the identity formation journey, as it involves the individuals forming friendships with those who have similar interests, which supports Breakwell's (1986) theory of identity continuity. Therefore, it was considered essential to know the types of Muslims individuals interacted with, and whether they experienced any significant turning points that would help to identify the main factors they were attracted to, to see if they were compatible, or similar, with their own identity, and, if not, to analyse the reasons why they were drawn to them.

At this stage, people become active seekers and make more effort to pursue their knowledge of Islam, having considered it to be a solution to their problems. Although Rambo (1993) did not take into account the influences of education at his interaction stage, it was found to be essential in this study, and, according to Lofland and Stark's (1981) intellectual motif, the active types of deep and intimate research that individuals undertook of Islamic teachings and the Muslim community should be explored to see how they resulted in influencing individuals to make the final decision to convert. It is argued that the challenge of this stage is discernment, where individuals need to be alert and aware of Islamic groups' laws, theology, rituals, culture, agendas, expectations, practices and values to check whether they are in agreement with their own values and understanding of Islam. It is important for the seeker to make rational decisions based on intellectual, observational and experimental studies, and not to be vulnerable, as a

result of their personal circumstances and crises, to being pressured or manipulated into converting by Muslims.

6.2 Observational and Experimental Studies

After the participants developed a keen interest in Islam, they started to explore Muslim lifestyles, practices and communities, to see if they suited them. This may be perceived as a process of critical evaluation and validation of the religious belief system and its rituals. Some participants observed Muslim communities before conversion, such as Maria (5), Omar (10), Rebecca (23), Jack (27) and Mark (33). They spent some time as guests interacting with Muslims or as observers of religious practices, such as the Friday prayers, to learn the customs and to get an idea of what kind of life they would lead in the future and what would be expected of them. Lofland and Stark's (1981) 'experimental' motif and element of the conversion journey appears more strongly at this stage, as individuals allow themselves to experience the spiritual phenomenon found in the religious practices, alongside the physical nature of the doctrine, before making a final decision.

In an experimental study and conversion, a potential convert may be invited to wear a *hijab* for a week, or fast and attend prayers at the mosque. An example of this is shown in the BBC Three TV documentary series 'Make me a Muslim' (2007), which showed people being invited to live as practising Muslims for three weeks. Those who agreed to commit to the experiment were able to experience life with Islamic values before deciding to convert, or form a new personal opinion of Muslims and Islam. The experience produced various reactions, some more positive than others. A few were unable to handle life as a Muslim on account of, for example, the covering, daily prayers and abstention from alcohol. It can be suggested that non-Muslims may be put-off converting to Islam because of the five daily prayers that they perceive as being difficult to perform in their everyday lives. Therefore, experimenting with them may help individuals to see whether they can or cannot become a part of their daily routine. Studying Islam by experimenting with Islamic values and teachings before conversion is often beneficial, as Muslims around the potential converts are aware that they are only 'trying out' the faith, and will not pressure them to conform properly and regularly to practices, whereas those who have converted may experience pressure to do so. The

experimental period allows individuals to take their time before deciding to convert, and instead of being burdened with practices at the start of their conversion they give themselves a chance to get used to them in gradual stages, so that once they become Muslims the practices, such as praying five times a day, will be easier to perform. According to Köse (1994: 107) the transformation of identity, behaviour and worldview usually takes place after conversion over a relatively prolonged period of time, but it may start from the experimental stage of the journey when individuals begin to discover themselves. Köse found that individuals are highly likely to play active roles in their experimental religious journeys.

This study shows that curiosity and positive experiences with Muslims in the encounter stage often triggered the experimentation phase. 'I would often be invited to observe some of the prayers in the mosque and ask questions' (Ahmed, 1). Ahmed, like the majority of the participants, experienced issues with Muslim cultural practices, which he recognised and differentiated from Islamic practices over a long period of time. His social experiences gave him the freedom to explore his beliefs by narratively constructing different groups, sects and 'types' of Muslims, and knowing which ones to avoid and which to take advice from. It is suggested that his conversion experience, alongside others, was a process of discovering rationality, by applying a degree of logic to make sense of Islamic beliefs, practices and teachings. It is also suggested that people rationalise teachings and practices according to how they understand logic. For example, those who come from a religious background might find another religious theology more logical, whereas others who are not raised to follow a religion might find it difficult to rationalise any religious beliefs at all, especially if they cannot accept or make sense of the reasons behind certain practices. A minority of participants, such as Henry (24) did not take the time to explore different Muslim communities, and so accepted Islamic teachings from the first group of Muslims he came across, believing that all Muslims were the same. Here, it is important to highlight the importance of education, and to be aware of the different faith groups and their practices before making a final decision and accepting information provided by Muslims.

Maria (5) spent two years observing different Muslims during her travels, and decided that she wanted to convert after being attracted to their moral conduct and social lifestyles, which held more meaning than her own. However, she found it difficult to differentiate between Islam and some negative cultural attitudes, and claimed that it

took her a long time to learn what ‘true’ Islam is, which she defined as being the pure form of Islam separated from Muslim culture. She expressed joy at meeting female European converts who wore the *hijab* at an Islamic awareness event in London, and said that their conversion stories drew her closer to the faith. It is assumed that western potential converts to Islam would prefer to be in the company of western Muslims, as they would be more understanding and be likely to possess many of the same identity elements, such as, for example, emanating from a White Christian background.

Zaynab (30) mentioned how *Allah* guided her to Islam and used her Arab husband, although he was not practising, as a tool to help her convert, as she came from a White area in Devon that had no Muslim residents. The concept of the *fitrah* is emphasised here, as she believed that God guided her to the truth, because if it were not for that, there is no way she would have known about Muslims or considered being one. Zaynab had never personally met or seen a woman in a *hijab*, or, indeed, any Arabs until she met her husband and his family. ‘He told me that if I converted it would make life a lot easier with his family and I was very young at the time and I just did it.’ It may be argued that some partners do not wish their spouses to convert for religious reasons but rather to fulfil cultural and social requirements, as many heritage Muslims are expected by family and society to marry people from their own religion, social level, cultural society and ethnic group. If Zaynab’s husband were to present her as a Muslim to his family, this would be in his favour, as he anticipated members of his family would be more accepting of her than if she was a non-Muslim.

Zaynab mentioned how her husband’s community had small social gatherings for new Muslims twice a week, which she observed over a period of time. She said, ‘I really loved how these women were so inspiring to me, so peaceful, simple and kind. They were different to the non-Muslim women I knew in the sense that they were spiritually happy and content people because they had a deep love for God ... something I didn’t understand but really wanted.’ She learnt about Islam, how to pray and wear a *hijab*, and in time started to love the practices and rituals. She wanted to convert properly for God this time, and not just for her husband. It was often comforting for individuals to know that there were others in the same situation as themselves, and to be welcomed into a supportive community that was not isolated from mainstream British society. It was also inspiring for individuals to meet converts who had gained ‘better’ traits in their new or ‘improved’ identities, as this made them realise that the same traits were missing

in their lives, and it encouraged them to think about who they were as people. Seeing people from their own background and upbringing as happy Muslims who enjoyed their lives greatly encouraged potential converts to explore a Muslim identity and lifestyle. It is assumed, therefore, that if Zaynab had joined a traditional heritage Muslim group and found no similarities or connection with the women she met, it would have been unlikely she would have converted, and might have developed a more cultural identity just for her husband's sake. Here, Muslims and the environmental context in which individuals are introduced to Islam are important in influencing the decision to convert. Other determinants include the Muslim community potential converts may become a part of after conversion, and what type of identity they are drawn to and likely to adopt, that is, whether a cultural Muslim identity or a White convert Muslim identity.

6.3 Relationships and Marriage

It is usually assumed that many women make the decision to convert after being introduced to Islam by a heritage Muslim boyfriend or husband, but this is not always the case. It has been shown in previous studies (Suleiman, 2013; Moosavi, 2011; Brice, 2010) that the majority of women who have Muslim partners feel offended when people assume they have been brainwashed, and/or only became Muslims for the benefit of marriage. In Islam, only a non-Muslim man has to fulfil an Islamic prerequisite and convert to marry a Muslim woman, otherwise known as 'a conversion of convenience' as opposed to 'a conversion of conviction' (Brice, 2010: 2), whereas believing Christian and Jewish women are able to marry Muslims without converting, as they are considered to be people of The Holy Books (Quran, 5: 5). With regard to other women, who are, for example, Hindus, atheists and Sikhs, Muslim men are not permitted to marry them unless they first convert to Islam (Quran, 2: 221). Such a type of conversion would be categorised sociologically as a 'secondary conversion', a religious conversion that is the result of a relationship with a Muslim. In this study, four participants (Sophia, 12; Hana, 16; Adam, 17; Zaynab, 30) decided to convert following romantic involvement with heritage Muslims, which led to an active interest in Islam. Lofland and Skonovd (1981) linked the 'affectional' motif to this stage in the conversion process, as here the decision to convert is based on a relationship. They argued that a romantic, emotional attachment, or strong liking for practising believers, is central to the conversion process.

Adam decided to convert to marry his Algerian girlfriend because he appreciated, and was attracted to, the values found in a traditional Arabian upbringing and mentality, alongside the home-making skills she had. An Islamic way of life may be suited to those such as Adam who have a more traditionalist view of gender roles in which a woman is familiar with, and accepting of, her 'traditional' role in life, and will prioritise her husband and children over a career. It is suggested, however, that not all Muslim women of today are raised to become traditional wives and mothers to the desired standard for men who are seeking this particular element. There is also a danger of men such as Henry (24) being attracted to a more cultural and patriarchal view of Islam, in which the superiority and authority of men over women is heavily emphasised and misunderstood (see Chapter X).

Hana (16) learned about Islam from her Egyptian boyfriend, and although he was not practising at the time, he made the effort to show her passages from The Quran about God that had an emotional effect on her. Here, it is notable that although some Muslim men are not very religious or practising, they nevertheless are inclined to introduce their partners to Islam. They may give their partners books and take them to talks, so that over time, as they learn more about Islam, their partners will be led towards a 'conversion of conviction'. Potential converts who search for Muslim spouses hoping they will support them with their faith will most likely look for people who are practising; however, those who meet before the decision to convert is made are likely to be in relationships with those who are not. This is because many people often meet Muslims in non-Islamic environments, at work, or at university. When it comes to marriage, however, it is often the case that the Muslim partner takes into consideration his or her family, community, reputation, culture and religious upbringing of children, and therefore tends to take religion more seriously as the relationship develops. It was found that women in general found it easier to convert to prove their level of commitment, be involved in the spouse's culture and community, and play an active role in the family, social events and in the upbringing of children (Ansano, 2012: 10). However, some participants, such as Ruqayya (9) and Hana (16) struggled to relate to the identities of their cultural in-laws, as their values and lifestyles were so different from their own. This created identity crises subsequently, as they were unable to find any continuity or compatibility between their former identities and their new Muslim identities that had adopted many Muslim cultural elements in order to fit in.

Sophia (12) married a non-practising Arab man, who became more religious after marriage and made the effort to teach her about Islam. This may be a problem for some women who have not agreed to marry someone who was religious and have not wanted to be involved with another religion, community or culture but have been pressured later on to do so by their partners to maintain the relationship. Such a situation sometimes ends in divorce, or causes the non-believing partner to live with an identity he or she did not want but feels obliged to conform to, unless he or she discovers Islam later, as in Khadija's (6) case. Other Muslims, such as Adam's (17) fiancée, were more lenient and did not pressurise their partners to conform to any practices that were uncomfortable for them. It was found that with this attitude the individual would eventually be encouraged to learn about Islam in his or her own time and make a decision to convert after being convinced that Islam is the right way of life.

6.4 Obtaining Islamic Knowledge

Aside from the interactions with Muslims, it is important to acknowledge the different ways and significance of obtaining Islamic knowledge and the influence it has on individuals. Many participants were given Islamic books to read as a form of indirect *dawah*, and some read or listened to The Quran, which affected them in various ways. Karen (29), for example, felt that the more she read and interacted with The Quran the more she was moved by it, and believed that God was speaking to her directly. There are many Muslim converts who have shared their stories online and have stated that they decided to convert after hearing The Quran being recited, or after reading specific passages from it and being intellectually, emotionally or spiritually affected by them. For example, Hassan (8) said, 'The Quran answered all of my questions about God, about our purpose and about how we should live.'

Lina (22) and Sonia (26) found the scientific facts in many Quran verses to be of great interest and that they were an incentive to pursue Islamic knowledge. Inviting people to Islam by linking Quran verses and Hadiths to modern scientific facts has been a method used in the works of educated Muslim missionaries, as they have constantly strived to prove that Islam is the religion of logical reason and truth. This tends to be a more successful approach for atheists, and/or those who have a greater interest in science and evolution. Quilliam used this approach in his regular publications and gained many

followers who became educated about the science of The Quran to create a more open-minded Muslim community. This type of education also strengthened and improved the intellectual formation of western Muslim identities, which helped people to integrate Islam into British society and successfully create channels of communication and interaction with non-Muslims.

The Internet was the most popular source of Islamic knowledge for most of the participants, even for reading and listening to The Quran. In more recent years YouTube videos and social media have greatly contributed to the spread of Islamic information and communication between Muslims all over the world. Up-to-date learning opportunities, such as listening to, and/or watching, online lectures, webinars and courses have also been provided, alongside online Islamic universities and colleges for distant learners. Online forums were popular for the younger generation of converts who have met, and conversed regularly with Muslims through them. Lauren's (20) search for a monotheistic religion led her to participate in online Islamic forum discussions at the age of seventeen. 'I got so knowledgeable that they eventually made me a moderator of the forum. I was like a sponge, I just memorized and processed every single information [*sic*] of Islam I got my hands on.' Lauren's attachment to Islam came as a result of her previous beliefs in one God and wanting to find a faith group that was compatible with her beliefs. She found that Islamic teachings helped her to overcome her crises by adopting new religious attitudes towards them, for example, perceiving crises as lessons and tests of patience from God. She also believed that God guided her to the truth (*fitrah*) and as a result felt a strong need to form close friendships with those who were considered to be very religious, leading her towards strict Salafi Muslims.

It was interesting to see in Jack's (27) case how reading the biography of The Prophet Muhammad (*The Sealed Nectar*, Al-Mubarkpuri, 2002), which is a compilation of thousands of what Muslim scholars claim to be authentic Hadiths, had positively influenced his character and his family's opinion of Islam before he decided to convert. The biography helped converts to know who The Prophet Muhammad was as a person and understand the contents of The Quran and Islamic jurisprudence. For example, many excerpts from the biography explain how The Prophet lived peacefully among non-Muslims, how he treated women, and how he advised and treated different types of people, including his enemies. *The Sealed Nectar*, which is known to be an excellent translation (the first edition was awarded the highest prize for its accuracy by the World

Muslim League in the first Islamic conference about The Prophet Muhammad's life in 1979), now includes colourful maps, pictures and diagrams (in the 2012 full-colour edition), is easily accessible, and, above all, is easy to read and understand.

Jack implemented The Prophet's characteristics and ways of dealing with others into his life, as a way of experimenting and finding out what it means to be a Muslim. 'I stopped drinking, taking drugs, smoking [over time] and treated my parents and neighbours better. I stopped having problems with the police and overall I was a much calmer, tolerant and nicer person.' This shows that Jack adopted identity traits that were not present in his former identity, so the element of continuity is not present. His identity change may therefore be perceived as a transformation, as many aspects of his life changed and he became a different person. Reading the biography before conversion first helped Jack to link The Quran verses to specific and relevant contexts alongside events that occurred in The Prophet's life, as it explained Islamic rulings, when they were applied, and who they were applied to. He also believed that some of the Muslims around him were 'too strict' and claimed that had he not read the biography he would not have known that they were extreme Muslims, as a result of not understanding Islam properly. Others (Ahmed, 1; Sara, 3, Hassan, 8; Ryan, 18; David, 19; Sonia, 26; George, 28; Karen, 29) were also helped towards their conversion to Islam by reading the biography. Therefore, this strongly suggests that obtaining Islamic knowledge and a moral foundation from the teachings and example of The Prophet Muhammad might help people create or develop a strong and balanced British Muslim identity after conversion.

Reema (13) mentioned being emotionally moved and inspired to convert after watching 'The Message', a 1975 film about the revelation directed by Moustapha Akkad. (It was certified by many Muslim scholars and Al-Azhar University in Egypt as being an accurate representation of the biography of The Prophet Muhammad and the beginnings of Islam.) It is suggested that Islamic films help people to learn about the prophets and their lives, especially if they do not enjoy reading. The recent 'Omar Series', for example (MBC1, 2012), is a historical and educational Arab drama based on the life of Omar ibn Al-Khattab, the second Caliph, and includes many elements taken from the biography of The Prophet Muhammad. Muslims believe that Muhammad was chosen by God to be a prophet and to teach people how to improve and perfect their manners because of his high level of morality and good character (Quran, 68: 4; 49: 11-12). The

Prophet's servant Anas bin Malik stated that: '*Allah's* Messenger was the best of all people in character' (Sahih Muslim, Volume 2, Book 43, Chapter 16, No. 1414, p. 751). Many of the more mature and educated participants, for instance, Ryan (18), David (19) and Karen (29), had taken time to study Islam and other religions at university, and had considered the various obstacles and challenges they might come across as Muslims to find solutions early on. Ryan (18) had initially applied for a degree in Middle Eastern studies before he converted and found during his studies of Islamic history that he was able to relate to The Quran more at both an academic and intellectual level, which enabled him to identify the political issues and misunderstandings people had. Karen (29) had studied religious theologies; what struck her about Islam was that The Quran had never been changed; every historical manuscript of it she had seen (many of which are exhibited in the Topkapi museum in Istanbul, Turkey) had included the same words. One of the world's oldest manuscripts of The Quran, believed to be 1370 years old was exhibited by Birmingham University recently in October 2015 (Al-Jazeera, 2015). The fact that it was possible to trace the family lineage of the prophets also proved to Karen that they existed. Muslims believe that The Quran comprises verses sent by God in spiritual revelations to The Prophet Muhammad that are protected and can never be changed or replaced, to preserve the intended message (Quran, 41: 42; 15: 9).

Studying Islamic literature helped individuals to make the decision to convert, as they identified a theology they agreed with, alongside important elements found in the faith that they believed to be missing in their lives, such as discipline, life goals, logical reasoning regarding the purpose of life and spirituality. 'I made it my mission to learn about different religions during and after my years at university. I had an urge to speak to all my colleagues at work who were from different religions and open discussions about them. I sat with Sikhs, Muslims and one Jewish guy and we debated about God and the afterlife' (Mark, 33). The study shows that those who were raised in other faith groups were those who were emotionally affected by The Quran, whereas those who had not been so raised were more drawn to The Quran's scientific facts.

Other participants, however, such as Lauren (20) and Rebecca (23), who were young and drawn to one group of Muslims only (often Salafi) had rushed into a conversion without studying the risks of doing so. Like Mark (33) and Khadija (6) they were unaware of the various Muslim sects, ideologies and works of western Muslim scholars and tended to follow the teachings of traditional scholars, which the Muslims they met

had recommended. Lauren was told by some Muslims not to follow the opinions/teachings of western Muslim scholars, as they were not as knowledgeable and authentic as traditional Muslim scholars, and Rebecca claimed she trusted the opinions of Saudi scholars more because they were from 'the land of Islam'.

6.5 Summary

The data in this study shows that the start of a religious conversion cannot be determined, and that it is a complex, multifaceted and layered process, embedded in the context of everyday life and shaped by experiences and interactions with Muslims and Islamic literature/knowledge. Rambo (1993) claimed that this stage in the conversion process was important, as the interactions influenced individuals' decisions to convert, especially when they found that traits and elements they were attracted to in Islam and Muslims were missing from their lives. Some participants experimented with different faiths or studied them until they settled on a way of life that they believed to be most compatible with their beliefs, aspirations, lifestyles and personalities. Some participants who were drawn to various aspects of a Muslim identity and Islam tended to form close relationships with Muslims and experimented with Islamic practices before conversion. For the majority, an Islamic conversion meant that changes needed to be made to their identity and daily routine. Therefore, those who perceived the conversion to be a serious, lifelong decision took time with their research, as they had to consider carefully the practices, rituals, values, beliefs and obstacles (for instance, giving up things considered *haram* and praying five times a day) that they would need to accommodate and overcome to be good Muslims.

Some participants found that socialising with converts, or potential converts who shared similar circumstances, stories and crises, encouraged them to learn more about Islam and often found themselves more eager to convert if they were part of a supportive community of Muslims who shared their opinions, heritage and western values. Continuity was found to be important when considering a Muslim identity, as many participants felt they did not want to change the positive aspects of their western culture and identity. A minority of participants, such as Jack (27), decided to adopt a new Muslim identity because they believed that many of the elements in their former identities were negative and they did not want to hold on to bad habits. Participants who

had welcoming and supportive friends and partners were also more likely to convert, as a result of being influenced positively by their lifestyles and behaviour and/or for the benefit of marriage or belonging to a community.

The study shows that all educational pathways led to an increased interest in Islam and God. The majority of the participants pursued a search for knowledge throughout different stages in their journey. This confirms that Lofland and Stark's (1981) intellectual conversion pattern/motif, which suggests that individuals made their choices based on the knowledge they come across, alongside the experimental, observational and careful examinations of the faith over different periods of time, is valid. Intellectual and theological patterns of change were noticed in individuals who interacted frequently with members of different faith groups, and were influenced by Muslims in discussions about God's existence and the purpose of life. It is suggested that finding logical reasoning in Islamic teachings is a main turning point in individuals' decisions to convert to Islam. Participants who read The Quran and The Prophet's biography were also highly likely to convert to Islam if they found it affected them emotionally, psychologically, morally, spiritually and intellectually.

Many individuals depended solely on books and Muslim friends for information about Islam, while some made an effort to attend and/or watch online lectures, university talks, debates and classes in local Islamic centres. University studies about the Middle East and world religions contributed greatly to the decision-making processes of some participants who adopted academic approaches towards Islam and its teachings, and were influenced by their intellectual findings and encounters with influential Muslims.

This chapter shows that the various interaction experiences affected individuals according to their needs, intellect, desires and what they felt was missing in their lives and in their identities.

Chapter VII

Conversion Experiences and Consequences

7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores Lewis Rambo's (1993) commitment stage, which generally follows a period of intense interaction and experiences of turning points, following which the seeker is presented with the choice of whether or not to commit to the faith. The experiences of individuals who formally joined Islam, and in some cases also Muslim communities, are analysed. Joining a Muslim community is not an obligation for new Muslims; however, it may help them to lead an Islamic lifestyle and provides benefits, such as having a support network and the opportunity to be among people who share the same beliefs and values. As Abraham Maslow (1943) and Glynis Breakwell (1986) suggest, the elements of 'belonging' and 'acceptance' are important needs and priorities for many individuals who decided to convert and live among Muslims.

Converting to Islam involves the acceptance of Muslim beliefs and the five primary pillars of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad's companion ibn Omar reported The Prophet saying, 'Islam is built upon five pillars: to worship *Allah*, to establish prayer, to give charity (*Zakat*), to perform the *Hajj* pilgrimage and to fast the month of *Ramadan*.' (Sahih Muslim, Volume 1, Book 1, Chapter 41, No. 62, p. 66). These practices of worship may be perceived, approached and understood differently by various people. For example, some may not necessarily be willing to pray all five prayers daily straight away, or fast the entire month of *Ramadan* (from dawn to dusk) until they have mentally prepared themselves for it, and have established a physical/spiritual daily routine that accommodates their new faith. In Islam it is considered important for individuals to declare their testimony of faith in public, to be recognised and treated as Muslims, and as individuals who have become part of the *Ummah*.

Although many individuals may be attracted to Islam, the challenge of the commitment stage is 'coming out' and being prepared to face a confused and incredulous public, a barrage of questions, and negative reactions from the community and family. This makes 'coming out' a difficult decision to make. Yasir Suleiman (2013), Caroline Neumueller (2012), Leon Moosavi (2011), Maha Al-Qwidi (2002) and Ali Köse (1994)

all found many new Muslims suffered during this stage. For others, however, the decision to convert can be an occasion for great joy, rather than a problematic experience. This chapter will investigate the social and personal consequences faced as a result of individuals' decisions to convert to Islam.

7.2 Committing to Islam: *The Shahadah*

The experiences of being a convert and the development of a Muslim identity may come before or after individuals choose to inform others of their new beliefs and/or declaring the *shahadah* on account of their issues of 'coming out'. Rambo (1993: 132) identified five common elements that are found at the commitment stage: decision-making, rituals, surrender, testimony and motivational reformulation. The decision-making element involves an intense confrontation with the self, which is often dramatized and commemorated with a public demonstration of the individual's acceptance of a new faith. The *shahadah*, otherwise known as the Islamic declaration of faith, is usually conceived as the rite of passage that marks the entry into Islam. It is usually given in an official mosque ceremony in front of worshippers and two main witnesses, which marks a discontinuity between a pre-Muslim identity and a new Muslim identity. The ceremony has a powerful emotional, social and religious significance for individuals, as they embrace a new life and identity, and it provides a means in which to enter a new community and a profound transformation for people's experience of the conversion process. At the commitment stage, individuals accept the worship and moral obligations of membership, and this is celebrated by local Muslims who embrace new Muslims with hugs and small gifts, such as prayer mats, headscarves and Islamic books. In many official mosques and Islamic centres a conversion certificate is issued by Imams and given to converts as proof that they are Muslims, should they wish to go on the *Umrah* and *Hajj* pilgrimages or marry Muslims.

He [Muslim friend] met up with me, took me to his local mosque where people greeted me warmly and offered their help and support... I was overwhelmed by the number of people who came to hug me and congratulate me. I felt excited and happy to be a part of this community (Luke, 34).

Breakwell's (1986) element of having 'social value' is emphasised here, as new English Muslims, in particular, are made to feel privileged, accepted, welcomed and honoured in joining Islam, which encourages them to become practising Muslims and conform to Muslim community values.

Displaying an effort to practice religious rituals is important for many converts, as it shows a level of commitment, sincerity and a will to change for the 'better', which involves a symbolic repudiation of the old self and the embrace of a new identity. The majority of participants had looked back on their previous lives and described them as being immoral and sinful. Chana Ullman (1989: 15) claimed that converts 'tend to denounce pre-conversion life as sinful and immoral and they tend to exaggerate their pre-conversion sufferings or sins, so as to glorify their present salvation'. Jack (27), for example, denounced his former life by adopting a Muslim name, as he did not want to be known as the same sinful person.

Salvation is a powerful religious term that the Oxford English dictionary defines as 'the act of deliverance from harm or destruction, difficulty or evil' and is theologically defined as 'the spiritual rescue from sin and its consequences' (Taqra, 2015: 3). It refers to the liberation of men and women from a non-religious to a religious situation, which implies that an individual has been salvaged or received salvation, as soon as they convert (Omotosho, 1993: 1). Salvation in Islam, however, has a somewhat different connotation, and while it offers deliverance from hell and eternal punishments for sins, The Quran clearly states that salvation is only attained through complete surrender to God after conversion and the worship of Him alone. In The Quran God states that He did not create men and women in vain and that people should not do anything without having a goal. 'Then did you think that We created you uselessly and that to Us you would not be returned?' (Quran, 23: 115) and 'I did not create the *jinn* [unseen creatures made from fire] and mankind except to worship Me' (Quran, 51: 56). Therefore, to retain this state of *fitrah* and purity from sin, people must only follow God's commandments and strive to live a righteous life, and if they fail and fall into sin they are requested by God to repent. Repentance in Islam is important, as it symbolises humbleness and blesses the individual with mercy from God, guidance and forgiveness (Quran, 39: 53). Participants who felt guided to Islam believed and felt convinced they had been saved from an evil world full of sins and immoral behaviour by the mercy of God (Quran, 3: 191).

Donald Taylor (1999) and Breakwell (1986) suggest that individuals often associate an improved wellbeing, quality of life and higher levels of morality with the new tradition, as they had not previously found these elements. They also claimed that many people at this stage experienced a turning point, and felt a higher sense of self-esteem and self-worth, alongside a feeling of distinctiveness from others they knew, as they believed they had been chosen to be guided by God to the truth.

According to Rambo (1993), the element and experience of emotional surrender empowers converts with a spiritual connection to God and the community, in which they gain confidence. Individuals who have a desire for surrender usually comply with the requirements of the faith and community, and understand that surrender is necessary on the path to spiritual transformation. It was noted that individuals who perceived their previous lifestyles to be 'wrong' were likely to start practising Islam and adopt a Muslim identity soon after their conversion, as their feeling of being unique and 'blessed' by God was strong. This leads towards the motivational reformulation element, which involves an assessment of individuals' interaction with the community to see how they develop spiritual growth over a period of time.

Surrender requires people to confront directly what they will be giving up for the benefits of the new option (Rambo, 1993: 134). However, some people may not feel they want to give up certain habits, such as drinking alcohol, for the sake of complying with the rules of the faith and the requirements of the community, or may want to do so in their own time rather than immediately. Some converts took time to choose a suitable Muslim identity for themselves and their environment, especially if they did not wish to change their lifestyles. Some people say the *shahadah* in private to themselves, while others may declare the *shahadah* informally in front of a few friends if they wish to avoid being pressured by Muslims into things they are not ready for, to keep a low profile in society, and are not keen on living in, or belonging to, a Muslim community. Some individuals, such as Sara (3) and Karen (29) found out they were already believing Muslims, as they had always believed that there was one God, that Jesus was not His son, and that Muhammad was the last Prophet.

Both Quilliam and Pickthall suggested a gradual shift towards the Islamic practices and five pillars of Islam, which made it easier for people to live as Muslims, because to them, establishing a moral and spiritual base was more important, as it set the

foundation for the development of a strong and active national-religious identity. However, the majority of Muslim scholars agree that once an individual converts to Islam, he or she is obligated to fulfil the five pillars of Islam. The study shows that those who were fully aware, prepared, and had experimented with religious practices before converting, found it easier to conform to these practices unlike many others who felt pressured and struggled to perform them. According to Ali Köse's study (1994: 137), fifty-one per cent of his study sample found it difficult to pray all five prayers and twenty-seven per cent struggled to fast during *Ramadan*. However, many were able to comply with prohibitions on alcohol, eating pork, and sex outside marriage. The creation of a comfortable British Muslim identity is considered to be a challenge among those who find it difficult to balance both Islamic and western values, depending on how they understand the Islamic faith.

Ahmed (1) mentioned how he was pressurised by Muslims to conform to practices he was not ready for or comfortable with. His initial understanding of Islam, which was based on establishing a close relationship with God, was changed when a friend brought a 'scholar' to teach him more about Islam to 'make sure he does it right'.

He started to reel off a list of extra things that I should or shouldn't do, mostly should not do. I had already learned and accepted that alcohol and relationships outside of marriage were prohibited but I had never appreciated how many other things in my daily life were going to be barred to me once I became a Muslim. For a start my extensive CD collection was going to have to be disposed of as 'music is *haram* [prohibited in Islam]; all the photos I had of my childhood and family would have to be destroyed as 'images are idol worship'; and my non-Muslim friends (which is to say almost everybody I knew and relied upon in this world) would have to be cut off as 'friendship with the unbelievers is *haram*.'

Such prohibitions were often perceived as being ridiculous and difficult for converts to accept, and after researching Ahmed found that they were not a part of Islamic law, but rather issues that are frequently debated by scholars. Ahmed believed the minor issues some Muslims picked on were certainly not the things that a new Muslim should be focusing on. 'God started to seem very far away as a growing list of dos and don'ts became my focus and obsession.' On account of this, Ahmed lost many friends who felt he had become too strict and difficult to be around. Others (Alia, 15; Adam, 17)

supported Ahmed's dilemma by saying, 'Muslims I have come across are overly religious and focus on rules rather than the religion and establishing a relationship with *Allah*' (Alia, 15). Adam said that had it not been a requirement for him to convert to marry his Muslim girlfriend, he would not have done so, because he feels Muslims put people off conversion with their long lists of what is not permissible.

7.3 Pre-Islamic De-Conversion

The subject of de-conversion from another group, community or religion is rarely discussed with Muslim converts, and it is hoped that this thesis will create a new awareness of the subject. Previous chapters have showed that the majority of participants had disaffiliated from previous beliefs and groups as a result of religious, intellectual, and theological doubts. Some faced hostility, discrimination, exile and abuse as a result, and some were prepared to take the risk of de-conversion for the sake of their new beliefs, especially if the individual's perception of the expected rewards of an Islamic conversion was strong.

Apostasy is the formal term used by sociologists (McKnight, 2008; Bromley, 1988; Coser, 1954) to describe disaffiliation or permanent abandonment of a religion by individuals. Lewis Coser (1954: 250) writes:

The apostate is not simply one who has experienced a dramatic change in conviction; rather the designation refers to a man [*sic*] who, even in his new state of belief, is spiritually living not primarily in the content of that faith, in the pursuit of goals appropriate to it, but only in the struggle against the old faith and for the sake of its negation.

To be labelled an apostate is not a favoured term in most religious societies, as it connotes the idea of being a traitor and carries negative associations. The three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, traditionally punished apostates using extreme measures such as torture and death, but in the West today the degrees of punishment vary from social exile to verbal, emotional and/or physical abuse. Article nine in the UK Human Rights Act (1998) expresses the legal right to the freedom of choice in religion and so punishments for any religious apostasy are not tolerated.

Thomas Aikenhead was the last person to be prosecuted and executed by the church at the age of twenty on a charge of blasphemy in Britain. He was publicly hanged in 1697 for denying the veracity of the Old Testament and the legitimacy of the miracles of Jesus (Graham, 2008).

Massimo Introvigne (1999: 83–99) defines three types of narratives constructed by apostates: type one is where the exiting process is negotiated between individuals who intend to leave their formal groups to minimise the social damage for both parties; type two comprises a situation where although apostates do not wish to remain in their religious groups owing to negative experiences, they may nevertheless mention the positive experiences to their society; and type three relates to the dramatic and open rebellion, and reverse of loyalties against the organisations they have left. Helen Ebaugh (1988) created a theory consisting of four stages in the disaffiliation process, which are (1) first doubts, (2) seeking and weighing role alternatives, (3) a turning point, and (4) establishing an ex-role identity. This theory was relevant to the majority of active seekers in this study, who were motivated by religious and intellectual doubts to study Islam and other religions to find the ‘truth’ and adopt a new identity.

Keeping a new identity a secret is inimical to authentic life and detrimental to mental health, which is why most people will declare their new faith in different ways at some point during their journey so they can practise Islam, depending on when and how accepting they assume their formal groups, community, friends and family to be.

7.3.1 Disaffiliation from a Religious Community

This study shows that religious and traditional conservative communities did not handle the issue of apostasy well, and issued different types of social and personal punishments for it, as it was considered an offence against the community and a rejection of the culture and religious values. According to Donald Taylor’s (1999) outward conversion theory, which focuses on the perspective of the religious group that individuals leave behind, conversions to another religious group are not acknowledged as they present a positive element, built into the definition of conversion as a movement to the superior.

The majority of participants did not face any major physical hardships or consequences that resulted from a de-conversion; however, those who were from practising Jewish and Hindu communities and households were more likely to suffer than others. Due to western laws and new understandings of religious texts, modern-day Jewish apostates no longer suffer from physical punishments. Instead, they experience social and emotional pressure from community members; are harassed and discriminated against; are excluded from the Jewish community and religious events; and have no right to marry other Jews or be buried in Jewish cemeteries (Frankenthaler, 2004). Ryan (18) explained how parents might mourn a child who leaves the faith and treat him or her as being deceased.

Leyla (7) mentioned how quickly word got around the Jewish community that she had left Judaism, which was taken seriously by family members and community leaders who attempted, but failed, to keep her within the Jewish faith. 'When I had made my final decision, you could say they exiled me from the community.' Leyla was asked by her mother to leave home and now shares an apartment with Muslim friends. Although she says she was not affected by being excluded from her former community, she nevertheless suffered from emotional and psychological problems on account of being separated from her family when she refused to give up Islam. People had warned her about this, however she was prepared to take the risk, and in doing so she made her family feel they were not respected or a priority in her life. This indicates the seriousness of having to choose between one's faith and one's family, and the degree of sacrifice individuals may need to make for the sake of God, a conversion and what they believe to be the 'right thing to do'. Moving away from one's family as a result of being exiled can have personal and social implications on individuals' wellbeing throughout their lives, as their families may harbour resentment towards them and refuse to stay in touch. Others who voluntarily chose to move away from their families, such as Sara (3), Mariam (13) and Luke (34), to be practising Muslims did not suffer nearly so much, as they were not forced to leave.

Ryan (18) broke the news of his conversion very gently to his family because they had noticed that he was avoiding the synagogue and began to ask questions. His family had also noticed positive changes in his character and that he had become a happier person, which he claimed lightened the burden of his news. His family members were not initially surprised by his decision, as they thought he was already inclined towards

Islam after living for some time with a Muslim family in Syria. Nevertheless they were upset and told him that he would need to leave home and the Jewish community before people find out he had become a Muslim, which would bring shame on them. Ryan mentioned that he knew someone from his community who had converted to Islam and been exiled, so he was prepared mentally and emotionally for the consequences that he would expect to face as a result of disaffiliation. Due to his extensive research into Islam and as a result of his time spent in Syria, Ryan was sure that being a Muslim was what he wanted, and was ready to make a sacrifice that others might perceive as being selfish, as he had to live with the guilt of breaking his mother's heart for the sake of following what he believed to be 'the right path'. 'During these [last] three years I have seen my family on three occasions only and they were out of London, away from the Jewish community.'

Mariam (11) and Reema (13) who were raised as Hindus also suffered from de-conversions. Although the Hindu faith does not have any prescribed punishments for apostasy, community members will usually exile apostates, as they are perceived to have betrayed the values, beliefs and traditions of the community and therefore no longer deserve to belong to it. Alia (15) said, 'In the Hindu community it is extremely wrong to convert to another religion, especially Islam because of the bloodshed in India caused by war between Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs.' Conversion to Islam was perceived as a huge betrayal and an act of disloyalty, dishonour and selfishness, as it ruined the reputation, honour, prestige and social status of an entire family.

Mariam felt anger towards her community members who were not able to accept the fact that individuals might chose a different path in life to their own, and was appalled at the intolerance shown towards her. 'No one helped either; my neighbours actually encouraged it [the hostility] when they [my family] asked for their advice. I was no longer wanted in the community and didn't belong there, they made that very clear.' Reema claimed she had felt scared to tell the members of her community about her conversion to Islam, and continued going to the Hindu Temple in order not to arouse suspicions. However, she avoided other social and religious gatherings, which raised questions, and claimed that most of her fights with her parents were because they could not handle seeing her pray in an Islamic way.

Alia (15) like Ryan (18) knew what to expect from her Hindu community, as she was

aware of another woman's experience that had resulted in community exile and family disownment, which helped her to prepare mentally and emotionally for a similar reaction. She gradually lost her Hindu friends who could not accept the fact she had chosen to be a Muslim, and her family tried to keep it a secret from the community to protect their reputation, which meant she was unable to practise her faith openly and 'come out' as a Muslim. Feelings of disappointment, anger and frustration were displayed by those she knew at the poor choice they believed she had made and were convinced that she had been brainwashed by radical Muslims. 'To this day friction remains between my family and I. They refuse to speak to me because of my decisions that they don't wish to understand or at the very least to discuss ... I had to move out too, as they refused to live with a "traitor and a Muslim".'

On account of the various problems disaffiliates may face, it is clear why some individuals prefer to be secret disaffiliates until they are psychologically, financially, physically and emotionally able and willing to face the social difficulties that may arise from 'coming out'. Some people may not disclose their conversions until they are sure they wish to remain Muslims, while others may find it more effective to introduce their new Muslim identities subtly and 'come out' in stages over a period of time, as they find ways of dealing with social issues during their journey.

It was found that modern-day Christians were more lenient than other religious groups when it came to disaffiliation. Khadija (6) presented an example of hostility she faced from her predominantly White religious Christian community back in the 1980s. 'I got a lot of verbal abuse from the locals to the point I didn't feel safe walking alone on the street.' It may be suggested that because more Christians were practising at that time, it was more common to see people verbally abused and stigmatized for de-converting and joining Islam or other foreign/ethnic groups, which was perceived as an insult to their prestigious White heritage and status, as postcolonial immigrant societies were perceived to be 'problematic'. Today many non-practising Christians no longer face abuse or social hardship if they leave the Christian faith, but are more likely to face negative reactions from their friends and families if they abandon or reject British cultural practices, such as celebrating Christmas and church weddings for the sake of their new beliefs.

The narratives show that people who had issues with disaffiliates who converted to

Islam in ‘White areas’, such as Lina (22) and Zaynab (30), were more concerned about the political climate and negative social aspects of individuals becoming Muslims, rather than their disloyalty to the beliefs of their former religious groups. They were often stared at in public and perceived as being ‘abnormal’ for wanting to be Muslims and wear the *hijab*, for example. Islamophobic reactions were also considered to be ‘normal’ if individuals’ conversions were perceived to be a declaration of wanting to support and become ‘terrorists’. It is suggested, therefore, that had the individuals concerned converted to another religion, such as Buddhism, this might not have been perceived as problematic to a large extent because there is very little negative media representation of that religion.

7.4 Conversion Challenges: Friends and Family Reactions

Participants revealed their new beliefs in different ways, which triggered various responses, ranging from extreme rejection to acceptance. Kate Zebiri (2007: 71) claims that family reactions to conversion fall into three categories. They are (1) negative reactions followed by a period of difficulty, giving way to gradual coming-to-terms and an eventual, if not always wholeheartedly, acceptance by the family; (2) instances in which time does not seem to heal; and (3) support from the outset, or soon after, from parents.

Some of the participants did not face any discrimination or difficulties from their previous religious communities but did from their non-Muslim friends, colleagues and family members. It is suggested that their reactions and responses may have profound effects on the psychological and emotional wellbeing of individuals, especially as they are going through many emotional, spiritual and mental changes in their conversion journey. The attitudes converts tend to experience from their families often seem to reflect the current attitudes of the society they live in. As a result, their conversion may have negative impacts on their most meaningful relationships, and result in, for instance, divorce (Janet, 32) or disownment (Khadija, 6; Mariam, 11; Hussein, 31) and isolation (Reema, 13; Ryan, 18). This section therefore argues that issues converts had with acceptance were on account of the various ways in which they presented their new Muslim identities. News of a conversion may often come as a shock to people who have

not been given the time to get used to the idea, prepare themselves, or think about how they are going to deal with the revelation.

Some participants, such as Hafsa (25), were made fun of and teased by their friends, which led to emotional issues, such as low self-esteem and insecurity. Jack (27) said, 'My brothers all made fun of me, calling me Bin Laden for a while which was annoying at first and then made me laugh!' Most participants believe that the right wing news media misrepresents them, and that this contributes to discrimination and/or a lack of understanding between communities (Fekete, 2006; Ahmed, 1992). Also, as some converts have indeed become involved in extremism and terrorist organisations, the news of Islamic conversions is not welcomed by much of the public, friends and family members. Ryan (18) said, 'My non-Muslim friends often joke with me and ask me when I am planning on going for *jihad* [holy war] in a Muslim country now that I am a Muslim! I do not get angry when they ask me as I feel they are just ignorant'

Sara (3), Reema (13), Lauren (20), Karen (29) and Luke (34) chose not to inform their friends and family of their conversion to avoid the negative consequences of so doing, and confined their prayers and other practices to their bedrooms or in private places away from people. The life of a closeted Muslim may be challenging on account of the religious obligations that have to be performed, such as the daily prayers, and so a number of converts (Aisha, 4; Hassan, 8; Robert, 14) tended to move away quietly from their societies so that they could find a suitable environment in which they could practise Islam freely, and be away from bad influences and temptations. However, some participants, such as Ahmed (1) refused to live as closeted Muslims. 'I had nothing to be ashamed of and there was no point hiding who I was to them. I had made a decision and felt they [friends, family and society] should know'.

At the start, converts often faced difficult choices, such as abandoning a certain lifestyle, living a double life or compromising on Islamic values to be able to live happily and peacefully in a non-Muslim society. New Muslims tend to be eager to implement what they can with regard to Islamic practices into their lives, and so, when presented with the social challenge of meeting non-Muslim friends and family in places not deemed to be Islamic, for example pubs, or living at home where there are statues of Hindu gods, they are torn between guilt and justifying the reasons for them being there. Many converts often believe that if a place is not suitable for Muslims, it is better to

find an Islamic alternative if possible. This is an issue many converts face, as they feel torn between identities, and struggle to find middle ground between their non-Muslim culture and Islamic beliefs if their friends and family are not considerate or are unaware of them. Others however, such as Lauren (20), Rebecca (23) and Hussein (31), prioritised their Islamic identity and beliefs even if it cost them their previous relationships. Breakwell's (1986) element of identity continuity was important at this stage for many participants who wanted to keep their previous relationships and remain in the same society, job/career, and social circles, but also be Muslims in a way that would not jeopardise their personal values and important relationships.

Following Islamic rules was a personal test of discipline, strength and willpower for many participants, to see how well they could do to adhere to what had become forbidden to them after becoming Muslims to earn God's love and rewards. Participants dealt with temptations in different ways according to their previous habits and the environmental context. Individuals who desired a significant change in their lives tended to perceive Islamic practices and living within Islamic boundaries as personal goals to reach, whereas others, such as David (19), attested to their conversions in a more spiritual manner and did not focus too much on the laws, as they considered their lifestyles already to be in line with Islamic requirements.

Lauren (20) wrote a letter that she described as being 'dramatic' to inform her mother of her conversion, as she felt it was an easier task than having to tell her face to face, and quoted verses from The Quran to explain how Islam was 'the truth'. 'She reacted very badly, it caused a crisis and they made me "retract" my conversion.' For a while, Lauren lived as a 'closeted disaffiliate' and 'secret Muslim' before coming out as a Muslim again, because she found she was not able to live two lives. Her mother forced the severance of Lauren's ties with her siblings as an emotional incentive to persuade her to leave Islam, and blamed Lauren for the problems they were having at school. She also did not allow her to accompany them on family trips. After many attempts to gain her family's acceptance, Lauren chose to leave home when she was eighteen to be able to live as a practicing Muslim and to avoid the stress and emotional and psychological bullying, which she perceived as being 'tests from God'. 'That might sound crazy, but the indoctrination was so strong that Islam and God had to come first before anything else, or else you would end up in hellfire.' It is suggested that Lauren's mother had reacted the way she did because Lauren did not 'come out' as a Muslim in stages.

Karen (29) lived as a closeted disaffiliate for many years, as she found it very difficult to inform her religious Christian parents of her conversion. Like Lauren, she suffered both emotionally and psychologically as a result of concealing her beliefs from those she loved. The fear of losing loved ones is the main reason why people live with hidden identities, alongside the anticipation of negative reactions and abuse. Giving up the comfort, love and security of family was one of the greatest and most painful sacrifices many converts had to make for the sake of their beliefs. However, during various points in the conversion journey, individuals feel a great need to 'come out', as they reach a limit in hiding and suppressing how they feel and wish to live. The feeling of not being able to be true to oneself either triggers depression or pushes people to confess if they are unable, or no longer wish, to live with the burden.

Mariam (11) said that she was emotionally, verbally and physically abused by her family as a result of her conversion. 'While I was in my room I would take the time out to pray and if someone walked in and saw me praying I would get spat at and laughed at.' She found her mother's pleas to Krishna (a Hindu god) to be 'ridiculous', as her mother knew that the statue was unable to respond to her, and this annoyed Mariam, who ran away to live with a Muslim friend. During this time she did not speak to her siblings for three months and her father disowned her. Reema (13) also lost her relationship with her mother when she moved away from their Hindu environment in order to practise Islam properly. Sonia's (26) father, however, although angry at the news of her conversion, did not make her leave the house, as he believed it was a phase she was going through. This created four dilemmas for her: she was forced to live with a hidden identity; she was uncomfortable with how Islam was made to look as something shameful that had to be hidden; she was not sure if she was able to continue to live with non-Muslims who had idols and gods in their house; and she did not want to be separated from her comfort zone and family, especially her mother.

Robert (14) did not inform his parents of his conversion, but made it obvious by displaying actions that indicated he had become a Muslim, such as praying when his parents visited his apartment. 'Dad would pretend not to notice and mum would constantly have a look of worry on her face. They sat me down to confirm and I told them I was a Muslim.' His mother's main worry was that he would change as a person and become a 'radical Jihadist', whereas his father was considered to be more open-minded, as he trusted him to make the best decisions for his life and both respected and

accepted his son's new identity. His mother, however, like Karen's (29) parents who believed she had been led astray by the devil, was not able to relax until she saw for herself over time that he was the same person but with different beliefs.

Khadija (6) allowed her family, whom she described as racist, to find out about her conversion by wearing the *hijab* in public. She has not been in contact with family members for twelve years, as they decided to disown her when she became a Muslim. It was something they really could not accept, as they were active Christian missionaries with hostile attitudes towards postcolonial immigrants. 'They used to tease me a lot by trying to make me eat pork and call me names and try to make me drink alcohol.' Being among friends and family who are not respectful or kind leads converts to become isolated from their society, which triggers depression, especially if they do not find support from Muslims. Robert and many others blamed their parents' negative way of thinking on the media. For example, Sophia's (12) parents feared she would be radicalised by her Muslim fiancé, and could not tolerate seeing her in a *hijab*, while Hassan (8), Alia (15), Hana (16), Holly (21) and Rebecca's (23) parents were initially convinced that their children had been brainwashed by extremists and were vulnerable to Muslims who would one day persuade them to join groups such as ISIS. Caroline Neumueller's study (2012: 174) noted that many Muslim converts feel that they have to work harder to prove that they are different from their stereotypical media portrayals.

Some parents felt they had failed to raise their children correctly to know who they, or what their aspirations were as a result of their conversion and can experience a form of bereavement for loss of their expectations, dreams and hopes. Maria's (5) father was not pleased and struggled to understand the reasoning behind her conversion, which he blamed himself for.

It was years later that he asked me what he had done wrong and thought I had been looking for something because I was unhappy. I explained that it was because he and my mum had given me so much love and freedom to be who I wanted to be that I was able to choose what was right for me. I explained I was still proud of who I was and my heritage but I had only changed my religion not my past.

Other parents, such as Sara's (3), were concerned about the 'oppressive' lifestyles of

Muslim women, and this frustrated them, as they did not understand why their daughters would exchange their pleasures of freedom for what they considered to be a regressive step.

Reema (13) among others, such as Ahmed (1), Omar (10), Hana (16) and Rebecca (23) had been told by Muslims that they needed to keep away from non-Muslims because of this verse: ‘Believers should not take disbelievers as allies to the exclusion of the believers. Whoever does so will have disconnected themselves from God...’ (Quran, 3: 28). According to the commentary of the four schools of jurisprudence (see 11.5), the Arabic word for allies (*awliyaa*) is understood linguistically as adopting political alliances and guardianship offered by those who have agendas against Muslims. However, in some weak English translations of The Quran, the word *awliyaa* is translated as ‘friends’ and ‘guardians’, which includes the guardianship of non-Muslim parents. Many Muslim scholars reject this translation and do not encourage Muslims to sever non-Muslim family and friendship ties, as long as they are not being harmed, prevented from practising their faith, or forced to leave Islam. Western Muslim scholars in particular have also argued that it would not be possible for Muslims to give *dawah* and live in peace if they did not maintain good relationships with non-Muslims. Asmaa, the daughter of the first Caliph Abu Bakr and a wife of The Prophet Muhammad had asked The Prophet if she should maintain a good relationship with her mother who was a polytheist and he had said yes (Sahih Muslim, Volume 1, Book 10, Chapter 25, No. 531, p. 297). According to some scholars, Hadiths indicate that Muslims have to treat their non-Muslim parents kindly, out of hope that they will one day be inclined to Islam.

This highlights the dangers of following the advice of people who may be ignorant or unqualified to answer important questions about religion. This is shown in Janet’s (32) case when Muslims convinced her that she was, as a Muslim, unable to stay married to a non-Muslim after failing to persuade her husband to convert. She said, ‘I must say getting a divorce was the biggest sacrifice I made for Islam.’ It is argued that the couple both suffered unnecessarily as a result of this poor advice, as they might have been able to find solutions over time to their dilemma had they consulted knowledgeable people and informed their families of Janet’s conversion in gradual stages.

7.4.1 Positive Experiences

Friends and family members who knew and understood the reasons why individuals wanted to convert to Islam were more accepting of the change, as, for example, in Adam's (17) case when he was required to convert to marry his Muslim girlfriend, as long as it did not attract unwanted attention, such as him suddenly wearing Asian clothing, which they felt would make them uncomfortable. Karen (29) attempted to find western alternatives for the *hijab*, which made it easier for her parents to accept. The findings show that the main concerns of loved ones were more about the wellbeing of participants, who they feared might change and as a result be discriminated against, abused, radicalised or rendered outsiders.

Jack (27) managed to gain his family's acceptance by gradually implementing good moral behaviour and attitudes in his relationships, actions and daily routine that he had learnt from The Prophet Muhammad's biography. He demonstrates the positive and powerful psychological effect that it had on him, as he had changed from being someone whose life had revolved around crime and a bad relationship with his parents, to someone with better morals and discipline. Dramatic identity transformations were rare in this study, however the majority had claimed to be affected positively after reading the biography, which encouraged them to change their worldview and morals. Jack found that his change of identity had eliminated hostility towards him, and he was accepted, welcomed and praised for the improvements in his life, and this later encouraged his younger brother to convert too. Hassan (8) also adopted and implemented new Islamic attitudes, beliefs, manners, values and behaviour in his life and found he gained his parents' acceptance when they saw his behaviour was changing for the better, despite being a closeted Muslim for the first few years of his conversion. Hassan would pray quietly in his room so as not to offend his family, which they respected and appreciated, as well as the fact that he did not wear Muslim clothes or grow a beard. This had a positive impact on a friend who also later converted.

Other participants such as Ahmed (1), Aisha (4), Lina (22) and Sonia (26) also experienced an improvement in relationships after they converted, especially with their parents. Islam places a strong emphasis on building bridges with parents by honouring them and behaving well towards them (Quran, 17: 23–24; 31: 14; 46: 15). 'And your

Lord has decreed that you not worship except Him, and to parents, good treatment. Whether one or both of them reach old age [while] with you, say not to them [so much as] "uff" [huffing and puffing] and do not repel them but speak to them a noble word' (Quran, 17: 23). Ahmed (1) said, 'My relationship with my parents is better now that it was before I became Muslim. Islam has encouraged me to build relationships that were not very strong when I was younger.' Ahmed later went on to teach Islam and The Prophet's biography to new Muslims, which he found to be very rewarding, both personally and spiritually, as he managed to educate and help people with their religious problems. He claimed that the responsibility and knowledge he gained contributed to an empowered sense of self, confidence and Muslim identity, and had implemented many character traits of The Prophet Muhammad in his life that made him enjoy what he did for the sake of God and as a member of the Muslim community.

Many participants mentioned how they were happy as Muslims, despite the sacrifices they had to make for God and others, and claimed that Islam 'disciplined them', as it encouraged them to stay away from immoral practices, places and bad habits. Others (Fatima, 2; Ryan, 18; David, 19; Jack, 27) felt more spiritually grounded after becoming Muslims, whether by feeling they had established a connection with God and The Prophet Muhammad, or via prayers, fasting and wearing the *hijab*. Holly (21) said, 'They [the prayers] give me a sense of peace and spirituality that I have never felt before. I feel really connected to God and I love it.' Reema (13) mentioned that she now feels at peace with herself, as Islam gave her spiritual wellbeing that helped to get rid of her psychological and emotional issues. Ryan (18) also said, 'It feels so comforting to know that you are working in your life towards something. The feeling of not knowing the purpose of life and questioning everything around you is an awful feeling.' Hassan (8) also claimed that the best thing about his conversion was knowing that he had a purpose in life and that he is now more wary of his actions.

George (28), whose parents are religious Christians, said, 'They were very upset and disappointed, primarily because they believe that salvation can only be achieved by professing the beliefs of Christianity, but also because of what they perceived to be "the terrible way Muslims behave".' His parents eventually came round when they noticed he was happier, and accepted that he was free to have his own beliefs. Like Hassan (8) and David (19), George considered the feelings of his family and avoided doing things that might make his relationship with them problematic, which eventually gained him

the acceptance he was hoping for. His conversion was more about establishing a spiritual relationship with God and leading a peaceful life as a British Muslim in his own society rather than belonging to a new Muslim community and culture. George felt that if he did not consider his parents' feelings it would do more harm than good to the reputation of his new religion. 'Had I done something like change my name, which I was requested and pressurised to do in the mosque when I took my *shahadah* – it may [*sic*] have been hurtful and insulting to them.' George found out that it was not an official Islamic requirement to change one's name, and that doing so was not as important as maintaining strong ties of kinship. 'God requests us to respect and honour our parents and this is how I choose to do it, by respecting what my parents gave me. I didn't want them to think that I was rejecting them and everything they had done for me as a son just because I became a Muslim.'

It was found that those who were welcomed and found encouragement and support from their Muslim friends, partners, neighbours and communities, especially at the start of their conversion journeys, were happier Muslims and were more likely to remain Muslims for the rest of their lives. Hafsa (25), for example, mentioned that during *Ramadan* a Muslim family would invite her every day to break her fast, and was regularly invited to celebrate religious occasions with them. Another family had also allowed her to stay with them for a month while she was facing hostility from her family for being a Muslim. Karen (29) was also invited into the homes of her Arab friends to break her fast and celebrate *Eid* (a joyous social celebration that marks the end of the month of *Ramadan* and the completion of the *Hajj* pilgrimage). She described them as very welcoming and hospitable people, as they taught her how to pray, what to say in the prayers, and how to wash in preparation for them. She was also taught daily Islamic etiquettes, such as saying '*al salamu alaikom*' (Islamic greeting – may peace be upon you) and '*bismillahi al rahman al raheem*' ('in the name of God the most Beneficial most Merciful') before performing activities such as, eating, sleeping and entering the house. These instances demonstrate that, for some, conversion was equivalent to gaining a new family that supported them, especially if they had been disowned or rejected, and that made them feel safer, happier and more confident. Muslim families who were generous with their time, effort and hospitality often gained the love, respect, admiration and friendship of converts, which has proved to be a successful tool of indirect *dawah* and an encouragement to keep individuals in the faith. George (28) said, 'Some Muslims are selfless, giving of their time to help others

without restraint and are very hospitable, showing kindness and generosity to their guests.’ As a result, many converts perceived some of their experiences with Muslims to be significant turning points that influenced their lives positively.

David (19) claimed that he was fortunate to have understanding Muslim friends who did not put pressure on him to conform to any particular practices, and as a result he enjoyed his conversion journey, as he was able to implement them at his own pace and when he felt ready to do so. Some participants became selective about their choice of friends and only kept those who respected their new beliefs. Adam (17), like Holly (21) and Karen (29), said that as time passed his friends and parents would consider and accommodate his Islamic values, especially during special events. ‘My mum [even] buys *halal* meat for me when she goes to the supermarket, which I find really sweet. She considers me in things like this and no longer drinks alcohol in my presence or offers it to me.’ Although Adam converted for the purpose of marriage and did not change for reason of belief, he found it important to follow the rules for his fiancée so he could live as a Muslim husband and father without difficulty, and his family had understood and respected this.

Maria’s (5) mother, like Ruqayya’s (9), Hafsa’s (25) and Sonia’s (26), was aware that she might be heading towards an Islamic conversion, as she had always been attracted to Muslim people and culture. As a result, the news of her daughter’s conversion did not come as a surprise, as she had already prepared herself mentally for it, and they continued to have a good relationship. Ruqayya (9), Lina (22), Zaynab (30) and Mark (33) enjoyed a good relationship with their parents whose primary goal was to make their children happy. They accepted whatever their children chose to be, as long as no social harm was caused to anyone by the changes made in their lives. Mark said, ‘I lived life as normal and over time she [my mother] almost forgot that I had become a Muslim’. Fatima (2), who was raised in a mixed faith household, was given the freedom to choose the faith she preferred to follow. She acknowledged that a religious upbringing, alongside the moral and ethical values found in most cultures, was a foundation for Islamic beliefs, and she viewed her conversion as an extension, rather than as a rejection, of previous religious values. This once more emphasises the importance of identity continuity, and how religious values are perceived both as a part of who individuals already are, and as a part of the identities they wish to build on and develop further.

7.5 Summary

The majority of converts did not face any physical hardships as a result of a religious de-conversion to join Islam, which is most likely a result of legal action in Britain taken against those who abuse converts and disaffiliates. It is also argued that owing to the secularisation of Britain, ever more people, especially Christians, are losing their religious beliefs and so many people now do not perceive de-conversion as a criminal act. It is attested that those who face negative consequences from de-conversion face them because they are perceived to have preferred a ‘problematic’ religion over their previous beliefs. Those who faced difficulties mostly came from closed, isolated and very traditional Hindu and Orthodox Jewish communities, and punishments ranged from being excluded from the community and places of worship to isolation and exile from the family home. The main cause for de-conversion was due to a gradual change in intellectual and theological doubts, alongside a lack of fulfilment of spiritual needs.

The study found that ‘coming out’ as a Muslim involved difficulties in both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Many felt pressured by Muslims to conform immediately to Islamic and cultural practices, and at the same time they worried about what their non-Muslim friends, family and former groups would think and how they would react. Many converts felt that Muslims had unrealistic expectations of them to change their way of dress, habits, lifestyle, name, diet, clothing and even relationships, in order to be good Muslims, and that they did not understand the dilemmas and issues of converts who were not ready to take on so many responsibilities at the start of their journey. Because of this, some converts lived for a period of time with a hidden identity, by keeping away from Muslim communities and/or privatising their Islamic practices in the confinement of their own bedrooms. Living with a suppressed identity sometimes created social, emotional and psychological problems for individuals. Other participants felt the need to declare their disaffiliation, as they decided they were unable to practise Islam in their own homes, could not live with a hidden identity, or did not fear a negative reaction.

Many converts were eager to practise Islam right away, while others took their time, and some attempted to negotiate their new Muslim identities in a manner that would satisfy both Muslim and non-Muslim societies. A few, however, compromised on Islamic principles, that is, for example, by not wearing the traditional *hijab* to maintain

a good relationship with their friends and families, whereas others were not able to do this and gave up their social lives and relationships for the sake of being committed to God and being able to practise Islam freely within a Muslim community.

Parents who find the conversion process difficult to accept often feel guilty, and wonder where they went wrong in the upbringing of their children that caused them to want to be Muslims. Such parents are more likely to worry if they see them socialising with practising Muslims, and often assume they will be influenced to become radical. To avoid hostilities and judgements, some converts moved away from their families to live peaceful Islamic lives. The minority of participants who were accepted without problems as Muslims by their societies, friends and families had an easier start to their conversion journeys and suffered less emotionally. This was usually the case when families could sense potential conversions or knew that individuals were interested in Islam. Converts who were successful at keeping their family ties were usually those who convinced their families that there were positive moral teachings to be found in Islam, and that they were still the same people with British values, but with more refined and improved identities. It was found that introducing Islam to friends and family members in stages helped to gain acceptance of their new way of life, as it gave them time to understand the nature of participants' conversions and their motives.

An increase in confidence was a factor that most participants acknowledged when they became Muslims, as a result of their crises being solved, newly found spirituality, and/or new position and value in society. It was also regarded as a privilege to be accepted and guided by God to what they perceived to be the true purpose of life. Significant positive experiences with Muslims also became turning points in participants' conversion journeys that brought them closer to God and contributed to a more enjoyable conversion journey and helped them to cope with many difficulties, especially at the start of their journeys. Other positive elements of a conversion journey included the abandonment of bad habits and behaviour. Every participant mentioned various moral elements they had gained from their religious conversion, which had a positive impact on their lives and the lives of those around them. Parents in particular were pleasantly surprised by a positive change in attitudes and behaviour of converts, both on a personal and social level, and were more accepting of their conversions after realising and acknowledging that the positive change had come as a result of them becoming Muslims.

Chapter VIII

The Creation of a British Muslim Identity

8.1 Introduction

It is suggested that conversions to Islam challenge mainstream secular western values by promoting a way of life based on God's laws, values and moral conduct. Most indigenous British people think that Islam belongs to postcolonial immigrants, so when White Britons convert to Islam, and sometimes adopt a new political opinion alongside a Muslim culture and physical identity, they are perceived as culturally 'other' by the general public, as they have discarded what is assumed to be a 'normal' White English identity.

European conversions to Islam have always been surrounded by questions relating to loyalty and ulterior motives, which largely seem to evade the obvious reasons of serious belief and personal conviction. Since the early Renaissance, when Europeans began to discover and colonise India and the Arab world, contact between Europeans and Muslims often resulted in conversions to Islam, which were then perceived as 'turning Turk', suggesting a cultural desertion rather than a change of religious beliefs (Zebiri, 2007).

Nancy Ammerman (2003) argues that taking up a religious identity is a matter of choice and is not determined. To understand responses given by participants, the terms 'spiritual', 'religious', 'cultural', and being 'cooperative' with regard to religion for other purposes such as marriage, need to be defined and differentiated.

The term 'religious' is usually interpreted as meaning adherence to a particular religion, orthodox doctrine, and consecrated belief structure, while 'spiritual' is less rigidly defined and can encompass ideas from various, and sometimes seemingly discordant faith traditions, as well as personal spiritual paths (Neumueller, 2012: 99).

According to Karin Van Nieuwkerk (2006: 102), the term ‘cultural’ is defined by the social practices of a particular society. She found that some converts seek belonging to, and social stability in, a Muslim cultural lifestyle that offers clear rituals and regulations regarding, for example, dress code, gender roles and social moral conduct. The convert of convenience is defined by Kevin Brice (2010: 2) as being ‘someone who converts to Islam in order to facilitate marriage to a Muslim partner. This type will not normally self-identify as a Muslim and will usually not be practising.’

Although a British Muslim identity is constructed by individuals in a postcolonial context, the elements that contribute towards, and influence, its formation are drawn from various religious traditions and systems of representation. Religious identities are also shaped by social processes, such as family and friendship relationships that influence their method and degree of integration as Muslims in different societies. The participants demonstrate how ‘being Muslim’ has various meanings for different people, as they draw upon the elements found within the contexts to represent themselves in different ways that suit their personalities, environment and lifestyles.

This chapter explores how participants negotiate both national and Muslim hybrid identities and why, for some, one identity may be more dominant than another. It also provides insight into the consequences of having multiple conflicting identities, and analyses the ways in which participants balance and make sense of them.

8.2 The Negotiation of Faith and a New Muslim Identity

Many of the participants in this study had undergone a series of identity and lifestyle changes that had developed over time, which involved adopting new forms of Islamic dress, mentality, worldview, foreign cultural practices, friends and social activities that adhered to Islamic principles and beliefs. The participants viewed and understood a Muslim identity in various ways, which influenced the changes converts made to accommodate Islam in their daily lives.

The term ‘identity negotiation’ originated in social psychology (Swann, 1987). William Swann was concerned with the processes that affect changes to personal identity, and scholars such as Heinz Streib (2001) and Stuart Hall (1997) built upon this term and

explored cultural, social and racial issues, perceiving identity to be a socially negotiated process. Fixed notions of identity more prone to stereotyping cannot account for experiences converts face in different cultural, geographical and diverse contexts. People perceive Islam and Muslims in different ways, according to their own understanding and experiences, and therefore each individual makes assumptions about the type of person he or she is. The process of identity negotiation starts when individuals represent and define themselves to others in ways that change other people's perceptions of their identity, to gain acceptance and recognition in their society according to established systems of representation, such as the use of symbols to show affinity with their new religious traditions, while at the same time keeping within the cultural boundaries of their traditional society (Ajrouch, 2004; Jackson, 1999; Hall, 1997). Over time, the process of representing the self in a particular way contributes towards the construction of a national-religious identity that encompasses, for instance, individuals' beliefs, practices and attitudes. Some aspects of a religious identity are more sensitive and difficult than others; for example, the decision to wear the headscarf in a non-Muslim society, which further highlights the complexity of religious identity construction as an ongoing social process required to fit into a variety of different social contexts. It was found that the more individuals perceive the different elements of their identities as being compatible, the higher the level of identity integration will be, as it strengthens the psychological wellbeing of individuals and gives them personal and social confidence.

8.2.1 Islamic Dress

Throughout the study, attention was paid to the way converts dressed and physically presented themselves to others as Muslims, as it reflects their understanding of Islam, and the various influences a religious identity has on their characters and behaviour. The use of symbols to create identity boundaries is an important part of the conversion and identity development process for many people (Ajrouch, 2004; Jacobson, 1997). An example is the decision of White Muslim women to wear, or not to wear, the *hijab* in Diaspora contexts – a topic of academic interest in recent years (Haw, 2009; Read and Bartkowski, 2000: 395–417). Émile Durkheim (1965) claims that those who adopt religious symbolism in their identities are perceived to want to associate themselves with a Supreme Being. However, this study shows that alongside a display of

commitment to God and the faith, the adoption of symbols primarily fulfilled social purposes to be identified as Muslims and/or as members of a Muslim community. For instance, Maria (5) said that, as a White woman, wearing the *hijab* helps her to be recognised as a Muslim, which was important to her.

White female converts who do not wear the *hijab* are usually identified as non-Muslims, and have a difficult task of portraying a Muslim identity to others if they wish to be known as Muslims. Some feel compelled to cover for identity purposes, rather than for religious and spiritual reasons, to fit into the Muslim community. The *hijab* was deemed to be problematic for White women in particular, as it tended to arouse public curiosity, but Maria took it as an opportunity to explain the benefits and purpose of covering to those who stared at her or asked about it. Alia (15) feels that because she looks, and is, Asian she needs to consider wearing the *hijab* to portray a Muslim identity. ‘Most people think I am Hindu because I am Indian and not wearing a *hijab*.’ Black converts are also often mistaken for non-Muslims if they choose to wear western attire. Luke (34) claimed how most people thought he was a non-Muslim because he did not ‘look Muslim’, whereas Mariam (11) was often assumed by other Muslims to be a heritage Muslim because of her colour, Asian dress and appearance.

Only forty-one per cent (14) of the participants adopted an Islamic appearance, the majority (11) of them female, on account of the *hijab* being obligatory, whereas fifty-nine per cent (20) of participants, ten of whom were male, chose to wear regular western clothes and no *hijab*. It may be argued that adopting Islamic dress in a western society that harbours hostility towards Islam and Muslims as a minority group requires some degree of confidence, as it may trigger various negative reactions from people who may assign a political significance and meaning to a young man’s beard or a woman’s headscarf. As a result, many women decide not to wear the *hijab* or a traditional Muslim *hijab* for fear of their safety.

The general Islamic requirements in dress for both men and women found in The Quran (24: 30–31) and Hadiths are that it be clean, smart, modest, loose and thick enough to not attract sexual attention, and that it covers most of the body. The *hijab* however is a fundamental religious obligation for Muslim women, according to traditional Muslims’ interpretation of The Quran, and involves the covering of the hair, neck and chest area. ‘O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring

down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is *Allah* Forgiving and Merciful' (Quran, 33: 59). There is, however, no mention in Islamic texts of any particular way of dressing for men, other than the basic requirements mentioned previously. Thus women were more likely to pressure themselves, or be pressured by other Muslims, to wear the *hijab* than men were pressured to wear 'Muslim' dress. Various cultural influences around the world have created specific Islamic 'uniforms' for men and women that meet the religious and moral requirements of dress, for instance, the *abaya*, *burka* and the *Salwar Kameez* worn in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and India, which are also worn in Britain by some converts and heritage Muslims. Islamic fashion varies, which is shown in the different ways women in ethnic communities, sects or countries wear the *hijab*.

Reina Lewis (2015) a London-based fashion professor and author of the book *Muslim Fashion* has mentioned how western fashion industries are experimenting with religious clothing styles and modern Muslim identities to cater for the Muslim population and perhaps others. Lewis explains how many Muslim women who wear the *hijab* use style to challenge stigma in the hope that being visibly fashionable and wearing western designer clothing that meets Islamic requirements will help non-Muslims recognise them as a part of the modern world. These women challenge the prejudice that British Muslims are 'foreign' and 'unstylish'. Their participation in popular mainstream fashion, often thought to be solely the domain of the West, highlights the emergence of cross-faith transnational youth subculture of Islamic fashion, which suggests the compatibility with Islam and western modernity. Colourful headscarves are worn in various ways, some more visible as *hijab* than others along with accessories, designer handbags and shoes. Male converts who chose to grow a beard also blended in recently with young people and famous singers and actors who followed the latest fashion trend in wearing a beard, as a way to assert their physical masculine identities (Wells, 2015).

The twenty participants, including Ahmed (1), Robert (14), Adam (17), Ryan (18), David (19), George (28) and Karen (29) who chose to not wear Islamic dress believed that a 'Muslim uniform' was unnecessary, as it often attracts unwanted attention and stereotypical judgments. 'It is, especially for a White convert like me, extremely difficult to suddenly adopt this outward Muslim identity in a society that does not look upon Muslims favourably' (Ahmed, 1). For these converts, Islamic practices were usually confined to the private sphere, as they also did not want judgmental,

pressurising and critical Muslims to interfere with their lives. Wearing Islamic dress was perceived as a large burden and responsibility that came with an Islamic obligation to conform to the practices and moral behaviour of Islam in the best manner possible at all times in both the public and private spheres of life. Participants, such as Maria (5), who attempted to do this perceived themselves as ambassadors for the faith who wanted to salvage the poor reputation and misunderstandings of Islam and British Muslims. Sincere converts do not see this as an easy task, however. Therefore, it was important for them to establish a grounded moral and spiritual foundation that would help them to be more positive and productive British Muslims in order to present a spiritual and peaceful form of Islam to others instead of the foreign and physical side to it.

Some Muslims have debated whether or not The Quran verse (33: 59) refers to the covering of the hair, with some claiming that it refers only to the chest. However, the majority of traditional scholars who have studied Hadiths with regard to women have said that the outer garment should be pulled as a covering over the head, neck and chest, which explains why many scholars believe that the face veil is obligatory, while others believe that uncovering the face is permissible, as long as it is not adorned. Female converts who do not wear the traditional *hijab* because they feel it is not an obligation in the West, or for other personal reasons, are often perceived and judged by practising heritage Muslims as being ‘not serious’ about Islam, as they appeared to be abandoning or rejecting a fundamental, universal and obligatory form of worship. Others like Sara (3) replaced the traditional *hijab* with hats, however this too was perceived by Muslims as being incorrect. Therefore, the ten women in this study who did not wear the *hijab* or who did not wear it ‘properly’ did not live in heritage Muslim societies. Many liberal Muslims who do not believe or agree with traditional Muslims that there is a religious obligation to wear the *hijab* have been defined by Abdullah Al-Andalusi (2013) as ‘Muslims’ who ‘follow whatever is currently in fashion in the modern world, even if it is based upon ignorant materialism’. Modernist views are considered to be problematic by traditional scholars, as they create religious confusions for people and converts in particular.

I don't believe that wearing the *hijab* like Asian Muslims is compulsory but at the same time I know I have to cover my hair because of what The Quran says and so I found it difficult to balance them [opinions] both. When I wore the

traditional *hijab* I was prone to attacks and when I didn't wear the *hijab* I felt guilty even though I felt safer that way (Khadija, 6).

The guilt associated with not wearing the *hijab* or practising Islam because of family and societal hostilities was common. Some participants felt they were disobeying and disrespecting God by abandoning what He had requested them to wear. Those who had strong reasons for not doing so, such as fear of attacks or being isolated from their careers, friends and families, justified their decisions in not wearing Islamic dress. They believed God wanted them to be safe and happy and usually had alternative options for it, such as wearing loose western clothes.

Participants differed in their opinions of what Islamic clothing meant and what message it sends out to other people. Robert (14), for example, realised that a 'good' Muslim possessed the moral principles that were in line with western values, and perceived the wearing of Asian clothes as an act of shedding a large part of his British identity and culture that he loves. Like Ryan (18), he does not associate any positive religious meaning to growing a beard and tended to avoid socialising with strict and judgmental Muslims to ensure he is not interrogated like Luke (34) about his level of commitment to Islam because of the absence of a beard. Therefore, for some, Muslim dress was perceived as a symbol of change in their culture and ethnicity, a transformation from White to Arab or Asian, rather than a symbol of a change in belief, as they believed a culture's uniqueness and significance lay in the fact there is a racial link between a people and its social system. Ahmed (1) said, 'I felt that Asian clothing made me look more Pakistani than Muslim.' Ruqayya (9) also claimed that not only had she started to look like a Pakistani woman but was transforming into one too. George (28) said that,

By changing one's name and starting to wear, say, Pakistani clothing, one confirms in their [non-Muslim people] minds the foreignness or alien nature of what is supposed to be universal Islam. I believe it makes it harder for non-Muslims and I am talking from experience here to accept and identify with Islam. It is a major put-off for many and an obstacle to conversion.

George and Robert indicate that cultural Muslim clothes are perceived as religious symbols by non-Muslims, and create the separation of societies. 'Clothing creates a barrier between people. I don't believe this is what Islam is about ... I don't believe you

have to grow a beard to be a good Muslim, it doesn't mean anything these days' (Robert, 14).

Social scientists acknowledge a correlation exists between religion and ethnicity (Oppong, 2013), and that the correlation depends on whether an individual perceives ethnicity subjectively or objectively. For example, individuals may not join a particular religious group if this means they will be categorised in the same ethnic group that may be associated with low social status or have a negative reputation, whereas other individuals may find that the religion and culture of the ethnic group relates to their own values and beliefs (Reitz, 1980). Timothy Smith (1978) argues that the religions of immigrant groups have played an important role in the configuration of ethnic identities when establishing their communities in the host country. Many participants, especially those raised in upper-middle class societies, did not wear traditional Muslim dress, such as a black *abaya* or Asian clothing so they would not feel 'foreign' or be treated as 'outsiders', especially if they lived in communities that did not have many Muslim residents. Therefore, to avoid the foreign cultural implications from the way they dressed, many participants such as Karen (29) chose to create a Muslim identity within the boundaries of their own culture by establishing their own western form of Islamic dress. However, a number of other participants, such as Rebecca (23), who lived in communities in which there was a large number of heritage Muslim residents often found it easy and convenient to wear traditional Muslim clothing. Carolyn Steedman (1991: 49) emphasises the dilemma of British Muslim women in particular, as they are torn between a British identity, religious requirements, and the modern western construction of feminist individuality that is independent of traditional biological and social roles. This requires women to define their values and choose the social model or context they wish to conform to according to their personal and social needs and priorities.

The fourteen participants who wore Muslim dress did so out of choice or pressure during various stages in their conversion journeys. Alia (15), for example, was pressured to wear the *hijab* by her first husband. She knew that it was an Islamic requirement, but was not psychologically prepared to deal with the consequences of wearing it. Sara (3), on the other hand, covered her hair straight away, while others took their time and either eventually covered or tried it and later abandoned it. Sara wore hats when in public with her family as an alternative to the traditional *hijab*; however, family

members perceived this as strange, as she had not previously worn them when she went out, and they began to think that something was wrong with her health. She was not able to wear the *hijab* properly until she had moved to a different area with her Muslim husband, and expressed her distress at having to lead a double life to satisfy both her British and Muslim identities and societies, as she was unable to inform her family of her conversion. Converts who had married heritage Muslims and were living in Muslim communities, such as Rebecca (23), were highly likely to wear Muslim dress to belong. A couple of converts, (Sonia, 26; Ruqayya, 9), only wore the *hijab* during *Ramadan*, in a mosque, or when praying.

Lina (22) said, 'I wear the *hijab* because I truly believe that it is compulsory Islamically but it is hard wearing it for different reasons, such as when it is hot or because family members find me wearing it embarrassing and offensive'. Leyla (7) also believed that wearing the *hijab* was an Islamic obligation, but was too unable to wear it in the presence of her family. However, when she was out with friends she did, and it made her happy because she felt she was fulfilling the commands of God. Leyla perceived the *hijab* to be both a reflection of internal faith and a God-given symbolic and holy expression of identity. She adopted this attitude with everything she needed to do on a daily basis, such as abstaining from things that were forbidden and trying her best to conform to what was encouraged in the faith. It is suggested here, according to the theories of Lewis Rambo (1993) and Abraham Maslow (1943) that Leyla had reached a level of self-transcendence early on in her conversion journey. Her desire for self-actualisation and transcendence is demonstrated in her efforts to live according to God's rules so as to be happy in this life and the next, while achieving her full potential as a human being. Others, such as Fatima (2), Mariam (11), Reema (13) and Hafsa (25) also wore the *hijab* because they felt happy to do so. Mariam (11) adapted the *hijab* according to her desired style by buying colourful *abayas* and headscarves with patterns on them, while Hafsa enjoyed wearing Asian dress, as she thought it was pretty.

Olivier Roy (2004: 243–247) observed the keen implementation of Islamic practices among Muslims who mainly adopted a Salafi understanding of Islam and whose entire lives and daily activities became sacralised, as they strictly followed Islamic rules to obey God. It is suggested that strict Salafi Muslim converts, such as Lauren (20), Rebecca (23) and Henry (24) believed they had reached a level of self-actualisation and self-transcendence; however, this was mainly demonstrated in their physical identities,

rather than in their spiritual relationship with God. Wearing a *burka* or growing a large beard, for example, was perceived as a rule that they had to fulfil to be good Muslims. Some strict Muslims, however, are not spiritual and lack kindness and basic manners, which often creates confusion for others, as the social conduct of these individuals reflects negatively on their faith, identity, relationship with God, and what their beards and *burkas* symbolise.

Lauren (20) described herself as a ‘fish out of water’ because she felt she had taken radical steps very early on in her conversion as a Salafi Muslim to follow all the rules, and had become ‘burdened’ with the obligations rather than enjoying them. Some individuals felt controlled personally and socially by what they perceived to be obligatory Islamic attire, as they felt it dictated the society they could belong to, the friends they could keep, and their conduct in public. Others (Omar, 10; Henry, 24; Hussein, 31) however, perceived it in a more positive manner and believed that wearing Islamic dress prevented them from being in bad company and places. Only Rebecca (23) attended the interview wearing a black *abaya* and *burka* because she felt convinced that it was the way Muslim women were supposed to dress, regardless of the environment they lived in. It was found that those who sought God’s approval did not let people’s opinions affect their focus, and were happier than those who wore Muslim dress to gain the approval of others.

A feminist approach was observed among some female participants towards the interpretation of The Quran and the requirements of Islamic dress. They attempted to show that media stereotypes attached to Muslim women, who are often portrayed as being abused, timid, un-liberated and oppressed individuals, are incorrect. For six female converts, wearing the *hijab* was perceived as a symbol of liberty and a rejection of the sexualised objectification of women’s bodies, allowing women to focus more on their inner beauty and intellect. ‘I thought women were oppressed and unhappy but I found the case to be the opposite ... The *hijab* liberates me and I feel I have a purpose in life, an important one’ (Rebecca, 23). Rebecca believes that wearing the *hijab* and *burka* makes her a better Muslim and was happy wearing them, as they came with moral and psychological benefits. She said, ‘I believe that if you go against God’s will you’re not a good Muslim, so what is the point of being a Muslim if you do not want to follow the rules? ... It is a challenge that I am enduring for the sake of *Allah*.’ Like Lauren (20), Rebecca claimed that despite feeling hot and uncomfortable in a *burka*, not

being able to eat and move around properly outside and getting stared at, she was ready to do this for God. Non-Muslims may struggle to understand the sacrifices converts may choose to make for eternal salvation, and so they are perceived as people who are enduring unnecessary inconvenience and hardships for a God that may or may not exist.

Reema (13) claimed that she loved wearing the *hijab* as it beautified her spiritually from the inside, and because men stopped looking at her in a disrespectful manner; this made her feel dignified. The *hijab* also saved her time in the morning, as she did not need to style her hair. ‘I feel I can focus on better things now and people can appreciate what I have to offer other than my looks.’ According to every traditional Muslim scholar, a woman wearing a *hijab* should not wear tight clothes, heavy make-up or perfume, short-sleeved blouses, or have any hair exposed. If a woman chooses to dress otherwise, she is defeating the purpose of the *hijab*. As a result, some women who feel unattractive wearing the *hijab*, may experience a decline in self-esteem because of a lack of male attention, and find the need to beautify themselves in other ways to make up for their hair being covered. This was an issue for Mariam (11) because she wanted to be a ‘good’ Muslim but suffered as a result of the *hijab* being looked upon by some Muslims as a cultural rather than a religious element. It has been noted that a growing number of heritage British Muslims are attempting to integrate into British society by leaving cultural and foreign practices behind, and thus may avoid marrying people who display an element of being religious, foreign or radical in their appearances. This may present an obstacle for women who believe the *hijab* is compulsory but who are torn between abandoning it for the sake of having better chances of finding marriage partners, or who are refusing to compromise their Islamic principles for men who are not religious or appreciative of their effort to please God. The definition of a ‘good’ Muslim is subjective, as people judge religious individuals in different ways according to their personal understandings of what ‘good’ Muslims should be like. For some, this relies heavily on the outward appearance of individuals and their commitment to religious acts, whereas others judge the genuine nature and level of religiosity of Muslims by their devotion to the five pillars of Islam and their show of patience, attitudes, humility, modesty and good manners.

On account of the difficulties of integrating obligatory Islamic practices in non-Muslim environments, most of the more practising converts (such as Rebecca, 23; Hussein, 31) felt it was better to live in a Muslim community so they could fit in and fulfil the

implicit social expectation that all Muslims should participate in the wider religious community (*Ummah*) (Ward, 2000) that supported each other to conform to religious practices and be 'better' Muslims. Marilyn Brewer (1991), like Glynis Breakwell (1986) and Lewis Rambo (1993), claim that individuals mainly identify with social groups to satisfy the ideas of both belonging and being unique individuals. Hussein (31) was happy and confident living in a Muslim community and enjoyed wearing a white robe and hat every day, as the majority of his neighbours and community members wore the same thing; this did not make him feel uncomfortable or alienated. He also perceived Islamic clothing to be a strong form of indirect *dawah* that triggered enquiries from non-Muslims. Hussein claimed to feel privileged to be guided by God and be with those who were on 'the right path', and this gave him a great sense of self-esteem. It is suggested that many converts had reached a point of self-actualisation at this stage, as they believed that if it were not for God's guidance, they would not have been able to reach Him, the knowledge of The Quran, or know the purpose of life.

8.2.2 The Social Integration of a New Muslim Identity in Britain

Individualism and the identity development process of participants was found to be associated with social and personal interests, beliefs and lifestyles, where there is a tendency towards self-creation and experimentation, rather than tradition or popular mass opinion and behaviour of other Muslims around them. In this study, individualists often did not favour any philosophy or ideology that required a dramatic identity and lifestyle change, or sacrifice of the self-interest of the individual for other social or religious causes. Participants who insisted on remaining who they were by avoiding a typical Muslim identity prioritised a personal freedom over what the new society dictated and believed was correct. They exercised the right to think for themselves and make their own decisions and judgments on how they should live as 'good' Muslims.

Maslow (1943) and Breakwell (1986) highlight the need for individuals to belong to the community they feel comfortable in, as being separated from loved ones may often bring about emotional and psychological issues, such as depression. Erik Erikson (1968) claimed that if individuals struggle to find a comfortable identity within the context of their living arrangements they will have issues regarding their development and future plans. Therefore, rather than making big life changes by joining a Muslim

community, some converts such as Karen (29) decided to subtly implement Islamic values into their daily personal and social lives, for example, by wearing Islamic clothing that they believed was suitable for their western culture, communities, beliefs and personalities. They expressed a desire to continue belonging to their communities and attempted to demonstrate that they could simultaneously be British, Muslim, and the same people, which had a positive effect on others and increased their chances of being accepted. Karen made the effort to socialise with Muslims when she went to the mosque for Friday prayers, and indicated that while she did not want to be involved with the Muslim community, a part of her felt a need to be connected to Muslims and an Islamic environment. It is rare to find converts who completely detach themselves from heritage Muslims, and there were none in this study who did so except those who had negative experiences with Muslims during a later stage of their conversion journeys.

Many individuals attempt to experiment in ways in which they can reconcile their hybrid British and Muslim identities and accommodate Islamic practices into their daily lives, which shows that for many a conversion to Islam does not result in the abandonment of their former lives and values. In this study, the term ‘hybridity’ explains the fusing of different elements, or a mixture of different cultures, that form a new identity and so its potential is in the ability to ‘see’ life from different perspectives. There are different ways of constructing what Homi Bhabha (1994) called a ‘third space’ hybrid identity, with a desire for transculturalism being expressed, an attachment to the society individuals wish to belong to and integrate within, and a ‘home-grown’ version of Islam that lives up to Islamic demands and removes the ‘foreignness’ of its practice. European converts challenged fixed Orientalist, imperialist and media notions of identity, for example, that Islam only belongs to Asians and Arabs, and instead perceived Islam as a universal and flexible religion that allowed them to present alternatives and efficiently practise the faith anywhere. Most participants were comfortable and confident about identifying with a hybrid identity, as they believed they were able to fuse both western and Islamic identities that they perceived were compatible. However, in most cases the Muslim identity was more dominant than the national identity, as individuals strived to live according to Islamic values that were in line with their national ones. For example, Hassan (8) claimed he would attempt to socialise with his friends in pubs, but would drink orange juice rather than alcohol, while Adam (17) would eat roast meat on Sundays and at Christmas if it was *halal*. It is rare to find converts prioritising national values over Islamic values unless they felt they

were going to lose their families and friends or were at risk of being abused, such as in Khadija's (6) case when she abandoned the *hijab* for the sake of her safety. Other converts such as Henry (24), who had been drawn to radical groups, found it difficult to balance his Islamic identity with a British identity, as he had been taught to believe that a national identity was part of a 'non-believers system'. (The concept of nationalism is not present in Islam because all Muslims belong to one *Ummah*.) As a result, he discarded much of his British identity and focused mainly on his Muslim identity, which alienated him and caused social problems. It is suggested that those who are drawn to radical groups often turn against their national identity if they believe it to be anti-Islamic. Nevertheless, they are often still recognised as being British on account of their fair complexion and features, but are labelled as being 'culturally and/or ethnically other' when they are seen practising Islam, wearing foreign clothing and using Islamic terminology. This shows how some converts could not, or did not know how to, create a hybrid British Muslim identity, owing to a lack of education and role models.

Muslims from traditional Arab or Asian backgrounds are more likely to use religion in a way that affirms their culturally constructed sense of self, whereas those who were raised in a British society may depend solely on Islamic teachings in the way they live their lives, without the need to integrate any ethnic cultural practices. This often results in a strict Salafi Muslim identity. Sasaki and Kim (2011: 101, 413) stated that people from cultures that prize individualism and who are driven by goals of personal agency will gain a sense of control from religion to help them withstand hardships, whereas those from collectivistic cultures that emphasize the needs and goals of the society as a whole over the needs of each individual, are motivated to maintain strong relational ties with others in the community for social, personal and religious support.

It is suggested that although different religious beliefs and traditions may merge and interact in some communities, people from different cultures may experience, perceive and understand the same religion differently, as they do not share the same values, traditions and customs. Robert (14), for example, mentioned how initially he was questioned by Muslims whenever he went to the mosque about the absence of a hat, which he found annoying because to him wearing a hat was not compulsory or important, and made no difference to his identity or faith. He did, however, want to belong to a community to avoid isolation. 'I believe that your faith is in your heart but

at the same time we are social creatures and seek social acceptance into our communities so you will find me now and then wearing a hat to the mosque.’

This shows how the identities of converts are constantly renegotiated, and while identity reconciliations are not always straightforward or without tension, they usually result in individuals feeling both Muslim and British. This multi-layered and dynamic sense of self is embedded in the experiences converts come across on a daily basis, which encourage them to implement the positive elements found in their former and Muslim identities. Breakwell (1986) claimed that establishing identity continuity during this stage was crucial, as it would determine the environment the individual would belong in, and the degree of personality and lifestyle changes an individual would go through to become a British Muslim. Individuals who had made some adjustments to their lifestyles (for instance, David, 19) were more likely to be settled as Muslims than those who had made dramatic changes (for instance, Rebecca, 23), as they had to deal with many types of obstacles and reactions, in particular from family members, who could not accept sudden changes or transformation of individuals’ personalities and attitudes. Identity continuity and negotiation were therefore found to be important, as it helped converts to live balanced, peaceful and happy lives, because they did not need to compromise on their personal interests or British and religious values. In turn, this would elevate their levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy (the ability to produce the desired identity), as they established an identity that they were proud of. Examples of identity negotiation would be the wearing of western clothing that meets Islamic requirements, being involved in traditional family celebrations and finding a quiet place to pray alongside eating, drinking and doing what is permissible according to Islamic law. It was found that the extent to which environments provide people with continuity with their past greatly influenced their hybrid identities and how they wished to integrate Islam into the present environment they are attached to.

Ahmed (1), Hassan (8), Ryan (18), George (28), Karen (29) and Luke (34) implemented the moral teachings they had obtained from The Prophet’s biography in their lives, together with Quilliam’s integration strategies, which made them happy. This was also effective as indirect *dawah*, because when people enquired about their change of attitudes and general improvement in their personalities, they found an opportunity to talk to them about The Prophet Muhammad. It is therefore common to find such Muslims acting as bridges between non-Muslim and Muslim communities, as they are

able to balance the fundamental elements of British culture with their Muslim beliefs, which results in non-Muslims becoming more comfortable with British Muslims in their societies. This shows how hybrid British Muslim identities are subjective, and perceived according to the degree of foreign elements that are applied or taken away from the daily actions and attitudes of individuals.

John Turner and Howard Giles (1981: 38) claim that identity comes in two levels: individual and social. Identity at an individual level comprises distinctive characteristics, such as personality, beliefs, spirituality and intellect, whereas social identity comprises class, nationality, education, gender and race. Religious identity may therefore manifest in many ways, depending on how it is defined and understood by the individual. As a result, social class and education played a significant role in the lives of converts when it came to determining the types of Muslims they would turn out to be. For example, this study shows that highly educated converts were more likely to find ways of integrating Islam into British society, as they had access to various western scholars and literature unlike lower- and working-class converts who were more likely to be affected by street *dawah* and the culture and attitudes of heritage Muslim friends. Middle-class converts brought academic and intellectual skills and strengths to their conversion journeys, whereas lower- and working-class converts brought physical or social skills that were useful and needed in street *dawah*.

In this study, White conversions to Islam were seen to have a negative effect on social class, especially if the individual adopted Muslim cultural traits. For example, if an upper-middle-class White woman started to wear a *hijab*, which was considered to be 'foreign', she immediately lost her prestigious White social status, which might have affected her self-esteem. Here, Breakwell (1986) states that if individuals do not manage to attain self-esteem and self-efficacy they will have problems with identity development, and various elements will need to be sacrificed from either the Muslim or national identity to be able to progress in a healthy manner. For example, some women at this stage may choose not to wear the *hijab*; on the other hand, they may give up their careers for the sake of their new beliefs. According to previous studies (Suleiman, 2013; Brice, 2010), White women's social class and careers are more likely to be affected than men's, as they are more likely to wear Muslim clothing, use Islamic terms, or have different worldviews and opinions regarding the social role and status of women.

The findings indicate that a broad Islamic education (see 11.7) is required to be able to create and develop a successful and balanced hybrid identity, as those who were not sufficiently educated were unable to differentiate between Islamic practices and Muslim culture and so were more likely to adopt cultural traits from heritage Muslims and abandon their own. This resulted in problematic relationships with their friends and families who could not accept their changes, which isolated them from their societies and those they loved.

8.3 Summary

This chapter shows how converts who chose to belong to a Muslim community publicised their religious practices, whereas those who remained in non-Muslim societies felt more comfortable practising Islam in private to keep away unwanted interference from others, and integrated their religious beliefs subtly and successfully into British society. The chapter also shows how participants perceived and understood the ideas of self-actualisation and self-transcendence in different ways, ranging from advancing their spiritually to being able to conform to all the outward religious obligations without necessarily gaining in spirituality. Some felt they had reached a peak in their human potential by living as practising Muslims among Muslims and knowing God, while others were grateful they had been guided to Islam and were living happier and more fulfilling lives in their own societies.

The study found that the way converts dressed in public often reflected the type of understanding of Islam they had, alongside any cultural or relationship influences. The style of dress they chose was their way of negotiating and displaying their British Muslim identity, and how they wished it to be perceived by others. All the participants considered themselves to be British Muslims, however for the majority the Muslim identity was more dominant than the British identity, resulting in some social and personal compromises and sacrifices being made for the sake of being good Muslims. However, a strong British identity was often maintained in order to preserve important family and social ties and an individual's personality and heritage.

Conversions brought about different identity challenges and consequences for individuals with regard to their attachment to British culture, their commitment to Islam, and their understanding of it. Some participants found the hardships they

experienced to be ‘worth it’ because they were enduring it for God and sacrificing worldly things to please Him, while others were trying to please Muslims around them to meet the standards of ‘good’ Muslims. Some participants did not wish to be members of Muslim communities so as not to be associated with extremists, ethnic groups or be told how to live as Muslims, and preferred to have the freedom of practising Islam in ways that suited their former lifestyles, culture and personalities. Those who were broadly educated about Islam and had read the biography of The Prophet Muhammad shared similar opinions and were more successful at creating their own British Islam, whereas others enjoyed being a part of a heritage Muslim community if they found the support they needed. Some participants such as Jack (27), Zaynab (30) and Hussein (31), felt that an Islamic conversion had changed every aspect of their lives, environments and goals, however the majority did not feel their identities had changed drastically, but perceived them to be more an extension or continuation of previous positive traits and British values, as their identities were adopting better and stronger moral elements.

The ideal situation for new Muslims was found to belong to mainstream British society where they could display a western and peaceful spiritual Muslim identity via a high standard of moral character based on the teachings of The Quran, The Prophet’s biography, and Quilliam’s precepts. This would act as a form of indirect *dawah* and would challenge or correct many stereotypical public views of Muslims, converts and Islam, which in turn would help converts to integrate and not get separated from their families and socio-cultural roots. Those who found it difficult to integrate as Muslims often did not know how to balance or negotiate a hybrid identity, owing to a lack of Islamic education and role models, which lead to identity, emotional, social and psychological problems. Identities were conceptualised by many individuals as being ‘everything that makes me who I am today’, and this chapter shows that for the majority their psychological world is perceived through a religious lens. It was therefore important for the majority of converts to make Islam the core part of their identity, regardless of the social context.

Chapter IX

Common Challenges

9.1 Introduction

This chapter explores part of Rambo's (1993) consequence stage, which involves the main daily issues that converts shared and experienced, as a result of their new Muslim identities. Most participants perceived their Islamic conversions to be ongoing journeys that had been shaped and strengthened by various positive and negative experiences, whereas others could not cope with the hardships, which often led to psychological disorders and disaffiliation (see Chapter XII). This chapter explores the common challenges and influences various experiences and issues might have on future decisions to de-convert from Islam. Understanding the challenges and problems they face is particularly valuable in providing an insight into the complicated underlying processes involved in long-term changes and perceptions of faith, God and identity.

The issues participants faced do not reflect the experiences of all converts, as different types of challenges may be experienced according to circumstances, location and social contexts. Nevertheless, the narratives in this study will give the reader an idea of the range of difficulties some people face throughout their conversion journeys in Britain.

9.2 Islamophobic Attitudes Towards New Muslims

A report published by Faith Matters (Brice, 2010), the only up-to-date demographic report available on British Muslim converts, showed the various ways they were portrayed by the media. The data shows that while thirty-two per cent of articles on Islam published since 2001 were linked to terrorism or extremism, the figure jumped to sixty-two per cent with converts, as they were often portrayed as being radical fundamentalists involved in terrorist groups and plots including the 7/7 bombings in London, which triggered a rise in Islamophobic attacks. Only two per cent of stories portrayed a positive image about Islam, Muslims and converts (Doyle, 2011; Moore, Mason and Justin, 2008: 3).

In this study, most participants stated that negative media coverage of Islam and converts was to blame for much of the Islamophobia, discrimination and hostility Muslims faced from the British public and family members. It should also be stated that irresponsible, uneducated and immoral Muslims are also to blame, as their crimes and aggressive attitudes play a large role in contributing to biased media portrayals. 'I don't sympathise with them [Muslims]. Many Muslims do give Islam a bad name and they have to shoulder that responsibility' (Luke, 34). Since the murder of Lee Rigby in May 2013 by two African Muslim converts with extremist views, hundreds of anti-Islamic offences have been reported in Britain. The Metropolitan Police recorded '500 Islamophobic crimes, compared with 336 incidents in 2012 and 318 in 2011' (Jivanda, 2013). News and police reports also showed a dramatic increase in Islamophobic attacks on at least ten mosques and almost two hundred Muslims only six days after the incident. It is therefore not surprising to find in this study that many converts prefer not to wear clothes that identify them in public as Muslims.

David (19) and George (28) condemn some Muslim converts for portraying a violent and politicised image of Islam in public to non-Muslims. George mentions how converts unnecessarily take Muslim names, adopt a Muslim culture, join radical groups and wear Asian dress because they are ignorant. He said,

It only reinforces and confirms a westerner's perspective and prejudices on Islam that it is a backward oppressive religion. Spiritually motivated converts to Islam are rarely shown in the media. The media is very biased about Islam and therefore anyone should understand that what they see isn't the whole picture. There is good and bad in everything. Being ignorant is a choice.

Alia (15) mentioned how negative media representations may re-enforce and ignite the hostility Hindus have towards Muslims and the biased opinions people already have about Islam. Sonia (26) suggested that extreme converts who wanted to live an 'Islamic' way of life should move to Muslim countries rather than trying to enforce their opinions and way of life on others in the West. Nevertheless, Muslim scholar Hamza Yusuf claims that many immigrant Muslims prefer to live in the West, as they feel oppressed by their culture in Muslim countries, despite their complaints of feeling alienated (O'Sullivan, 2001). Some converts, such as Ahmed (1) and Mariam (11), claimed that conspiracy theories in the media encouraged Islamophobia and the British public to

have a fear and hatred of Muslims who were out to ‘Islamise’ Britain. They claimed the media also encouraged support for the government’s counter-terrorism policies in Britain and in wars with Muslim countries.

Most participants who ‘looked’ like Muslims anticipated abuse and discrimination, such as Omar (10) who had his home raided a few times by the police who suspected that he was involved with Muslim gangs in his area because he was mixed race, young, wore Asian clothes and had a beard. Despite this, many participants did not hide the fact they were Muslims when asked about their beliefs, and either attempted to present Islam positively or discarded Islamic dress and any other Islamic symbols to keep unwanted attention away. For some, therefore, an Islamic identity was more important than a Muslim identity. Participants considered Islamic and Muslim identities to be two different entities, with an Islamic identity primarily linked to spirituality, good moral conduct and internal beliefs, and a Muslim identity linked to the outward display of cultural and religious practices and/or symbols.

Fatima (2) removed her *hijab* and *burka* after experiencing hostile looks after 7/7 from Muslims and non-Muslims alike and Ruqayya (9), who wore Asian clothes and the *hijab* to fit into her Muslim community, became the subject of hostility and verbal abuse, such as ‘White Paki’, and was nearly physically attacked by someone in a park for being a White Muslim. She felt that those who attacked her perceived her to be a traitor, and that she was being punished for wanting to belong to a ‘dangerous’ foreign community. People may struggle to understand the Muslim identities of European ‘White’ converts, as Islam is traditionally associated with brown- and black-skinned people, so the term ‘White Paki’ might mean that the person who says this thinks that the convert is someone who wants to be a Pakistani, but cannot be so because he or she is White, or that the convert has become a Pakistani although he or she is White. The term ‘White’ here emphasises the confusion felt when seeing two conflicting identities merged together. Lina (22) said, ‘I had some English neighbours who would call me a Paki and I would get eggs thrown at my window, which was very distressing.’ The term ‘Paki’ is as offensive as the word ‘Nigger’, and has been linked to racist abuse for many years. The term was first recorded in 1964 when hostility in Britain towards postcolonial immigration emerged. Despite being an abbreviation for ‘Pakistani’, it was used as a generic discriminative term with offensive connotations directed at those who had brown skin, and has been a highly sensitive word ever since (Bhatia, 2007). In 2009

Prince Harry was heavily criticised for calling a fellow army colleague a ‘Paki’ and was denounced for his use of offensive language (Harrison and Swaine, 2009).

The theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) refers to how different social processes interact to produce both complex identities and forms of discrimination. Classic conceptualisations of oppression, such as racism and Islamophobia, for example, do not act independently of one another; rather, they interrelate, creating a system of oppression and discrimination (Knudsen, 2007: 61–76). An example might be where many associate Black people with crime, a tendency to be radical, a lower social class, and with very little, or no, educational qualifications. If, however, a Black man were to become a university professor or a wealthy business owner, this would elevate his social status and remove many elements of discrimination. On the other hand, Muslim converts who have social privileges, such as being White, upper class, wealthy and highly educated, would be more likely to become victims of racial discrimination if they adopted any type of Islamic or foreign cultural dress as part of their identity, and as a result their social status would be lowered.

Ruqayya (9) no longer wears the *hijab* for fear of more abuse and unwanted attention and believes that God does not want Muslims to be in danger and that He will understand her reasons for so doing. It is suggested that this way of thinking may benefit the psychological wellbeing of individuals and have a positive effect on their self-esteem, rather than making them feel guilty that they are unable to practise Islam properly. Like others, Sonia (26) was afraid of risking her social life and relationships, which she found more important to her wellbeing and religion than wearing the *hijab*, whereas Aisha (4) had chosen to wear it, even though she was a victim of verbal abuse and was often asked if she had a bomb in her bag. Henry (24) insisted that, despite the negative consequences, Muslims should not give up any of their Islamic principles or ways of behaving, as they are tests from God.

Maria (5) described her dilemma of being a practising Muslim and living in an area that did not have a thriving Muslim community.

Probably the biggest hardship I had was when I first became a Muslim and put on *hijab*, I was living in Surrey where it was an all-White, low income

uneducated population. I had quite a lot of bad experiences from my neighbours. They would put things like rubbish through my letterbox and make fun of me.

A study (Lambert and Githenz-Mazer, 2010) found that small, isolated Muslim communities and Muslims living in towns that did not have Muslim communities were most vulnerable to racial and Islamophobic attacks. They do not have strong support networks and local police forces are not trained to deal with such issues, as they are uncommon or rarely reported. The study found that there had been a rise in random attacks on women who wear headscarves and any kind of foreign dress, which exposes the daily challenges many female converts face when attempting to balance the demands of western society and their religious obligations. Moosavi (2014; 2011) also mentions the likelihood of Islamophobic attacks on Muslims in smaller and more traditional White British towns and villages, causing many Muslims to conceal their Islamic beliefs in the public sphere. Moosavi suggests that Islamophobia may often be discreet, and that new Muslims are able to expose this subtle type of abuse because of their regular contact with non-Muslims, which make them susceptible to offensive remarks about their new Muslim identity. This often leads to isolation and depression, and in many instances causes individuals to leave Islam and revert to their former communities. A few participants, such as Rebecca (23) and Hussein (31), moved to Muslim communities in order to feel safe and live among other Muslims.

Participants such as Maria (5) and Sophia (12) were made fun of and stared at a lot when they started wearing the *hijab*. This bothered them, and they knew this was because they were White. Sophia admitted that she used to think White Muslims were 'strange', and for this reason she was not offended and did not take the rude comments and stares personally, as she perceived people to be ignorant like she once was about Islam. Maria found it important to reflect a positive image to non-Muslims of herself as a White Muslim who was proud to be British, adaptable, flexible, tolerant and accepting of other people's beliefs and cultures. At times she expressed her frustration when she was unable to explain her views to people with negative feelings or opinions for them to gain a deeper understanding of what made her convert. Maria believed that if she successfully conveyed a positive image of Islam to people, much of the stereotyping, hostility and antipathy would end. She knew that many could not relate to her Muslim identity because they did not share the same understanding of Islam as converts, which made her more tolerant of Islamophobic remarks. Like Sophia, she sometimes found

what people said to be amusing. What is perceived as minor to some, however, may be major to others. For example, some people may become psychologically disturbed and feel paranoid in public if they are being constantly stared at, whereas others may be unaffected by this.

Some studies reveal a positive relationship between British identity and religious participation amongst Muslims in Britain, underscoring that a religious worldview does not necessarily isolate an individual from modern secular British society. Kate Zebiri (2007) and Leon Moosavi (2011) claim that contrary to typical portrayals of radical Muslims and converts, converts have a unique potential to act as cultural mediators and bridge-builders between Muslims and non-Muslims, and contribute greatly to an indigenous western Islamic thought and discourse. Moosavi (2011) found that Muslim converts tend to view themselves as being more patriotic and better citizens than many non-Muslim Britons following their conversions, contrary to common opinions and depictions of radicalised converts opposing western laws and values and campaigning for the enforcement of *Shariah* law in Britain. Many participants claimed they had not come across radical converts. ‘The converts I know are nothing like the ones that appear in the papers and are definitely not violent or extremist. They are really beautiful people’ (Zaynab, 30). Ahmed (1) and Ryan (18) mentioned that many Muslims are inspiring and influential people, but that the media fails to credit them with these positive characteristics or to promote them as good examples of law-abiding and spiritual British Muslims. Ahmed said, ‘The likes of Richard, for example [from the documentary “My Brother the Islamist”] are a minority and should not be used as prime examples of Muslim converts, as it just creates an unfair stereotype.’ It is suggested that some documentaries about extremist Muslim converts have been positively perceived, in the sense that they may be creating an awareness of how converts become radicalised, so new Muslims and people who are interested in Islam may avoid the mistakes they made and the types of Muslims they associated with. Ruqayya (9) mentioned how many problematic Muslims have cultural or political identities and that because many people cannot tell the difference between the two, they are mistaken for being religious Muslims when in fact their actions are far from being Islamic.

Henry (24) explained how many of the Muslims he met were jailed for robbery, and that their actions were often legalised and justified in an Islamic manner by radical groups, which triggered Islamophobic attacks. ‘For them stealing Muslim money and property

is considered *haram* but if the person they are stealing from is a non-Muslim, especially one who supports war against Muslim countries, then they see it as something justified and allowed.’ The actions of such Muslims encourage the negative media portrayals of them being dangerous people who commit crimes, fraudulently feed on British welfare, threaten social security, oppose British values, and cannot be trusted. Reports (for example, Brice, 2010) show that radical groups often target prisoners and those who are newly released, as they are disadvantaged financially and also because they are often angry and tough people who possess criminal skills. Henry (24) said: ‘I loved the power, the freedom and how people feared me in public [after joining a Muslim gang]. It gave me confidence that I was feared. Jail toughens you up as a person and I stopped caring about what people would think of me.’ Omar (10) also said, ‘I felt a sense of empowerment when people feared me. Being young it was a nice confidence boost to have. I felt more masculine with my beard as well.’ Omar and Henry expressed the need for a personal boost in self-esteem and self-worth, which they managed to gain from being Muslims and wearing Muslim dress at the start of their journeys. They explained the importance of having a strong identity, social power, being in control, belonging to a group or gang, and having confidence that made up for their unfavourable social situation, on account of coming from a lower working-class environment, low financial status, lack of education and, in Omar’s case, skin colour. It was only later in their lives when they had become more aware of various Islamic teachings that they began to develop a different understanding of religion and abandoned many practices that are considered to be extreme. This shows how some young British people take advantage of public fear by joining radical groups to satisfy psychological issues in their lives, solve a personal crisis, and feel acknowledged and noticed in society. Radical Islamic groups may also appeal to some who feel that they have membership benefits, such as jobs, money and accommodation, which present different motives that drive them towards an Islamic conversion to most other converts. An article published in the *Telegraph* stated:

Many of those [converts] they [the researchers] spoke to had converted while inside but they had mixed motivations for doing so, and not all had done so voluntarily. Reasons included ‘seeking care and protection’, ‘gang membership’ and ‘coercion’ as well as ‘rebellion’ since Islam was seen as the ‘underdog’. Prisoners told the researchers that becoming Muslim was a ‘cover’ for power and influence (Beckford, 2012).

Islamic conversions involving disadvantaged youth and criminals may therefore often be perceived as a solution to social and political power rather than as a personal need for a spiritual and religious way of life. Thus, it can be argued that a combination of a criminal record with extreme Islamic beliefs is perceived by the British media and public to be a great threat and social problem, and fuels hostility towards Muslims. This highlights the importance of tackling the psychological issues that Black, foreign and other disadvantaged young people from poorer areas and in prison have to prevent them from joining extremist groups as a ‘way out’, or as a solution to their problems.

Those such as Omar (10), therefore, who had more than one negative element that made them victims (such as race, class, gender and financial status), were the ones who suffered the most in their communities from Islamophobia, oppression and racial discrimination, due to the interplay of what were known to be social disadvantages. It may be argued, therefore, that as Islamic teachings eliminate such social discriminations, many people from the lower working-class feel tempted to convert to raise their social status in a different society.

9.3 Common Daily Issues

Many participants found it difficult to pray the five prayers on time, find a suitable and private place to pray, or pray at all. Some struggled to learn how to pray, while others had jobs that made praying an issue. The five daily prayers are: *Fajr* (dawn), *Thuhur* (midday), *Asr* (late afternoon), *Maghrib* (just after sunset) and *Isha* (late evening before midnight). Islam encourages children from as young as seven to learn how to pray. It takes on average up to ten minutes to complete each prayer, which involves uniting the mind, soul and body in worship. The prayers consist of a series of essential set movements that go with the Arabic words that need to be recited, along with *Al Fatihah* (Quran, 1), which is the first chapter of The Quran made up of seven verses; a prayer for the guidance and mercy of God, along with some other short Quran verses. Muslims must also be clean before they pray by performing ritual washing (*wudu*). This involves the washing (in order) of the hands, mouth, nose, face, arms, the wiping of the head and ears, and washing of the feet. The *Fajr* prayer proved to be quite a challenge for some, because of having to wake up at such an early time to make *wudu*. When asked about his most difficult challenge, Luke (34) said, ‘I think getting up for the very early

morning prayer. Some of my shifts end late at night and so I only get about two hours sleep before I have to wake up and wash for prayer.’ Making time for prayers also meant that other things had to be postponed or changed. For example, many converts preferred to pray *Maghrib* before going out and meeting friends so that they did not need to worry about the time and finding a quiet place to pray in.

Leyla (7) found the moral and religious obligation of wearing the *hijab* a burden, especially when it was hot outside. Others, however, felt a spiritual connection with it and tried their best to portray a good image and character of a Muslim woman by refraining from, for instance, swearing, back-biting and shouting, so as not to distort the purpose of the *hijab* (which in itself is a form of worship as well as a special type of covering to make women appear modest and decent), despite the fact it was sometimes difficult to wear when being among people who did not like it. Leyla mentioned the problems of washing for prayers in public toilets, as she was stared at in disapproval by other women when seen washing her arms and feet in the sink. Gender segregation was also an issue for participants such as Zaynab (30) because male friends and relatives were not permitted to be in the same hall as women during weddings, lectures and events, and this was an inconvenience for many non-Muslims. Zaynab mentioned how segregation would offend her non-Muslim family and friends who refused to attend a Muslim wedding if, for example, their partners could not sit with them.

Some participants found giving up smoking and abstaining from alcohol and non-*halal* meat difficult, and perceived these issues as sacrifices. It was noted that the majority thought that to be good Muslims they had to change their diet, give up bad habits, non-Islamic practices and forbidden things as soon as they possibly could, while others would not consider converting or changing their daily habits until they felt ready to do so. A minority found it relatively easy to give up what was forbidden such as Ryan (18) who said, ‘As a Jew I never ate pork and I didn’t drink or have a big social life and therefore I didn’t struggle in this area like others would’, whereas converts such as Hafsa (25), who enjoyed drinking frequently, found alcohol difficult to abstain from during the early period of her conversion. Hassan (8) mentioned how his new beliefs were an incentive for him to give up smoking and drinking, which greatly improved his health and general wellbeing.

Many participants changed their friends, as they felt the need to be around people with

the same beliefs and values who could encourage them to be better Muslims. For some, this meant cutting relationships with friends of the opposite sex. 'I changed my name and my lifestyle has changed including my choice of friends, hangouts, diet and routine, sleep patterns and pretty much everything' (Hussein, 31). For many participants (for example, Reema, 13; Alia, 15; Ryan, 18) losing friends and family members was their biggest issue, as it resulted in their isolation from those they loved. This was an even bigger issue when they felt isolated among Muslims as well, who failed to support them during their hardships, which often resulted in depression. It was found that converts, such as Janet (32) who had lost their relationships with friends and family members were looking for attention and a replacement for their family in Muslim communities. Feeling lonely and vulnerable among Muslims greatly contributed towards an unhappy Muslim lifestyle, and often led people to de-convert. Janet said, '*Ramadan* came that year and I was virtually ignored by the women in the mosque ... I would take some food each day around the time of breakfast at sunset and would eat alone in the mosque. It was the longest, loneliest month of my life.'

Although isolation was the hardest experience most converts had to endure, many believed their sacrifices for Islam would be worthwhile, and hoped their family members would also convert one day. According to their understanding they believed they had to be patient with their hardships as a test of loyalty to God (Quran, 2: 155). Some participants such as Sonia (26) and Hussein (31) also suffered emotionally and grew more anxious about the future of their families the more they read The Quran and The Prophet's biography. Sonia stated that she was worried about family members going to hell because they worshipped many Hindu gods and idols. Maria (5), however, was very happy to announce that her mother had died three days after saying the *shahadah* at the age of eighty-four. Many Muslims believe it is important to try and convert non-Muslims to Islam, although according to some verses in The Quran it is stated that Muslims should only create an awareness of Islam and not take it upon themselves to actually convert people. The Quran (5:99) says, 'Not upon the Messenger is [responsibility] except [for] notification. And *Allah* knows whatever you reveal and whatever you conceal'. However, *dawah* is not always welcomed: 'I have cut ties with my previous community, as most of them do not wish to speak to me any more after attempting to give them *dawah* to Islam' (Hussein, 31), and because of the hardships she faced, Khadija (6) decided not to give *dawah* any more, despite the fact she believes that Islam is the truth. She said, 'A Christian can face God on the day of judgment and

be judged according to the good and bad he did in his life, but telling someone about Islam is too big a responsibility if it will mean a life of untold hardships with no help or support whatsoever from Muslims.’

Henry (24) believed his main struggle was being able to practise Islam fully in a western country, as it required a big effort to resist certain temptations, such as remaining a chaste and pious Muslim. ‘It is not always easy to pray on time amongst non-Muslims and fast while there are half naked women walking around. The temptations of the world are too much in the West making it hard for a Muslim to be a good one.’ It is suggested that young men and women who were involved in sexual relationships prior to their conversion may struggle to abstain from the sin of pre-marital sex while being Muslims, which is why it is common to find converts, such as Henry, seeking Muslim marriage partners during the early stages of their conversions. Other converts were compelled to change jobs or careers, as they felt they were no longer welcome, or faced religious discrimination, had relocated to an Islamic community, had experienced Islamophobic abuse, or the job did not suit their Islamic beliefs and values. Leyla (7), for example, had to change jobs, as she could not continue working as a schoolteacher in her Jewish community. Therefore, converts either chose to confine their Islamic beliefs to the private sphere or work in more suitable environments if they were not willing to compromise on their Islamic values.

9.3.1 Issues with Heritage Muslims

Experiencing racial and religious discrimination in the Muslim community was reported by a number of participants (Ahmed, 1; Fatima, 2; Omar, 10; Sonia, 26; Luke, 34) whether in marriage procedures, belonging to the community, or when seeking support. African and Caribbean converts complained about negative attitudes from heritage Muslims towards them, and about White converts being treated as valuable social trophies in Muslim communities when they embraced Islam. Sonia (26) mentioned how young White female converts were more likely to receive marriage proposals from heritage Muslims than others and Ahmed (1) felt distressed because heritage Muslims did not make the effort to invite White Muslims into their homes to teach them about Islam and offer moral support.

They would proudly display educated English converts in the mosque as a testimony to the power and glory of Islam and declare ‘*Subhanallah*’ [God is Exalted beyond comparison], but nobody there was going to invite a *Gora* [White man] to their homes and show him how to live as a Muslim.

Ahmed emphasised the Urdu word ‘*Gora*’, which is perceived by White people to be a racist term, the White equivalent of ‘Paki’. He went on to say, ‘The British non-Muslim community are generally far more accepting of my Islam than most of the Muslim community have been of my colour.’ Almost all sociologists agree that race is socially, rather than genetically, constructed, and racial discrimination or ‘colourism’ (Walker, 1983: 290) has its roots deeply embedded in the history of European colonisation based on the ideal of White European supremacy. In nineteenth-century Britain, the social understanding of racial differences created hierarchies and boundaries between groups of people, and distinguished them on a biological basis of colour. ‘White’ meant good, beautiful, privileged, civilised, superior and pure, while ‘Brown’ and ‘Black’ was connected to slavery, evil, ugliness, being disadvantaged, crime, immigrants, immorality and other undesirable and negative qualities. Such a social outlook elevated the ‘White’ to become the prestigious class that belonged to western society (Mason, 2000). These categorisations may be perceived as socio-political concepts in their meanings, based on ideas developed and maintained in social human interaction. According to Islam, however, people are differentiated and categorised only according to their beliefs; they are believers, non-believers or hypocrites, and the best people are those who are the most pious, regardless of their race, status or wealth (Quran, 49: 13). However, in Muslim societies, fair skin has been associated with higher standards of human beauty and physical perfection on account of the influence of western imperialist ideologies, which is why many heritage Muslims, men especially, tend to seek the element of ‘fairness’ in a marriage partner, and often find themselves drawn to European Muslims.

It can be suggested that heritage Muslims feel socially empowered when they see a growth in English people wishing to join their communities. The increase in White conversions indicates to them that westerners are starting to prefer their (Islamic) way of life, and therefore it is more common to find Muslims celebrating White conversions than others. Moreover, heritage Muslims tend to feel more privileged and superior to others within the context of a Muslim community, as they consider themselves, to be

‘authentic’ Muslims, whereas both Black and White Muslim converts are not considered as such.

Ahmed (1), amongst others, mentioned how he was not provided with, or offered, any personal or social support from heritage Muslims who knew he was a convert. He found that many of the Muslims he came across did not want to engage with converts or bear the responsibility of taking care of them, despite the fact they had worked hard to convert them to Islam. ‘As I came to the mosque giving my greeting of *salams* and expecting everyone to return that as warmly and energetically as I had read the Companions of The Prophet had greeted each other I was met with indifference. They seemed to look with suspicion on this stranger.’ Despite the negative attitudes, however, he continued to find a way out of the intellectual confusions he had encountered and decided to further his studies to resolve the ‘forceful and conflicting opinions’ that had entered his heart. He had begun to see how harsh and arrogant he was becoming from taking Muslim views on board and how he was destroying his character and faith instead of improving it, which caused him over time to become less practising. Mark (33) mentioned that he was interrogated by Salafi Muslims who suspected he was a government spy, as they had not seen him before. (It is argued that some Muslims may be wary of spies after Mortem Storm exposed himself in 2014 as an undercover CIA agent disguised for five years as a Muslim convert, which in turn has increased mistrust of converts in Muslim communities (Storm, 2014).) This mistrust is not something new, as in the past western Muslim converts were not always accepted in either Muslim or Christian societies, as their sincerity was doubted (Zebiri, 2007: 32–33).

Mosque administrators were criticised by a number of participants (Ahmed, 1; Maria, 5; Khadija, 6; Robert, 14; Lauren, 20) for not providing support programmes for new Muslims, alongside translated sermons and prayer areas for women. Maria and Robert mentioned how converts were often patronised and not granted permission to give talks in their local mosques because they were assumed to be ignorant of Islamic teachings, when in fact they found heritage Muslims to be more confused about Islamic teachings than they were. Aisha (4) mentioned how she was tired of being categorised as a ‘convert’ because she believed that everyone who said the *shahadah* was a Muslim.

For most converts the most important element of Islam is the daily prayers, and it confused some, such as Sara (3), when they saw Muslims who wore Islamic dress or

fasted the month of *Ramadan* but did not pray because they fasted and/or wore the *hijab* for cultural reasons rather than for religious reasons. Khadija (6) and Ryan (18) also mentioned the confusion non-practising Muslims cause for both non-Muslims and converts when they are seen to have the same habits as many non-Muslims and lead non-Muslim lifestyles. For example, Khadija mentioned how she had come across Saudis at university who would drink alcohol, not wear the *hijab*, and have forbidden relationships. However, she would find them in the mosque for Friday prayers, which she found hypocritical and a terrible example for converts and non-Muslims. Saudis in particular are generally expected by non-Muslims and converts to uphold the principles of Islam and present the religion in its true manner because they were born and raised in Arabia. Therefore, it can be disappointing and disheartening for people who cannot find good Muslim role models in their societies, and this may often lead them to lose interest in the faith, as they lack any encouragement. Hana (16) said, ‘Converts tend to think very highly of Muslims, especially Arabs and unfortunately it is just an illusion. Many Arabs I have met have been a lot worse than non-Muslims in their conduct. They should be ashamed to call themselves Muslims.’

Many participants complained about witnessing bad manners when going to a mosque for Friday prayers and struggling to hear the sermon or being unable to feel any spiritual connection with God, because women brought their noisy children, argued, spent the entire time talking and gossiping in loud voices, and ate, despite notices on walls that forbade this. Witnessing contradictory behaviour was one of the factors that drove people away from Islam, especially when it was compared to the better conduct and attitudes of other faith groups. Fatima (2) gave examples of heritage Muslims ignoring her, not greeting her, being patronising because she was a convert and giving her weird looks because she wore the *burka*. She found it particularly upsetting when no one visited her in hospital after a foot operation. Hana (16) also felt depressed when no one visited her after she had her first baby. According to these converts’ understanding, Muslims were meant to be a part of one *Ummah*, formed of supportive brotherhoods and sisterhoods; however, the reality of their conversions was far from what they had expected. According to a report on new Muslims in Leicester (Al-Toma and Hibell, 2010) seventy-five per cent of the converts interviewed (mainly women) experienced high levels of confusion post-conversion, often owing to the conflicting ways in which Islam was presented to them. Lauren (20) described her experience with heritage Muslims as being ‘highly frustrating’:

I early on saw the misogyny, oppression and subjugation of women amongst the Muslim community, which was even practised by the ‘nobler’ Imams, *Shuyookh* [Sheikhs] and preachers. The culture was more oppressive than the religion seemed to be... I also realized that a lot of Muslims did not ‘understand’ or practise Islam, in the way I thought was correct and right, and some of the very devout and pious Salafi Muslims even committed crimes such as fraud and stole money through the social services.

Lauren believed that many heritage Muslims are intolerant of difference, especially when it comes to an understanding of Islam and how things should be done. An understanding of Islam is subjective, so while she believes that some Muslims are not practising Islam in the right way, others believe they are doing so. Some people may also become heavily judgmental and openly critical of others if they do not practise Islam in the way they believe is correct, which creates hostilities between individuals and Muslim groups/sects. It may also be understood from Lauren’s statement that despite doing wrong, such as committing fraud, some people may continue to perceive themselves as good Muslims because they have managed to somehow justify their contradictory actions in an Islamic manner by twisting the meanings of various Quran verses and Hadiths or taking them out of context to suit their motives. Karen (29) chose to be a Muslim away from the Muslim community because she perceived Muslim culture to be oppressive for women, and because some people used religion in wrong ways to their advantage. She claims she is able to enjoy life in this way as no one can control, judge or criticise her, and she is free to practise Islam according to her own understanding of it without losing her personality and values.

9.4 Summary

This chapter shows that Islamophobia, lack of social and personal support from the Muslim community, isolation from family and loved ones, balancing a British Muslim identity, witnessing bad behaviour and hypocrisy among heritage Muslims, and struggles with practising Islam were common daily issues new Muslims faced. All participants acknowledged various degrees of hardships they experienced when it came to the creation of a new Islamic identity, whether it was struggling to find the time and opportunities to pray and fit in with others, or conforming to the many unrealistic and overwhelming rules and practices that Muslims had presented them with. It is argued

that experiencing such pressure and attitudes from heritage Muslims is problematic because it can cause converts to retract their conversion or move away from a Muslim community to one where they are not interrogated and judged by others.

Career and social changes were also difficulties some converts had to endure, as they preferred to work and socialise in environments better suited to their Islamic beliefs. Also, those who wanted to maintain their relationships with non-Muslims sometimes concealed their beliefs or compromised by refraining from displaying any symbols or actions that indicated they were Muslims in order to avoid problems and isolation. Being disconnected from families, social groups and loved ones had profound effects on participants' emotional and psychological wellbeing and was a cause for some to consider de-conversion, especially if they were not supported by Muslims during times of difficulties, *Eid* and *Ramadan*.

Some converts complained about racial discrimination that was experienced at different levels and in different societies. White female converts in particular were likely to lose their prestigious English status if they adopted foreign Muslim dress, whereas the heritage Muslim community perceived White converts as significant trophies and symbols of achievement, especially if they were highly educated or famous. Black conversions, however, were often perceived as problematic, by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, as Black converts usually came from uneducated and disadvantaged areas, and in some instances broken or troubled homes; factors that contributed to the likelihood of them being discriminated against or becoming radical Muslims. The study found that Islam often empowered these disadvantaged converts and gave them more personal and social confidence, as they became feared and acknowledged in British society. Those who had converted in jail, or shortly after being released from prison, were also found to be more likely to join radical groups, as they were offered money, accommodation and jobs if people and companies refused to employ them.

While some participants blamed the media and non-Muslims for being ignorant, others blamed Muslim criminals and extremists for the negative media coverage that gives Islam and Muslims a bad reputation. The negative media portrayals had affected the lives of many individuals, resulting in some experiencing Islamophobic abuse and different types of discrimination.

Chapter X

Marriage, Divorce and Children

10.1 Introduction

In this study, marital issues were found to be common, especially amongst young female converts who struggled to cope with the demands of strict Muslim husbands and a cultural lifestyle they were not used to. For many, the cultural and religious expectations within the context of marriage were perceived to be great difficulties because they involved changes in external identity, personality and values to keep their spouses, in-laws and new society happy. Experiences ranged from struggling to find suitable Muslim partners to facing hardships regarding the Islamic upbringing of their children. This chapter explores how marriage contributed towards the development of a British Muslim identity and also how negative experiences became significant turning points that led to divorce and/or de-conversion from Islam. Many converts hoped marriage would help them to become better Muslims because they would then have partners who would support them with their faith; however, this was not always the case. Only a few female converts were fortunate enough to have partners who displayed what they believed to be good Islamic behaviour and were supportive throughout their conversion journey.

10.2 Difficulties in Finding a Suitable Muslim Partner

The study found that converts often preferred to marry heritage Muslims, as they believed they would be able to learn from them and have a better chance of raising their children with Islamic values in a Muslim community. However, many participants claimed it was difficult to find heritage Muslims who were willing to take on the responsibility of looking after converts. Finding moderate Muslims was also a challenge, as converts usually came across those who were strict, not practising or who were otherwise hypocritical in their faith, which often caused confusion.

Single mothers (for example, Aisha, 4) found it particularly difficult to marry and receive social support in a number of Muslim communities, as many older generation

and/or traditional Muslims discriminated against them. Despite social advances in modern-day British society, the reputation and status of divorced Muslim women and single mothers continues to be perceived as ‘tarnished’ in very traditional and closed Muslim communities. Ruqayya (9), a divorced convert said, ‘Some women [some of who were friends] weren’t allowed by their husbands to talk to me in case I influenced them.’ Divorced women are often treated as ‘failures’ for breaking the family bond, which leads to emotional problems, lack of self-confidence, and psychological distress. Orna Cohen and Rivka Savaya (2003: 283) say that reasons for divorce usually relate to the culture in which the couple is living. Participants who lived in Muslim communities felt their lives were being ruled and influenced by an oppressive Muslim culture, which has a conservative and judgmental approach to divorce, contrary to Islamic teachings. Empirical studies also repeatedly show that marital dissolution in traditional environments is associated with a number of social problems. For example, divorcees have smaller social networks and are more likely to lack social support (Gahler, 2006: 372–382).

Others were also discriminated against, such as Rebecca (23), who said, ‘I had issues with my mother-in-law who hated the fact I am a convert who used to be “a dirty non-Muslim”, having relationships with other men etc. Even though I never told her this, it is something she generally assumes about me.’ According to Islamic teachings, it is forbidden to judge new Muslims based on their past lives, as a conversion to Islam and sincere repentance wipes out previous sins (Quran, 8: 38; 25: 70). Nevertheless, Asian and Arab cultures in particular have long associated virginity with ‘pure’ and ‘chaste’ young women. Therefore, many traditional parents of young men often struggle to accept women into their family who are considered or assumed to be ‘physically damaged’ even if they are converts to Islam. People may struggle to deal with, and accept, the hypocrisy in this situation, as a man’s chastity is not questioned, regardless of his past, whereas a woman (convert or heritage Muslim) may suffer personally and socially if her reputation has been damaged. According to Islam, however, the punishment for being unchaste applies to both men and women (Quran, 24: 3–5). Amena Amer, Caroline Howarth and Ragini Sen (2015) found that representations of culture and religion influenced social practices and attitudes towards virginity, and that they embodied the elements of ‘Arabness’ and ‘Muslimness’ in British society that signified women’s sense of religious and cultural identity. It is therefore argued that some heritage Muslims may feel that western women are sinful, promiscuous and do

not honour their values, and divorced Muslim women, especially single mothers, were socially marginalised and perceived as burdens.

The study also shows that heritage Muslims often prefer to avoid having family relationships with non-Muslims on account of the issues that may arise, such as racial abuse, cultural conflicts, and dealing with behaviour that is not compliant with Islamic beliefs and values. Mariam (11) and Sonia (26) were rejected by heritage Muslims because they had Hindu families, and Ryan (18) found the process of searching for a suitable Muslim wife difficult because of his Jewish family and upbringing. He proposed to the daughter of a Jordanian man he met in a mosque, and was turned down because the father feared that although he was now a Muslim, he would still have 'Jewish blood and characteristics'. It upset Ryan that heritage Muslims were not willing or able to accept him, though he knew Islamic teachings to be different to these cultural attitudes. A British-educated and Arabic-speaking Muslim woman had appealed to Ryan, as he was familiar with Arab culture and, more importantly, felt that such a woman could help him to be a better Muslim and raise Muslim children. Leyla (7) received interest from educated Muslims but their parents would not accept the fact that she was originally an Orthodox Jew too. 'I found this disheartening as I had made all the effort to become a good Muslim and sacrificed a lot for it only to be treated by many as if I had never converted to Islam in the first place.'

Hassan's (8) experience provides another insight into the issue some young converts face. He proposed to the daughter of a man who worked for an Islamic organisation, and expected that he would be religious and both accept and support him as a new Muslim. He was surprised and disappointed, however, to find that although the man worked in an Islamic environment he did not follow the teachings and advice of The Prophet Muhammad regarding marriage. The man had listed material requirements that included an expensive *mahr* (dowry), but as a young man he was unable to afford this alongside the expenses involved in providing a comfortable home. The obligatory *mahr* is given by a man to his bride in order to validate the marriage (Quran, 4: 4) and is often a sum of money or jewellery that symbolises honour, respect and the groom's willingness to take on his financial responsibilities and marital duties. Based on his understanding of Islam, Hassan believed that an Islamic marriage was provided by God as a simple and easy procedure to help young men and women avoid the sins of fornication that lead to the corruption of society. Al-Haakim and Al-Bayhaqi narrated that The Prophet

Muhammad had said: ‘The best of dowries is the simplest (or most affordable)’ (classified as *saheeh* (authentic) by al-Albaani in *Saheeh al-Jaami*, 3279). According to other various Hadiths, a man is not to be judged as a good potential husband by his status, wealth or lineage, as this would only make marriage possible for a very small and specific group of people, but rather by his level of piety, social reputation, and character, which includes everyone. Muslim scholars agree that if a man is known to be genuinely pious and God-fearing he will be a kind and loving husband who will fulfil his religious and marital duties in the best possible manner. It may also be argued that some demanding fathers are causing harm to their daughters who spend years of their youth unmarried and childless, as there is a shortage of wealthy men. This often results in them becoming spinsters or getting involved in prohibited and ‘shameful’ relationships, which may trigger further problems and consequences such as abortions, disownment, or, in some cases, honour killings.

George (28) on the other hand had a more positive experience, ‘Her father made it [the marriage process] easy for me. I could see he really respected me and appreciated that I was a convert.’ He married a British Palestinian woman he met at university four years after his conversion and claimed that her support helped him to become a better Muslim. ‘I was lucky because my family really loved her and didn’t have an issue [with the marriage]. She is practising and moderately religious in the sense she wears western clothing and a colourful *hijab*.’ George here indicates that the way she represented herself as a balanced British Muslim affected the ways in which his family perceived her. It is argued that had she worn a *burka* or other foreign clothing, for example, George may have received very different reactions from his family members and the likelihood of them accepting her would have been low.

Robert (14) felt it would be better for converts to marry converts who shared the same culture and understanding of Islam, and who would appreciate their efforts to be good Muslims; however, it was difficult to meet them, as there are not many avenues and social services available for this. A few participants, such as Sonia (26), mentioned they wanted to see matrimonial services provided for converts in mosques and Islamic centres to help them find compatible partners. Luke (34) did not have any luck with finding a partner using an online Muslim matrimonial service, as he felt the women he contacted were not serious or that they were unsuitable, and those he proposed to did not accept the fact that he, too, had ‘*kafir*’ (non-Muslim) parents and was a Black

convert. Converts have also become wary about the intentions some heritage Muslims have towards them when it comes to marriage, and are reluctant to accept non-British people who may marry them for visas and passports.

There has been a growing demand for matrimonial services that cater for converts in the mosque. We cannot recommend people for them as it is a huge responsibility, as we do not know the potential suitors personally and we do not want vulnerable people being taken advantage of. However, it is a big problem especially amongst female converts who have been abandoned by their families (Imam Khalifa Ezzat of London's Central Mosque, 2012).

The Imam highlights an important issue vulnerable female converts are likely to face when they rush into marriages with unsuitable heritage Muslims, hoping it will solve their problems that might, for example, include being homeless. Converts may be pressured by other Muslims to get married during the early period of their conversion so that they can be financially and Islamically supported rather than relying on others who do not have the time to help them. Here, marriage would seem like a replacement and temporary solution for the emotional issues converts might be going through, and many marriages are often arranged quickly in mosques before women have the chance to settle into their new faith, learn about it, explore a Muslim identity, and find themselves. 'Imams find "Islamic" justifications for "fast-track" marriages, without any preparatory official administrative procedures, leaving women without security or rights, abused and deceived by unscrupulous individuals' (Ramadan, 2004: 139–140). For some converts, such as Ruqayya (9), it was disappointing to find that the people they married were not good examples of Muslims. The same may apply to male converts, however, it is not often they encounter such issues, and men are less likely to feel as vulnerable as women and do not usually consider marriage as a solution for their financial problems.

According to Muslim cultural practices, men are tasked with investigating a potential suitor for a female relative, and check for signs of bad character, extremism or a lack of religious commitment. The men are given this responsibility because they know more about the nature of men and are able to recognise negative traits that women may not perceive or ignore. Therefore, the presence of a *wali* (male guardian), usually the father, brother or paternal uncle, is required in an Islamic marriage to make sure that the man is suitable and does not ignore any of the woman's Islamic rights, such as the obligatory

dowry. According to Islamic law, converts' fathers cannot be legal guardians in marriage unless they are Muslims, and so female converts tend to appoint Imams or other authoritative Muslim figures instead. However, some women have found that these men are not always as caring about their rights as they are with regard to Muslim women who are related to them. As a result, they have felt they were taken advantage of, as the grooms did not have to go through a vetting process by male relatives and meet certain standards and requirements. This encouraged some men to give very low dowries and forgo wedding celebrations. A few female converts (for example, Ruqayya, 9; Hana, 16) complained about Muslim husbands taking advantage of the fact they did not know their Islamic rights and did not have any male relatives, which made them 'easier' to marry. Hana (16), for example, was upset, as she had to be content with getting married in a 'shabby little room in a mosque' because she was told that it was the correct Islamic way to get married. This had depressed her, as she had often longed for a white dress and wedding. 'After conversion everything happened in such a rush and I missed all those beautiful moments I had looked forward to so much in my life.'

Many parents have often been confused, angry and frustrated with their daughters who had married into a problematic society in which men are portrayed to be oppressive and violent towards women (Brown, 2014; IKWRO, 2013; Kirkova, 2013). Ruqayya (9) mentioned how her mother had cried with worry during her marriage ceremony in the Imam's office, and because her dreams of seeing her daughter getting married in a white dress with her family around her had been shattered. As a result, Ruqayya had to live with the guilt of breaking her mother's heart and letting her down by being and marrying a Muslim she loved, which caused her emotional problems.

Henry (24) married a nineteen-year-old convert, whom he had met through a friend seven months after his conversion, to avoid the sin of having prohibited relationships. It is common to see young converts such as Henry searching for marriage partners soon after their conversions in order to stay 'chaste' and be good Muslims. He had married her in a mosque without the knowledge of her family in order to avoid problems, as her family despised Muslims. However, because he had a more extremist outlook than her with regard to religion his marriage only lasted a few months, as she was unable to cope with his strict lifestyle. It may be argued that the stricter converts are more likely to marry young and very religious women from their own Muslim groups, as they do not come with 'non-Islamic cultural and material requests'. The study found that young

women were more likely than men to marry heritage Muslims, as heritage Muslim women were often not accepting of converts who were not White, educated and/or financially stable.

10.3 Marriage Issues

This section addresses the main marital issues some participants experienced that had caused them to live miserable lives and in some cases disaffiliate from Islam. Lauren (20) claimed that her Asian husband's poor treatment of her, alongside the subjugation of Muslim women in general, were her main reasons for disaffiliation. She felt her husband gradually destroyed all her ambitions, hopes, hobbies and dreams, as a result of his 'dictator attitude' that stopped her from accomplishing anything in her life that was 'a threat to him and his ego'. It is suggested that her issues were mainly gender-related and cultural rather than religious, as they were based on her husband's understanding of religion and morality that contains many 'backward' cultural elements and personal insecurities. For example, Lauren was unable to do anything without his permission, and she abandoned her university education because he did not want her to come into contact with men. She said they never went to the cinema, did not have a TV, and that he refused to let her go out with friends because to him this was not important and was also *haram*. 'I got the impression Islam didn't want you to enjoy your life at all. It prevented you from everything you enjoyed.' She blamed her husband for portraying an awful image of Islam to herself, her family, and her non-Muslim friends, and for making his mindset an obstacle to her enjoyment. 'I regret it badly, however I was so keen on being a good Muslim I just accepted all the Islamic texts that he somehow managed to justify in order to get his way all the time.' Lauren acknowledged that she was affected psychologically as a result of her suppression and feelings of deprivation from the things she loved, and that her husband took advantage of the fact she wanted to please God. She claimed that if she did not obey his orders, he would tell her that she would go to hell and would become rude and abusive as a punishment for her disobedience. Hana (16), who married an Egyptian Muslim, described her marriage as being a 'nightmare', as she, too, was not allowed to go out with friends, had to give her job up as a secretary because he was jealous of the men in her workplace, and had to wear a *burka* in public. Hana said that her husband also regularly took Quran verses and Hadiths out of context, and became aggressive if she did not submit to his will. Hana

viewed him not only as a terrible example of a Muslim, but as a reason to make people leave Islam and, like Ruqayya (9), felt deceived, as she perceived her husband was not like this before she married him. Ruqayya mentioned how her husband had appeared to be westernised and enjoyed a ‘British lifestyle’ with his friends, however within the context of his home and Muslim community, he was very different.

Sophia (12), like Ruqayya (9), also suffered as a result of the cultural expectations of what a Muslim housewife should be, and Rebecca (23) struggled with daily challenges that involved the preparation of Pakistani food and attending local Urdu classes so she could converse with her mother-in-law who did not speak any English. Ruqayya explained how she too felt she had gradually turned into a Pakistani rather than a Muslim, and that she was losing her British identity, which greatly upset her. She also complained about the lack of privacy in her life and believed that as a Muslim woman she was not obliged to live with her in-laws, and it bothered her to have to always wear the *hijab* in the house when her brother-in-law was present. In general, she felt her in-laws prioritised cultural values over religious values, which confused her and created conflicts between what she considered to be right and wrong in Islam. ‘I was constantly criticised and told what to do and what not to do and I began to feel that being Muslim was more of a chore than a spiritual journey for me.’

Many women, such as Lina (22), had converted to Islam after being attracted to the rights God gave Muslim mothers, wives, daughters and sisters, and had expected to receive those rights in a marriage from supposedly practising Muslim men. It is interesting to note here that women were attracted to the *status* of Muslim women, which may give the reader an idea of the identity they felt they needed to enjoy life and become spiritually cleansed, liberated and respected as human beings. It was an identity they believed would honour them, as it would bring them closer to God, prevent men from perceiving them as sexual objects, protect them from abuse, and would satisfy their desire of establishing a traditional nuclear family, spirituality, discipline, confidence and self-value in their lives. Statistics from reports (for example, Brice, 2010) show that these are the main reasons why there are more female than male conversions in the West. However, Lina claimed that her husband was physically abusive, ‘extremely’ suffocating, and had a tendency to interpret Quran verses and Hadiths about male authority in a harsh manner, and repeat them many times to make a point, which caused her to start resenting God and Islam. She described her marital

relationship as one of a slave and master, and her husband often told her that her family would go to hell for being non-believers, which greatly distressed her. She came to believe that God preferred and loved men more than women by giving them so much authority to control women as they pleased. Basheer Ahmed (2009: 22) claims that some religious scriptures have been taken out of context to support emotional, physical, verbal and mental discrimination against women. A primary example of a Quran verse that is often misunderstood is 4:34:

Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance – [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand.

Anne-Sofie Roald (2001) confirmed in her study that Muslim men who understand from this verse that it is their right to control, order and physically punish their wives for being disobedient were very problematic husbands. The verse, however, is also interpreted in another way by acknowledging that a woman's right is to be fully taken care of by her husband so that she does not need to bear the tiring and stressful task of having to work to provide for the family. This was hailed by converts such as Rebecca (23), who support the continuation of the traditional family unit. She believes that God has burdened men with this great responsibility towards women and so in return women should be obedient to what their husbands feel is best for the family within reason, providing that husbands do not oppress and request women to do anything that opposes the law of God. With regard to this verse (4: 34) The Prophet Muhammad explained that the light striking of women was permitted by God as a last disciplinary resort in extreme cases, such as, for very rebellious wives who committed adultery, on the strict condition that it avoids the face and does not constitute physical abuse that leaves marks on the body. Despite dispensing this permission, however, The Prophet did not encourage it as a practice. Aishah (The Prophet's wife) said, 'The Prophet never hit a servant or a woman and did not strike anything with his hand' (Abu Dawud, Book 43, Number 4217) and Iyas ibn Abdullah reported that The Prophet Muhammad had said, 'Many women have come to the family [of Muhammad] complaining about their

husbands hitting them. These men are not the best among you' (Abu Dawud, Book 12, Number 2146). Islam prohibits emotional abuse, name-calling, threatening and blackmailing (Quran, 49: 12), and examples of these are found in the biography and how The Prophet dealt with them.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2006), Amina Wadud, Asra Nomani, Myriam Francois-Cerrah, and Asma Jehangir are renowned Muslim feminists who have fought for the full equality of all Muslims, particularly gender equality, to eradicate radical cultural practices and extreme ideologies found in patriarchal Muslim relationships (Brittain, 2007). They encourage the questioning of patriarchal interpretations of Islamic teachings to solve many of the issues that arise from personal and social relationships between men and women. Many women, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, struggle to accept literal Islamic rulings and interpretations on gender roles and relationships and perceive them to be sexist. The majority of Islamic scholars, however, insist that discrimination against women emanates from Muslim culture and not from Islam. Abdurahman Jafar of the Muslim Council of Britain emphasised that oppression of Muslim women could not be pinned on religion. 'We agree that Islam doesn't discriminate, but men do discriminate, and men control society ... Muslim men seek to justify that oppression under the guise of Islam' (*Guardian*, 2004). Hena Zuberi (2011) claims that not all men who abuse their wives do it because they think it is their Islamic right, but because they are either ignorant about Islam or that it is a part of their bad character. 'They [some Muslim men] make religion hell for women and anyone who speaks out against this is deemed anti-Islamic. People are leaving the religion because of how some Muslims treat women, using "Islam" as a weapon.' This shows that female converts are more likely to suffer in marriages to heritage Muslim men, as it is less likely for male converts to have oppressive and abusive Muslim wives on account of the nature of Islamic and cultural teachings regarding gender relationships.

Oppressive behaviour and attitudes often reinforced media stereotypes of Muslim men on account of the political climate. Non-Muslims, or Muslims who are ignorant of Islamic teachings, may believe such men to be religious when they see them act or portrayed in a negative way, which is not good for *dawah*. 'His attitude ruined my life. Everything I had read about the status of Muslim women in Islam did not apply in my case. I was extremely disappointed' (Lina, 22). Lina mentioned how her husband spent his time in the mosque, watching Islamic lectures or giving *dawah*, while she was

unable to pray properly herself or read The Quran in Arabic, as he had not taught her how to do so. Holly (16) mentioned how her husband had forbidden her to visit her only non-Muslim friend whose father had passed away, and because her friend could not understand her Islamic obedience to her husband she decided to cut her relationship with Holly, which triggered depression. Such demands may have profound implications on a convert's attitude towards Islam and Muslims, as they become isolated from their erstwhile non-Muslim friends, society and families. This caused many converts to live miserably in isolation, as they did not know who to talk to about their problems or where to go, which triggered a lack of self-esteem.

Lina (22) claimed that none of her neighbours helped her when she was physically and verbally abused by her husband when she did not 'obey' him. Instead she was told by some Muslim women to be patient, because it was the husband's right to be obeyed and it is in men's nature to be ill-tempered. As a result, she perceived Muslim women to be vulnerable and weak, with no self-respect, as they were taught not to stand up to abusers so as not to bring shame upon themselves. (It should be noted here that of course this does not apply to all heritage Muslim women.) Tariq Ramadan (2004: 140) condemns this lack of support and says, 'Some women, with the knowledge of all around her, suffer violence and degradation while the Muslim community remains culpably silent and complicit, justifying its inaction and cowardice by reference to the Islamic injunction 'not to get involved in what does not concern you'. It is suggested that some women such as Lauren (20) and Janet (32), who experienced abuse in their relationships and remained within them, were reluctant to admit to their families that their lives became worse after becoming Muslims, and that the men they had often been warned about had in fact turned out to be abusive, whereas others such as Holly (16) perceived their hardships as tests from God, or remained in the marriage for the sake of their children, as they were afraid to lose them. Yasir Suleiman (2013: 53–54) also found domestic abuse and patriarchy to be a problem in his study, and claimed that women cannot escape from such relationships for various reasons, such as a lack of family support or because they do not want to be shamed in front of their families and friends.

Such women are unlikely to find support within the Muslim community, where they are frequently instructed by community leaders to have patience, ignoring the injustice of the situation, its contradiction of Islamic principles and its

criminality in Britain. The violence perpetrated towards convert women is often viewed by others as a sign of their own personal failings.

Some participants were devastated to find that non-Muslims were more respectful to their wives than Muslims were. Janet (32) mentioned that her non-Muslim ex-husband had more Islamic qualities, manners, kindness, compassion and love for her than her Muslim husband. 'Never had my ex-husband hit me or abused me or treated me with disrespect, despite the fact he doesn't really believe in God himself but he was a gentleman and had manners.' What made things worse later on was finding out that her Muslim husband abandoned her once he received his residency visa that she had helped him to get. It is such experiences that cause religious doubts. Converts are likely to leave Islam if they feel the sacrifices made to become Muslims were not worth it, and that they gained nothing positive from their time as Muslims. Janet said, 'I was enraged that I had given up so much to be Muslim, that I had such high expectations of being a Muslim and the community. I sacrificed my family and no one who hadn't gone through that would understand how that felt. I was majorly depressed.' Lauren, Lina, Janet and Ruqayya all believed that they made the mistake of marrying Muslims too soon after their conversions to Islam due to a lack of guidance and support from Muslims who did not advise them well and look out for their best interests.

Henry (24) creates an awareness of how patriarchal systems in Muslim communities are established in radical groups by saying that group members often emphasise the rights they believe men are given in Islam, to make them feel more powerful and to provide them with an incentive to become Muslims. 'The Islamic way of life became perfect for me, I could have four wives and I was granted full authority and control over a Muslim wife, which was great, as I did not need to take the independence headache that came with a lot of non-Muslim women.' Henry's mention of how he found that being Muslim was suitable for him because of the authority he could have over women is dangerous for the wellbeing of women, the Muslim society and its family units. Such an attitude breeds hatred between men and women, and fuels negative opinions of Islam, especially when it is adopted by radical groups that claim to follow Islam in its correct and pure form.

In Islam, women are not obliged to contribute any of their earnings to the household, even though they may be very wealthy, which places a great responsibility on the

husband to financially take care of his family. A man who chooses to marry up to four women at the same time would need to split his time and finances equally between them, which for most people is very difficult. The Quran (4: 3) says, ‘But if you fear that you will not do justice [between them], then [marry] only one’ as polygamous marriages come with very stringent conditions. A TV documentary, aired on Channel Four in September 2014, entitled ‘The Men with Many Wives’, exposes the rise in polygamous marriages among Muslims, of which there are believed to be as many as 20,000 in Britain and who are circumventing British law (Reid, 2011). It was found that many of these Muslims were knowingly or unknowingly abusing the rights of women, causing many to leave Islam. Zaynab (30), for example, suffered emotionally and financially when her husband forced her to accept a co-wife. Later she was granted a divorce, after which her ex-husband moved back to his home country with his second wife and left her with the sole responsibility of raising their seven children.

Sophia (12), who converted to marry her non-practising Muslim boyfriend, became religious over time and took Islam seriously the more she read about it. However, her husband did not, and it started to bother her that he did not pray and practise Islam as he should. As a result, they had regular marital issues regarding religious matters. This study shows that obtaining a broad and sufficient Islamic education (see 11.7) is important, as those who relied on Muslims, or who had hoped their spouses would teach them about Islam, were often disappointed, whereas others who preferred to seek knowledge for themselves were able to decide what they thought was right or wrong, especially if they had knowledge of Hadiths that explained many Quranic verses. They were also able to stand up for their rights and not be victims of abuse, as they did not accept given advice, information, interpretations or translations without thoroughly researching them first, and, like Khadija (6), did not allow the bad behaviour and attitudes of Muslims to influence their opinions of what they knew to be true Islamic teachings.

The study shows that only Maria (5), Hafsa (25), George (28) and Karen (29) had successful marriages to Muslims, as they felt compatible in many ways and because they shared the same intellectual outlook and understanding of Islam. Those who had taken their time searching for someone spiritually, culturally and intellectually compatible were happier than those who rushed into marriages without taking these elements into consideration. Educational levels and intellectual abilities influenced the

ways in which men understood their roles as Muslim husbands and vice versa. For example, Karen considered her husband not only to have a good moral character but also to be highly educated and someone who understood that behaving in an oppressive manner towards his wife would only create a troubled household, which goes against Islam's main objective and purpose of marriage (Quran, 30: 21). According to the biography, The Prophet Muhammad set a good example to his people of how a Muslim husband should be. His wife Aishah claimed he was humble and would help with the housework, mend his clothes and shoes and sweep the floor. He would also milk and feed his animals and was the kindest and gentlest of men towards his wives and daughters (Al-Mubarkpuri, 2002: 223). Men, such as George, who married compatible heritage Muslim women were also happier than others, as they enjoyed having wives who supported their lifestyle and prioritised their homes and families. At the same time heritage Muslim wives also found advantages, qualities and values in educated western converts that they could not find easily in heritage Muslim men, and so these marriages were considered mutually beneficial and successful.

10.4 Divorce Issues

Aisha (4), Ruqayya (9) and Lina (22) mentioned that obtaining a divorce was one of the hardest struggles they had to go through, as their husbands did not make the procedure easy and dragged it out for a long period of time by not answering legal letters sent by the *Shariah* Council. Ruqayya said, 'It took me eight months to persuade him to divorce me. He and his family turned into horrible people after I asked for divorce.' She has since harboured strong resentment towards Asian men, and neither trusts nor respects them. She says she would prefer to marry a like-minded English convert who would be more compatible. 'Getting married is easy, but finding the right person who can help you improve as a person and as a Muslim is not ... I was convinced that Islam is the truth but my faith became weaker when I was married.'

Participants expressed disappointment in the lack of Muslim counselling bureaus that they felt were needed for people in their situations, because divorce within an Islamic context is problematic for women who do not fully understand or know their rights, and do not have people to support them to ensure their entitlements, such as financial provision and child custody, are protected. It can be a very stressful and lengthy ordeal

obtaining an Islamic divorce from a Muslim husband who does not want to grant one. 'Divorce is made very difficult, even when it is clear that the woman is defending her most basic rights' (Ramadan, 2004: 139–140). Samia Bano (2010) suggests that the rise in power of unelected Muslim leaders means that those who have the best connections often establish a platform of authority to impose conservative patriarchal religious interpretations, which traditionally discriminate against women. Islamic institutes and courts often draw on the knowledge of these unelected male elders in their interpretation of Islamic law that may be problematic for British Muslims, particularly women, who attempt to obtain their Islamic rights.

Although it is true that the ultimate power of divorce in Islam is in the hands of the husband, this does not mean that women have no ability to put an end to their marriages if they are mistreated, and many Muslim scholars have claimed that men who convince their wives otherwise have deviated in their faith. Sheikh Haitham Haddad, a judge in London's Shariah Council, claimed in a number of lectures that divorce is a subject in which many Muslims are ignorant or misinformed, and because many do not know their rights, they are forced to live miserable lives for a long period of time. Contrary to cultural opinions, in Islam, divorce is permitted as a blessing from God for people to escape harm caused by abuse and intolerable or irreconcilable differences. There is an entire chapter in The Quran (65: The Divorce) dedicated to the rights of spouses to separate in special circumstances alongside verses in chapter two (227-241) and others. According to Islamic teachings it is considered necessary for a couple to separate when one or both spouses are afraid they will not be able to abide by the marital laws set by God with one another, or do not wish to do so or know that they are incapable of fulfilling each other's rights, in order to avoid the oppression of one another. The participants who had obtained a divorce from their husbands left the Muslim community, especially if they decided to disaffiliate from Islam too, and so did not experience the social discrimination that other divorced Muslim women faced among Muslims.

10.5 Children of Converts

Raising Muslim children was a challenge for converts, as negative media coverage alongside bad behaviour, racism, discrimination and attitudes displayed by heritage

Muslims caused many youngsters to abandon the teachings of their parents and adopt a more British, non-Muslim identity. Women who married Asians and Arabs had a difficult time raising their children, as they were expected by their husbands not to raise them in western ways that they were used to, but rather in ways that preserved many elements and values of their ethnic Muslim culture. Also, it was difficult for parents to find local schools that catered for the needs of hybrid children who belonged to two different cultures and/or ethnicities. Single working parents in particular did not have the time or social support to educate their children about Islam, and as a result the children either received their Islamic education from other Muslims, which had both positive and negative effects on how their Muslim identities were shaped, or were not practising at all. Fatima (2) enrolled her children in a local weekend Islamic school, mostly attended by Somali children, and they were teased and discriminated against because they were the children of a convert. Among what her children learnt at school was that Muslims are only kind in *Ramadan* and unkind for the rest of the year, which made them understand that Muslims are hypocrites. 'It is not good for them at all and I do worry about how this will affect their values when they are older and their perception of Islam because no matter how much I tell them that Muslims are different from Islam, they see otherwise.' Fatima, like other parents, felt frustrated because she could not provide her children with the right social environment to live in alongside the personal and religious support that they needed, and struggled to raise them with Islamic principles because they did not have good examples around them, including their own Muslim father who was abusive. Lina (22) mentioned how she felt her children were affected negatively by her conversion, and were confused about their hybrid national-religious-racial identities, as the White children at school teased them for having a 'Paki' mum because she wore a *hijab*. 'My daughters hate it [my headscarf] and refuse to go out with me when I wear it, they find it very embarrassing. Raising my daughters to be good Muslims was just too hard a task and a burden for me.' It is argued that because many children of converts are White, they struggle to accept the fact they are Muslims because the White children around them are mainly either atheists or Christians, and Muslims are associated with Black or Brown people. 'My daughters were told from some other kids they could not be Muslims as they are "White" and this created a lot of confusion for them' (Maria, 5).

Karen (29) struggled with one of her children who refused to have anything to do with Islam because he was scared of people laughing at him and calling him names. Children

were often worried about being bullied at school because of their faith, and it was common to see them rebel against religious principles and practices from a young age to avoid crises. David (19) and his wife struggled to raise their three daughters as Muslims too because they did not want to be associated with terrorists. After trying to help them love Islam they decided to leave them be and prayed that they would naturally and independently find their own paths to Islam later in life.

Eid festivals were good opportunities for parents to introduce their children to other children of converts; however, they often struggled to find good British Muslim role models for them. Zaynab (30), a single mother, took her children to a school in London that has a large number of Muslim students and would also take them to social gatherings where there were Muslims their age, but this was something she often had to be wary of, as her sons had a tendency to befriend boys who were members of Muslim gangs. Zaynab, who had married a Libyan man, raised her seven children in a predominantly Muslim area that they liked, and she had the task of preserving the reputation and honour of her family by constantly keeping an eye on what they did.

It got harder the older the kids grew, as I constantly worried about them, especially the boys, who they were mixing with etc. On a couple of occasions one got into trouble with the police. It was a bit too much for me. I also had to be very strict with the girls when it came to boyfriends and going out and that alone was stressful.

Although Zaynab worried about her children and who they socialised with in the Muslim community, she found it better living among Muslims and supportive friends than moving to a non-Muslim society in which there was a higher chance they would lose their Islamic beliefs and values.

Khadija (6) mentioned another issue that some converts and Muslims faced when they married someone who followed a different Muslim sect or school of thought. ‘My kids attended a regular Islamic school but their [Shi’a] father would take them to the Shi’ite mosque that was run by Iranians who prayed differently and had different Islamic views on rulings and verses. Oh it was a nightmare trying to break the confusion for them.’ As Khadija was a Sunni Muslim, she faced many struggles and stressful ordeals when it came to raising her children, as she often had problems with Shi’a practices and

teachings whenever she felt the Sunni understanding was more logical or authentic. It is for this reason that most heritage Muslims prefer to marry people from the same sect and also preferably from the followers of the same school of thought, as they share the same understanding of Islam and its laws.

10.6 Summary

Finding a suitable Muslim partner was a challenge for many, as converts did not know where to go to find one or who to approach. Discriminatory issues were also experienced when it came to proposing marriage to heritage Muslims regarding marital status, religious background, skin colour, social status, education and job, and female converts were judged and often not accepted by Muslims families who assumed them to have had a 'sinful' past. Many converts found such behaviour to be very contradictory to Islamic principles, which was a great disappointment for those who felt that despite their efforts to be good Muslims they were nevertheless rejected and not treated as Muslims or as part of the community. Some participants resorted to the Internet to look for a spouse, and were either disappointed at the cultural or non-Islamic requirements of people, or were victims of people who were after a visa or British passport (Powell, 2015). Parents often worried about their daughters marrying Muslim men because of the media's portrayal of them being obsessive, oppressive and abusive people. However, those who met their husbands or wives at university and shared the same culture, Islamic understanding and values had more successful marriages, and were accepted by their families. These converts were often influenced positively by their Muslim partners, and had developed stronger beliefs, a more confident Muslim identity and were happy in their lives, whereas others suffered as a result of their poor choice of partners who were not compatible, religious or supportive. As Glynis Breakwell (1986) and Abraham Maslow (1943) suggest, the more individuals feel comfortable with their chosen identity the more likely they will feel confident and reach a level of self-actualisation. The element of identity continuity was found to be present in the marriages of educated converts in particular, as they had chosen spouses who shared the same British and moral values, culture and ways of thinking, whereas female converts who married into cultural Muslim families often lost many personal and British elements from their former identities and lives such as wearing western clothing, as they had to adapt to their new environments, lifestyles and customs to be good Muslim wives.

Dealing with Arab and Asian in-laws had been difficult for some who had been raised differently, and did not understand the practices and requirements of the new culture. Some individuals felt culture was prioritised over religion in heritage Muslim households, which confused those who did not know the difference between them and thus felt that they were slowly turning into Asians or Arabs rather than Muslims. It was also difficult for some to live with non-practising spouses, as they did not receive the encouragement they needed to be better Muslims. This was often a problem when individuals converted to marry Muslims who were not practising at the time, as many converts who took Islam seriously later on bypassed their partners in religious practices and faith, as they grew a deeper love for Islam.

The study found that some women who were naive and in vulnerable situations became victims of men who abused their rights, which caused a major crisis in their lives. These women often complained about the patriarchal relationships in which they were involved. Some husbands unintentionally made their wives resent God and Islam as a result of their behaviour, and this may have happened because the men did not have sufficient knowledge of Islamic matters and their spouses' rights or because they had problematic characters and strict/extreme religious attitudes. As a result, the women witnessed a gradual decline of their Islamic beliefs and Muslim identity, which led some towards a divorce and in some cases disaffiliation from the community and Islam. Obtaining an Islamic divorce was difficult for some, especially when children were involved, which led to more hardships, as some husbands did not make divorce an easy process. Some women remained in abusive marriages or de-converted from Islam because they were not fully aware of their Islamic rights, or were too ashamed to admit they had made the wrong choice to convert and/or marry a Muslim. The study shows that converts rarely received any support from Muslims and family to help them through their ordeals, which made their problems worse.

Raising children to be Muslims in an increasingly secular society was a significant problem for converts. It was perceived as a hardship when White children in particular preferred a non-Muslim lifestyle so as to avoid feeling alienated or foreign. Parents struggled to find local Muslim weekend schools that tended to their children's needs, and conflicts would arise if parents followed different sects or understandings of Islam. Some parents had to deal with rebellious teenagers, who either had a tendency to befriend radical or non-practising Muslims, or did not want to be Muslims because they

did not want people to call them names, associate them with ethnic groups or terrorists, or because they had had bad experiences with Muslims. Other parents left their children to find their own paths to Islam at a later stage in their lives.

This chapter shows it is essential that female converts in particular are well educated in Islam and their rights before committing to marriage. It is suggested that understanding men's expectations of their wives, and their views on religious and cultural subjects will to some extent prepare women for marriage to heritage Muslims. It is also suggested that women will have a higher chance of avoiding potentially abusive relationships if they initially feel uncomfortable with potential suitors' views and therefore avoid them. The study shows that educated converts described their marriages as harmonious and happy, as they were aware of the important questions to ask potential suitors, and chose partners who were compatible with them intellectually, culturally and personally.

Chapter XI

Islamic and Arabic Education

11.1 Introduction

This study shows that many of the challenges and hardships participants have faced are due to a lack of Islamic knowledge and not knowing how to integrate both their Islamic beliefs and British values into their lives effectively. This chapter explores the various ways in which participants obtained their Islamic education and how it affected their identities and outlook on life. It also addresses the issues converts have with sects, different scholarly interpretations, and learning Arabic.

Owing to a lack of western Muslim scholars and educated English-speaking Imams in Britain, alongside the difficulties of obtaining access to them, urgent questions remained unanswered, resulting in converts relying on heritage Muslims, Internet forums and websites for answers given by people who are not qualified or knowledgeable enough to provide credible Islamic advice. This resulted in some to incline towards the more extreme way of practising the faith. Converts often gave up on education, or realised they needed to study Islam with or without help from Muslims, to find their own answers and think independently. Such participants usually leaned towards the scholarly opinions they felt more comfortable with, both personally and intellectually. It was found that being educated both prior to and during conversion is important, as the material that is read will often influence the development of a national-religious identity based on an individual's understanding of Islam.

11.2 The Importance of an Islamic Education

According to Islamic teachings, the first verse to be revealed by God to The Prophet Muhammad was: 'Recite [Read] in the name of your Lord who created – Created man from a clinging substance' (Quran, 96: 1–2), which conveys the importance of seeking knowledge. The Prophet Muhammad was heard by Muawiya (a companion of The Prophet) to have said, 'If *Allah* wants to do good to a person, He makes him comprehend the religion [The Quran and Hadiths]' (Sahih Bukhari, Book 3, Chapter 7,

Number 64, p. 86), and Ibn Majah, a ninth-century Muslim scholar who compiled the last of Islam's six Hadith collections, wrote that Anas ibn Malik stated, 'The Messenger of *Allah* said, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim"' (Ibn Majah, Volume 1, Book 1, Number 224). These Hadiths emphasise the importance of not only seeking knowledge but also teaching and acting upon it, to benefit people and be closer to God. Humanists and secularists deny the concept of revealed knowledge given to mankind by a Divine Being and believe it is a continuous process of mental, emotional, intellectual and moral development that creates different worldviews for individuals. Muslims, however, perceive The Quran and Hadiths to be a guide for human beings on how they should be and live their lives, as they claim that God knows best about how individuals may succeed in this life and the next. 'We have sent among you a messenger from yourselves reciting to you Our verses and purifying you and teaching you The Book and wisdom and teaching you that which you did not know' (Quran, 2: 152).

The study and transmission of Islamic knowledge is important for Muslims to be able to know their rights as Muslims and understand Islamic law, morality and practices. It was also important for most converts to know that they were following what they believed to be the 'right' understanding of Islam, as they felt they had a moral obligation towards God to act appropriately as Muslims. Therefore, it is suggested that they regard religious study as a form of worship in its own right. Converts were often confused with regards to what is considered to be the 'right' understanding of Islam, as different Muslims (such as cultural, feminist, political, liberal and extreme) provide their own interpretations of The Quran and Hadiths to suit their motives and lifestyles; each believing they are correct. This leads many different people to take Quran verses out of context or interpret them incorrectly, which encourages the spread of Islamic misunderstandings, problems and ignorance.

In a lecture about Islamic education, Hamza Yusuf (2015) mentioned that there is a scholarly difference between the two main types of ignorance. There is simple ignorance (that is, those who know they are ignorant) and compounded ignorance (those who are ignorant of their ignorance). Compounded ignorance is the greater problem that requires solutions to educate people about their purpose in life and about Islam, so Muslims can understand and practice Islam correctly. Yusuf says that according to Islamic tradition, the highest level of knowledge and education that a human being can attain is to know God through The Quran and the greatness/miracles of His creations.

‘And that those who have been given knowledge may know that it [The Quran] is the truth from your Lord, and that they may believe therein, and their hearts may submit to it with humility. And verily, *Allah* is The Guide of those who believe, to the Straight Path’ (Quran, 22: 54). Muslims also believe that humans are inclined to God and revealed knowledge, as it is a part of the *fitrah* for this to happen.

According to Ashraf (1978), being educated is different to being instructed. He believes that education helps to contribute towards the complete growth of an individual’s personality and attitudes, whereas instruction merely trains an individual or a group of people to reach an ideal performance of some tasks. He claims that a human being may be a great doctor or engineer, for example, but still remain a semi-educated, ill-mannered, immoral, unrighteous or unjust person. He further adds that truly educated people know and perform their moral duties towards God, themselves, family and neighbours that help them in their personal growth, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually and socially. ‘God has revealed the nature of humanity to humanity, together with the laws which lead us to the total flowering of our personalities’ (Ashraf, 1978: 4). As a result, the values are considered to be the same for all humanity, and save human beings from arrogance by teaching them that God is the ultimate Teacher of knowledge and wisdom, and that He has provided the prophets, The Prophet Muhammad in particular, as appropriate role models to mankind.

11.3 Difficulties in Obtaining a Broad Islamic Education

In Britain, mosques have long been perceived as educational venues for converts and heritage Muslims alike since 1893 when Quilliam established the first mosque in Liverpool that was a place of worship and education for hundreds of English converts (Geaves, 2010: 2–3). However, many converts today have complained that they have been unable to find much or, indeed, any educational support in their local mosques, as they often provide classes and services that cater for people from specific ethnic backgrounds, educational levels and age groups. A mosque is considered to be the hub of a Muslim community and the Imam is expected to be a source of education, guidance and support for new Muslims, but this was not always the case. Workshops were also important for converts, such as Lina (22), who needed Muslims to demonstrate how to pray, how to wear a *hijab*, and how to perform *wudu* (the ritual washing for prayers).

Additionally, it was difficult to find mosques and social groups that were run by western Muslims and that did not require many hours of travelling per week, which for some like Fatima (2) became very tiring and costly.

Some participants, such as Sophia (12), Robert (14), Janet (32) and Luke (34), complained about the poor quality of Arabic classes they found for new Muslims in some mosques, as they were often run by people who were not highly qualified, who were not Arabs, or who had strong accents. Some converts were also annoyed that the mosques they visited did not have a women's prayer area and that some of the teachers assigned to the tasks failed to turn up on a number of occasions without cancelling beforehand. There was also an expressed need for modern teaching methods, as many classes and schools focused solely on memorising Arabic grammar, Quran verses and Hadiths, rather than teaching what they mean; many adults struggled with this and found it frustrating. At the start of his conversion Ahmed (1) had not found much educational support and material available about Islam and resorted to children's books, which provided him with the basic information he thought he needed to know. However, he found it difficult to know how to practise Islam in a non-Muslim society, as he had no role models or people to teach him.

Alia (15) and Hana (16) both felt they were missing out on a lot by not being able to understand The Quran properly. Alia felt she was reading watered down translations and was unable to feel any spiritual connection with God through them. George (28) said, 'I have not made any great attempts to learn it [Arabic], due to a combination of laziness and a feeling of inadequacy in learning foreign languages. I have been unable to read The Quran [in Arabic] for years, as the task of learning it was beyond me', while Fatima (2) said, 'I would love to know the meaning of what I read but with four kids and no support I just don't have the time or will anymore.' The participants expressed the need for professional Arabic and Islamic classes in community centres as well as in the mosques, as they felt that classes for new Muslims were 'patronising', providing only the basic teachings of Islam and Arabic, while others were frustrated by the fact that many women went to Islamic classes to gossip and socialise. 'The Imam told us we could attend the children's classes but it wasn't comfortable at all and very patronising. I attended one to see what it was like with a few other adults, we sat at the back and we just kept getting laughed at by the kids!' (Luke, 34). Ahmed (1), Robert (14) and George (28) had trouble fitting in with Muslims and going to their local mosques

because the sermons and talks were always given in Urdu. Robert (14) compared British mosques with those in Spain that provided translation services for sermons in different languages and attracted people from all ethnicities, which made attending mosques there a wonderful experience.

11.4 Issues with Independent Learning

Owing to a lack of scholars, qualified Muslim teachers and Islamic educational institutes, the majority of participants (25) had become independent learners, relying mainly on various books, the Internet and other Muslims for their Islamic knowledge. Sonia (26) believes that heritage Muslims do not appreciate how difficult it is to study Islam, as they take it for granted that they have been raised with Islamic knowledge, whereas converts have to work harder and seek the knowledge from the beginning, in most cases without help. The problem here is that individuals may easily be led astray by interpretations they find difficult to understand and implement into their lives, primarily because what they read goes against their western principles, or simply does not make sense. Ahmed (1), for example, who was first approached and advised by Salafi Muslims, struggled with many of their literal understandings of various Quran verses and Hadiths, and believed that more interpretation was needed for the verses to make sense and be suitable, or more flexible, for non-Arab Muslims.

Salafi scholars are known to reject any individual autonomous initiative in interpreting The Quran and the Hadiths according to contemporary needs, and thus new scholarly interpretations provided to help twentieth-century Muslims understand Islam more easily are perceived by Salafis to be false (Roy, 2004: 232–243). Many converts found it very difficult and almost impossible to practise seventh-century Islam in Britain, which Salafis follow. Mark (33), for example, felt that the lifestyle many Salafis want to lead does not suit Britain or the modern age. ‘It’s a part of human nature to adapt. I mean we can’t live like eighteenth century Victorians [*sic*] in modern-day Britain that would be absurd but that’s unfortunately what a lot of Muslims are doing.’ He said that many converts were given Islamic opinions by Salafis on various rulings that belonged to a different time, a different context and a different culture, which confused them and made their lives as Muslims difficult. Some converts, such as Lauren (20) joined Salafi groups at the start of their conversion, as the lack of Muslim culture in them appealed to

them and they believed they were following a 'purer' form of Islam not affected by other influences, however it was found that many would eventually leave Salafi groups, as their understandings of Islam were considered to be extreme and influenced by ancient Arabian culture. Therefore, it was found to be important for converts to have an idea of the social, geographical and cultural context in which The Quran was revealed, to help them understand the symbolism and cultural references made to Arabian tribes in The Quran at that time in order to extract the intended moral message. All scholars have argued that Islam inherited features from a pre-Islamic Arab tribal context, which has shaped the relational and regional culture that accompanied the spread of Islam.

Mistaking cultural for Islamic practices was a common problem with young converts in particular, such as Ruqayya (9) and Zaynab (30), which contributed to their hardships, as no one taught them how to identify and separate them. It was found that some Muslim cultural practices and attitudes were discriminative, oppressive and illogical, which caused major problems for many uneducated converts who decided to leave Islam. Zaynab said:

The negative impacts were not so much Islam, it is the culture of Arabs. Being married to an Arab was slightly confusing, for years I had mixed up the culture they had with Islam. What I thought was Islam was actually cultural practices, it was not until years later after my divorce that I began to learn the difference.

Fatima (2) was also often confused, as she felt she was unable to judge for herself what was right and wrong because she did not have enough knowledge; however, educated participants such as David (19) were more likely to consult a Muslim scholar or someone highly qualified and confirm if certain practices and attitudes were Islamic before making any decisions or taking any actions.

It may be argued that those who study Islam independently, such as Lina (22), without the help of scholars or academics, might find problems if they were to analyse The Quran and Hadiths in a manner that was not suitable or justified for the process of interpretation, or if their personal opinions conflict with the fundamental teachings of Islam. Individuals read material and understand it in a variety of ways, which may make for misunderstandings. For example, some individuals may interpret some Islamic texts from a feminist or anti-feminist perspective, and as a result regard each other's points of

view as being ‘incorrect’ understandings, and this may lead to social issues and conflicts between Muslims. This indicates that The Quran and Hadiths can be interpreted and perceived in different ways according to the gender, biases, experiences, needs, personality, personal views and culture of individuals, alongside their values, geographical environment, educational level and Muslim sect, which can be problematic on both a personal and social level.

A few participants (Fatima, 2; Maria, 5; Khadija, 6; Mark, 33) faced issues with Muslim sects because they had been unaware of their differences in teachings and practices. The four main sects found in Britain are Sunni, Shi’a, Sufi and Ahmadi (Sardar and Yassin-Kassab, 2014). As London is a multicultural/faith city, people are likely to come across different types of Muslims at work, universities and activity groups, but not know the difference between them on account of a lack of Islamic knowledge. Mark (33), who assumed he was a Sunni Muslim, learned a year after his conversion that he was in fact a Sufi Muslim. ‘My colleagues at work were also Sufi Muslims and so I didn’t really know the difference at the time between them and other Muslims. I thought that every Muslim was a Sunni Muslim, as I didn’t really understand how sects worked.’ He spoke of the issues he had had with the Sufi group of which he was a member, as he was growing increasingly uncomfortable with its practices and felt he had been emotionally brainwashed. For example, he mentioned how he would be upgraded by the Sheikh to higher levels of spirituality the more he followed Sufi practices. ‘The more advanced I was getting the more cult-like the practices were becoming.’ Mark noticed the Sufi members had a deep attachment to the Sheikh, treated him as a holy middle man to God, and had to get permission from him to do many things, such as get married or travel abroad. He said that the more he questioned this and Sufi practices, the more he was told he was having ‘satanic thoughts’. Mark also felt uncomfortable with the loud chanting of God’s names, which he found exhausting. ‘I was having serious doubts at this time about Islam.’ GeriAnn Galanti (1993: 1) said, ‘Cult life involves much ritual behavior (Rcomplex) but de-emphasizes intellectual processes (neocortex)’, and ‘Cults often emphasize ritual chanting, meditation, or prayer. It is well known that repetition induces trancelike altered states of consciousness’ (Galanti, 1993: 3). She also suggests that cults tend to hook their members emotionally, which reduces the chances of members asking questions, doubting the beliefs, and perceiving the practices either critically or intellectually. Previous studies on the Moonies, Hare Krishna movements and other cult groups, (for example, Appel, 1983) showed that many members were

impressed by the closed cult communities and felt obliged to stay in them, as they were taught that the only path to salvation was through the cult and that to leave would be a great sin. It is therefore argued that had Mark consulted trusted, renowned and qualified Muslims and taken his time to study Islam more broadly prior to conversion, he would have known about the various sects and what to expect. He would also have had different experiences if he had joined mainstream Sunni Islam and practised his faith in his own society. However, as a result of his experiences with Muslims and the confusions he faced Mark decided to leave his life as a Muslim behind.

While many scholars and academics, such as Tariq Ramadan (2004; 1999), claim there is no one ‘true’ Islam to follow and that there is a spectrum of acceptable beliefs and practices suitable for various geographical contexts, circumstances and cultures, many converts are often made to believe otherwise. Each sect claims to follow the true Islam, even though some involve cult-like practices and laws that have been claimed by many renowned Muslim scholars not to be a part of Islam. As a result, independent learners often become confused when they read information from a variety of websites and Islamic books given to them by *dawah* preachers from different Muslim sects, who differ with regard to many Islamic opinions on jurisprudence. Ryan (18) provides an example of religious Shi’a Muslims who appear in the news in *Muharram* (the first month of the lunar Islamic calendar), in which many in Iraq, Iran and Pakistan are seen to stab, hit and wound themselves out of traditional mourning for Imam Hussein (a grandson of The Prophet Muhammad), who was martyred in The Battle of Karbala in Iraq. Sunni Muslims, however, are against mourning for the dead in this way, but those who are not sufficiently educated in Islam would not know this and may assume this to be the practice of all Muslims. Therefore, this study suggests that people and converts who wish to gain a neutral understanding of Islam need to study the life of The Prophet Muhammad, who set the prime example of how to live as a Muslim (see 11.7) alongside the ideologies of different sects, so that individuals may compare and study the differences in beliefs, interpretations and opinions.

Aside from terrorist attacks and wars, people often question such violent ‘Islamic’ mourning practices, for example, and wonder why people would want to convert. Ryan (18) argued that if people do not get a bad image of Islam and Muslims from the media, they are likely to get it from reading material based on more extreme interpretations of Islam. He therefore highlights the need for the distribution of moderate and broad

interpretations of Islamic literature, which are in line with western values that people can relate to, so that non-Muslims may gain a more balanced understanding of the faith.

11.5 Advanced Islamic Education

According to this study, seven participants (Ahmed, 1; Aisha, 4; Robert, 14; Ryan, 18; David, 19; George, 28; Karen, 29) became advanced knowledge seekers and studied scholarly works before and after conversion. They were all able to understand the Arabic language and could identify the differences between various opinions of Islamic teachings, Muslim sects, the four schools of thought/jurisprudence, interpretations of The Quran and Hadiths, cultural and political motives, and other religious theologies. This is usually achieved through university studies, independent research with the guidance of a scholar or scholarly teachings over a number of years, and by attending intensive Islamic and Arabic courses. This section will explore the advantages that advanced learning gave some of the participants and how it influenced their attitudes and identities.

It was noticed that an individual's level of education is likely to influence the uptake of opportunities in higher studies to learn more about Islam at both an advanced academic and intellectual level, and produces different outcomes regarding an individual's ability to interpret and understand Islamic texts. This will usually affect their identity, attitudes, behaviour, social groups and the way they deal with personal issues. For example, those who have a more philosophical and academic view of Islam are likely to attract like-minded Muslims to socialise with, and will live in a different way from those who are not highly educated, live in Muslim communities and rely on other Muslims for religious information and advice that may be incorrect or influenced by culture.

As a result of his confusions, Ahmed (1) applied to study Islam and Arabic at university and with a western Muslim scholar he trusted to find what he believed would be the correct understanding of Islam. This emphasises the importance of identity continuity, by being able to understand Islamic texts in a manner comfortable for him without being pressurised to make any dramatic identity changes and accept other interpretations that he does not agree with. Ahmed compared his new academic understanding of Islam with previous teachings he was told to follow, and found Islam,

contrary to Salafi teachings, to be flexible and applicable to any person in any context. Tariq Ramadan (2004) says that while the revealed rites of religious practices are fixed, leaving no room for interpretation, such as the daily prayers, the wider area of human affairs is open for interpretations, as everything is permitted except for that which is explicitly forbidden. This makes the scope for the exercise of reason and creativity huge in contrast to matters pertaining to religious practices, and Ramadan claims that people have complete discretion to experiment, progress and reform, as long as they avoid what is forbidden. It was thus found that the advanced learners who had studied the interpretations of western scholars were able to find different and trustworthy understandings of Islam that were more suited to their environments and circumstances.

Sunni Muslims are advised by scholars to follow a school of jurisprudence to make sure they are adhering to a sound understanding of The Quran and Hadiths. It is advised they choose a school of thought followed by the majority of people in their country or community to avoid conflicts and confusions regarding religious opinions and rulings. Each of the four Sunni schools of thought had been taught by Imams in different parts of the world, which encouraged the spreading of Islamic teachings and knowledge to other places via their students. Imam Malik's school of jurisprudence is taught in North Africa (Kitab Al-Muwatta); Al-Shafi's school of jurisprudence is taught in Egypt (Kitab-ul-Umm); and Abu Hanifa's school of jurisprudence is taught in Asia (Kitab-ul-Aasaar). These three Imams/Scholars lived during the first three generations of Islam, and Imam Hanbal in the fourth generation (Haddad, 2007). The Hanbali school of thought is taught in Saudi Arabia and most Gulf countries (Kitab-ul-Musnad). The lives of these scholars were dedicated to learning the Hadiths, taken from authenticated and verified chains of trustworthy narrators, so that they could explain the teachings of The Quran to people in a clear and comprehensible manner. The scholars all agreed on the five pillars of Islam (see 7.1), such as fasting the month of *Ramadan* and the five daily prayers; some, however, disagreed on other issues, such as marriage and divorce procedures. Each scholar established his opinion to the best of his ability, by making sure each Hadith narration received was genuine. For example, a Hadith may be categorised as weak because the narrator's degree of truthfulness or integrity is in question, or the narrator was known to have a tendency to forget and its accuracy is therefore questionable. Because of this it is found that not all narrations are the same for the subject under discussion. Thus Imam Malik may have received a genuine Hadith that stated that The Prophet was seen praying with a hat on his head, while Imam

Hanbal also received a genuine Hadith that stated The Prophet was seen praying without a hat. Based on the two different narrations received, scholars will teach two different interpretations to the people. Therefore, many Muslims following the Malki school of thought in Morocco pray with a hat, while those following the Hanbali school of thought in Saudi Arabia pray without, and both are deemed to be correct. Although they may differ in opinion regarding various Islamic subjects, evidence is always provided to support their understanding of The Quran and Hadiths. It is not, however, deemed to be correct in Islam to take what suits a person from the different schools, as this may create social and religious conflicts. Shi'a Muslims, on the other hand, do not acknowledge any of the four schools, and only follow Islamic teachings they believe come from the narrations of The Prophet Muhammad's direct blood relatives; they being the twelve Imams (Corbin, 1993: 45–51). As a result, scholars from different sects differ regarding the authentic nature of many Hadiths and their narrators. For example, some scholars base some of their opinions on what are considered by others to be weak Hadiths, while other scholars refuse any narration that is considered to be weak or false. Only those who had obtained an advanced education were able to recognise or know the difference between the opinions of scholars regarding weak and strong Hadiths.

Advanced Sunni Muslim converts tend to follow a school of thought they believe to be compatible with western values, whereas heritage Muslims follow a school of thought or sect according to family tradition. Olivier Roy (2004: 28) argues that religion is not an established church or academic institution. 'Knowledge of the truth is achieved through personal faith, not through years of theological learning, nor through obedience to religious scholars and clerics.' However, contrary to Roy's opinion, many converts prefer to follow scholars and Imams who are perceived to understand Islam properly and are therefore likely to show obedience to their teachings they believe to be authentic. This may, however, induce some people, such as Lauren (20) to understand and follow Islamic teachings only in the way they are taught, without any independent thinking, which might at times be problematic. Although Lauren had studied Islam with scholars, she was not perceived in this study to be an advanced learner, as she only studied Salafi teachings and neglected others. Reputable scholars encourage Muslims and converts in particular to use their intellect, investigate and trust their gut instinct if they are confused about Islamic matters and the opinions of others, to avoid problems. For example, if Muslims or a scholar claims that Muslims cannot be friends with non-Muslims then it is advised that the individual studies the subject further in order to

verify, challenge or reject this opinion. However, as Lauren was told that she could not challenge or reject Salafi understandings of Islam, she lived a difficult and miserable life, as she had to accept rulings that went against her personal, social and British values, which eventually led her to de-convert.

The study shows that an advanced education along with the guidance of western Muslim scholars helped individuals to create their own 'British Islam' and British Muslim identity in their own non-Muslim environments. This reflected positively on their families and friends who acknowledged the positive changes and improvements in the new identities of converts and made them perceive Islam in a different manner.

11.5.1 Learning Arabic

Scholars often advise Muslims, advanced learners especially, to learn Arabic in order to fully comprehend The Quran and Hadiths and overcome the linguistic issues found in many interpretations and translations. Anne-Sofie Roald (2001: 32–59) mentioned that traditional scholars in the past, such as Jalal Al Din Al-Sayufi, an Egyptian commentator on The Quran in the fifteenth century, have insisted that being highly proficient in the Arabic language is one of the essential conditions for being able to interpret The Quran. This is because Islamic terms and the various linguistic contexts they appear in convey many connotations and meanings that demand a profound mastery of Arabic for The Quran and Hadiths to be adequately understood.

All the advanced learners studied Arabic in an attempt to understand Islam in its entirety. Those who possessed a high level of intellectual and language skills had the advantage of being able to analyse The Prophet's biography and The Quran in an academic manner, which helped them to obtain a deeper understanding of detailed scholarly works that others might struggle with. It was found that only advanced learners in this study were able to challenge what they perceived to be inaccurate, poorly translated and interpreted, incomplete or misleading because of their knowledge of both the Arabic and English languages, The Prophet's biography and scholarly opinions. They also possessed research and academic skills to enable them to interpret and critically analyse the Islamic texts in ways others, including Arabs living in Arab countries, could not, on account of the differences in personal western values, gender opportunities, learning methods and social culture.

Ahmed (1) believes that every potential convert and Muslim should learn Arabic, as it is the language that unifies the Muslim world (*Ummah*) and is needed to achieve a better and deeper understanding of The Quran and Hadiths. Learning Arabic helps people to avoid relying on poorly translated books and people who may be ignorant or extremist, as a result of manipulating rulings and meanings that are taken out of context. It also helps individuals to identify misunderstood words that are used to justify actions that are claimed to be Islamic but are in fact influenced by other factors, such as politics and culture. Ahmed (1) and Aisha (4) found it important to learn Arabic from a native speaker, rather than independently in order to perfect the pronunciation of letters and words and be corrected when making mistakes. For example, a word compiled of the two letters ح and ب can be read as *hob* (حُب) or *hab* (حَب) ; *hob* meaning love and *hab* meaning seeds, depending on the use of written and verbal grammar and Arabic vowel marks. Therefore, it is important to be corrected so as not to alter the meaning of a verse or sentence. Another example is the word *jihad*, which can have different meanings in different contexts; it can either be interpreted as one's personal struggle and efforts to overcome hardships and sins, or holy war against transgressing disbelievers.

Aisha (4) said, 'I believe every Muslim should learn Arabic in order to study The Quran and obtain Islamic knowledge independently. It definitely makes a difference in terms of what kind of Muslim you turn out to be.' Here it is interesting to see how the Islamic literature, translations and scholarly opinions that people choose to follow determine the 'type' of Muslims they become. For example, individuals who joined Muslim gangs were more likely to follow the harsher, stricter and literal interpretations of Islam than those who chose to follow the interpretations of moderate and spiritual scholars who oppose violence, oppression, patriarchy and who focus on coexistence and promoting peace. David (19) regularly followed the teachings and courses run by Hamza Yusuf and attended Arabic courses so that he could read the biography of The Prophet Muhammad alongside the works of different scholars, which helped him to differentiate between opinions. George (28), alongside attending professional Islamic and Arabic classes, studied with a scholar who taught him about The Prophet and different scholarly opinions available, which helped him to choose a school of thought/jurisprudence (Malki) that he could follow and implement in his life. George had also married an educated British Arab woman who helped him with his studies.

Robert (14) studied religious theologies at university and was drawn to the scientific facts found in The Quran. He later decided to study Arabic to understand it (The Quran) better and claimed that the scientific explanations of human nature and the universe as a whole were expressed in a deeper and more intimate manner in Arabic than in English, which added an element of spirituality to his studies. 'I was emotionally moved by some details in The Quran, such as how a baby is formed in the womb and these details have so much more meaning when read in Arabic.' Ryan (18), who studied Islam and Arab history at university had also recognised that there was a significant difference between reading the Torah in English and reading it in Hebrew, and this encouraged him to learn Arabic in order to study The Quran during his research. 'I can speak Hebrew, as my parents took us to Jewish schools on the weekends and my parents sometimes speak it at home and because of this I am able to understand most of the Torah without having to read it in English.' He claimed that it was more meaningful, intimate and spiritual for him to read The Quran in its original Arabic language, as it was thus revealed by The Prophet to the Arabs. Karen (29), a university lecturer, claimed to be emotionally moved by an audio recitation of The Quran, and although she did not understand why, she felt inspired to study Arabic at university. 'For the first time I heard the most beautiful Quran recitation ever. It made me cry even though I couldn't understand what he was reading and why I was crying; something about the way he read really touched my heart. I can't explain it; it was just amazing.' Karen mentioned that her Arabic speaking colleagues had helped her to understand the meanings of various Quran verses, which made her realise that there was a lack of deep meaning and accuracy in the English translations.

The issue many people find with translations of any works that need to be read and understood in their original language is that they do not provide the exact meaning of the original. The translator often has to interpret the meaning as well as render it in a new language, which makes it an approximation of the original meaning, since words, ways of thinking, ideas, connotations, context, grammar and sentence structures cannot always be expressed identically in different languages. It is argued that Arabic is a very rich language in which words have many shades of meaning, and often requires more words in a foreign language to get the desired meaning across. This detracts from the simplicity of The Quranic language and message, as Arabic idioms and the weight of the words are sometimes difficult to translate, understand and put into English words. Another issue may be that the translator is fluent in classical Arabic, but may not be

familiar with the nuances of the foreign language in which The Quran needs to be translated. Therefore, the challenge is to find a translation that is both linguistically and spiritually as accurate as possible, which leads some scholars to raise concerns as to whether or not The Quran is translatable.

Many scholars have raised concerns regarding the use of translations in the daily prayers. The four Imams agreed that the prayers, which include the recitation of various Quran verses, need to be recited in Arabic for the purpose of generating meaning, spirituality and communication with God (Quran, 10: 57; 41: 44; 43: 3). It may therefore be suggested that translations are meant mainly for informing non-Muslims or new Muslims about the faith to make the principles of Islam and the teachings of The Prophet Muhammad clear to them. Muslims who do not have the opportunity, time or ability to learn Arabic, are advised by scholars to learn the basics for use in the prayers and other worship rituals, which is considered to be sufficient. They are also advised to follow the teachings of specialised and highly qualified scholars who are fluent in at least one language in addition to classical Arabic. This is beneficial for *dawah* and ensures the passing of knowledge in a correct and clear manner to others.

11.6 The Prophet Muhammad's Biography

Reading an English translation of The Prophet Muhammad's biography, the most popular being *The Sealed Nectar* (Al-Mubarkpuri, 2002), greatly affected some of the participants (for example, Ahmed, 1; David, 19; Sonia, 26; Jack, 27) who either converted as a result of what they had read (see 6.4) or learnt more about Islam from it after conversion. Jack (27) began to read the biographies of other prophets mentioned in The Quran too, after being inspired by The Prophet Muhammad, and claimed that each prophet came with the same belief of monotheism but with different moral teachings. He was also inspired and made the effort to learn Arabic so he could read and understand The Quran and Hadiths better. Although he found this a difficult task, he gained many spiritual benefits and appreciated The Quran more. The knowledge that Jack gained was reflected in his character and lifestyle, which changed for the better, and he claimed to have learned a lot about Islamic history, The Prophet's Companions and his family members and the four Caliphs. He also enjoyed attending lectures given by scholars who displayed characteristics and attitudes of The Prophet that he admired,

and they helped him to verify his understandings of, or explain, various aspects of the biography, Islamic jurisprudence and The Quran that he did not fully understand.

Converts who were familiar with The Prophet's biography tended to avoid those who did not display much, or any, moral conduct when preaching and teaching people about Islam, as the latter reflected their poor understanding of The Prophet Muhammad's life and attitudes. Ryan (18) and David (19) found it important to have role models in their lives because they encouraged them to be better people. Many participants felt drawn to the teachings of inspirational, modern and moderate scholars who were also once converts to Islam, such as Hamza Yusuf and Timothy Winter (Abdul-Hakim Murad), alongside the teachings of young scholars such as Mufti Ismail Menk, who has a light sense of humour and highly educated lecturers, such as Tariq Ramadan, Jeffrey Lang and Nouman Ali Khan, who regularly address the difficulties new Muslims face in western societies. It is argued that young western scholars are more appealing than heritage Muslim scholars to British converts, as they are able to relate to the religious and cultural issues new Muslims face in a western context and offer solutions and advice for the various identity integration problems that arise. Hamza Yusuf was reported in the *Guardian* to be 'arguably the West's most influential Islamic scholar' (O'Sullivan, 2001). He converted to Islam when he was aged seventeen and spent many years studying Islamic jurisprudence, philosophy and classical Arabic, to better understand The Quran and Hadiths with some of the world's most prominent scholars to reach the level of knowledge and understanding of Islam that he has today.

Yusuf (2015) and Ashraf (1978), along with the experiences of the participants, show that knowing God and The Prophet Muhammad through a deep and intimate connection with The Quran and biography is an important part of being a moral Muslim and gaining knowledge. Muslim scholars consider it important for Muslims to study the lives of the prophets, The Prophet Muhammad especially, as there are many examples of how he lived, treated people, acted and dealt with situations that people can learn from: 'There has certainly been for you in the Messenger of *Allah* an excellent role model for anyone whose hope is in *Allah* and the Last Day and [who] remembers *Allah* often' (Quran, 33: 21). If Muslims take The Prophet Muhammad as a role model, they may perhaps ask themselves at every juncture in their lives what he would have done to live peacefully, morally, successfully and in a manner that is pleasing to God (Quran, 4: 59). It may therefore be argued that those who wish to follow and have a neutral

understanding of Islam must study the life of The Prophet who lived every aspect of his life according to Islamic laws, virtues and values. Islam also encourages people to explore the intellect that God gave them by learning about science, His creations, skills and other worldly knowledge.

11.7 What Constitutes a Sufficient and Broad Islamic Education?

It was found that converts were more likely to be independent learners than advanced learners because they did not have the time, academic advantages, or opportunities to study with scholars and in Islamic schools. Therefore, it was important for them to find a way in which they could learn about Islam independently but also in a broad manner that helps them understand Islam in its entirety. Based on the findings and experiences of all participants, this chapter proposes an Islamic educational procedure that is sufficient, obtainable and suitable for the majority, if not all, converts to live peacefully and happily as British Muslims.

The study found that reading an English translation of The Prophet's biography (*The Sealed Nectar*, Al-Mubarkpuri, 2002) first before an authenticated translation of The Quran was the best way for new Muslims to educate themselves about the faith without getting distracted or confused by other opinions, especially because the majority of converts in this study did not follow a school of thought/jurisprudence or know what it was. Those who had read the biography before The Quran tended to share the same or similar opinions of Islam, but those who had read The Quran first differed in their interpretations of the verses, as they did not fully understand what they mean. The biography helped to correct any misunderstandings and explained the verses of The Quran and their purposes according to their appropriate contexts. Such education encouraged converts to explore Islamic teachings and experiment in ways in which they could integrate Islamic beliefs and practices in their societies. Also, those who were unable to learn Arabic for various reasons confirmed their religious understandings with renowned Arabic-speaking western scholars and teachers who also helped them to comprehend The Quran and biography in a sound and efficient manner. These scholars often followed a particular school of thought/jurisprudence, which helped the converts to know, for example, which teachings to follow regarding how to pray, how to get married, and how to perform the *Hajj* pilgrimage.

Jack (27), who only has GCSE qualifications, demonstrates how it is fairly easy, as an independent learner, to understand Islam, be a good Muslim, and know God and The Prophet by reading the biography before The Quran and following the teachings of western scholars. He claimed that reading the biography and the biographies of other prophets transformed many aspects of his life, improved his character, and helped him to find solutions to his problems. It was interesting to find that his attitude, understanding of Islam, and way of life was similar to that of Ahmed (1) who is an advanced learner, despite the gap in age, educational and social level. It is suggested that this is because of the way in which the biography has been simplified and written in order to educate a wide audience from different age groups and backgrounds.

Many Islamic schools/classes for children and adults in Britain have been criticised by educated Muslims for focusing too much on grades and memorisation rather than teaching the meaning of The Quran, encouraging critical thinking, and guiding the characters of people to become like that of The Prophet. Black and Dylan (1988: 4) state that one of the negative impacts of assessment in western schools has been that the giving of grades has been over-emphasised, whereas imparting useful moral advice has been under-emphasised. It is therefore important that students are given the space, opportunities and critical thinking skills to study Islamic literature, and open debates and discussions on interpretations they may find extreme and/or problematic, rather than be pressurised to learn Arabic and conform to practices, accept specific interpretations of jurisprudence, and be assessed solely by grades and memorisation skills. The role of successful teachers, Imams or scholars should therefore be to set excellent examples of Muslims to their students by adopting the character traits, qualities, attitudes and conduct of The Prophet to help influence the personal and positive development of students' national-religious identity. Additionally, the study suggests that missionaries, mosques and organisations provide support and active workshops for converts in order to teach them how to practise Islam (such as how to wear a *hijab*, pray and read The Quran) if they are unable to teach themselves independently via books and online video/audio tutorials.

11.8 Summary

This chapter highlights the difficulties most participants faced with regard to educational support, either because they could not find suitable classes or because they had become confused, as a result of being given too much and/or misleading information and not knowing how to separate Muslim cultural practices from religious practices. It was found that an individual's general understanding of Islam, whether from school, taken from experiences with Muslims, or from an advanced study of the faith, had an overall effect on the mindset of an individual prior to and after conversion, as some understandings were more moderate and western than others.

Some of the Salafi teachings in particular were considered to be too strict, which caused converts to drift away from Islam because they found it difficult to practise the religion, as it stripped them of their 'Britishness' and isolated them from their friends and families. Many participants also experienced difficulties accepting various Islamic opinions and interpretations provided by traditional scholars from different sects. Therefore, to study and understand The Quran and Hadiths properly and in their entirety, it was found that a broad Islamic education was needed.

The study found that those converts who were taught or who had read the biography of The Prophet Muhammad first and later linked its teachings to The Quran were able to understand Islam better and tended to share the same opinions, as the biography explained the contents of The Quran. This eliminated many misunderstandings and made them believe they were following the 'right' and 'true' Islam, whereas those who read The Quran before the biography differed in their opinions regarding the meaning of the verses. The study found that participants who had obtained a broad Islamic education were more confident and happier British Muslims than those who had not, as they had found ways of solving their problems and had managed to develop national-religious identities that balanced all of their important values. Many individuals also preferred to follow the teachings and opinions of western scholars, such as Abdullah Quilliam and Hamza Yusuf, who could relate to their challenges and concerns because they applied western values to their interpretations of Islamic texts, which made Islamic practices and values easier to integrate in their usual everyday lives. It also helped them to avoid making drastic changes to accommodate Islam, which might have caused

personal and social problems. Some participants were also inspired to learn Arabic after hearing The Quran, reading the biography, or after studying Islam at university.

A few participants decided to further their studies to an advanced level so they could avoid confusions and independently grow as Muslims without needing to rely on others. The advanced learners were more aware of The Prophet Muhammad's biography, Muslim sects, the four schools of thought/jurisprudence, different interpretations of The Quran and the Arabic language, which helped them to separate Islamic teachings from political and cultural practices. Learning Arabic was beneficial for those who wanted to understand The Quran and Hadiths at a deeper level. However, it was not an easy task and only seven participants managed to do so.

Chapter XII

Leaving Islam

12.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the experiences of five participants (Lauren, 20; Lina, 22; Janet, 32; Mark, 33; Luke, 34) who chose to de-convert from Islam, and analyses the main turning points and reasons for their disaffiliation to provide a better insight and understanding of the de-conversion process. Usama Hasan, a part-time Imam and senior researcher at the counter extremism think-tank the Quilliam Foundation, said, ‘Many converts leave the faith. We don't have exact statistics but some stats say fifty per cent will leave within a few years’ (Shahid, 2013). Numerous articles (for example, Raiyaan, 2012) found that a large number of individuals who de-converted from Islam had cited bad experiences with Muslims and lack of community support as the main reasons for this. This thesis, however, argues that the main reason for de-conversion among participants was the lack of a broad Islamic education, both prior to and after conversion, which was reflected in the reasons given for their decisions to de-convert.

Simon Cottee (2015), Scot McKnight (2008), James Richardson (1991), David Bromley (1988), Helen Ebaugh (1988) and Bryan Wilson (1982) have studied the lives of apostates from different faith groups and the motivating factors/reasons behind their de-conversions. During their research they found that apostates often suffer during the de-conversion process, and in a few cases take on the role of the ‘whistleblower’ in private and/or in public. The ‘whistleblower’ is known as someone who exposes their bad experiences and the faults of their former groups to fuel and influence negative public opinion about the group and its members; which causes various types of social harm to the former community. This is usually rewarded by groups in conflict with the former group, such as anti-religious/cult organisations (Vandekerckhove, 2006). Armand Mauss (1969) defines true apostates as those who exit their religious group and have access to oppositional organisations that sponsor their careers and validate their negative opinions and experiences.

This chapter fits in with Rambo's (1993) consequences stage, which analyses the repercussions people faced as a result of their conversion to Islam. It was found that

Ebaugh's (1988) theory of ex-nuns that describes four stages of de-conversion was suitable to use in the analysis of the participants' de-conversion stages. They are, (1) first doubts, (2) seeking and weighing role alternatives, (3) a turning point and (4) establishing an ex-role identity. In this study however it was found that stage two often came before stage three.

12.2 Apostasy in Islam

The Arabic word for apostasy is *riddah*, meaning 'rejection' or 'turning away'. In Islam, it is considered a profound insult to God and a great crime of blasphemy, and results in a person being damned in this life and the next. It is also perceived as a betrayal of the community to which an individual belongs and to which loyalty is owed. An individual born of Muslim parents who rejects Islam is called a *murtad fitri* (natural apostate), and a person who converts to Islam and later rejects the religion is called a *murtad milli* (community apostate) (Ibn Warraq, 2007). Apostasy in Islam falls into two main categories: converting to another religion, or openly disbelieving in all or parts of The Quran (Shafaat, 2006).

Apostasy in Islam may be identified by open public actions and beliefs, such as becoming atheist, adopting a new religious identity or religious symbols (such as the cross) to indicate a conversion, denying the existence or attributes of God, rejecting The Quran and prophets, making what is permissible forbidden and vice versa, denying established principles and laws in Islam such as the daily prayers, mocking Islam, The Prophet and God, being involved in idol worship and promoting un-Islamic behaviour.

Since some of these issues have always been the subject of significant and persistent disagreement among Muslim scholars, it is difficult to establish the definitive and categorical view by which all other views are to be judged. ... It would therefore logically follow that where there is no consensus on an issue, apostasy is not possible on that count (Marshall, 2013).

Religious sins, such as murder (Quran, 5: 32), fornication (Quran, 24: 2) and stealing (Quran, 5: 38) have prescribed worldly punishments, however, despite the fact The Quran refers to the issue of apostasy a number of times (2: 217, 3: 86–90, 4: 88–91; 4:

137, 9: 66, 9: 74, 16: 106–109, 47: 25–27) it does not prescribe any worldly punishment for it, which presumes the death penalty is not necessarily considered part of *Shariah* law, depending on individual understandings of The Quran and Hadiths. Many Muslim scholars agree that a worldly punishment for apostasy is not mentioned in The Quran, however, a punishment for it in the hereafter is (Quran, 3:90; 16:106) (Farooq, 2007). An example of a Quran verse that promotes religious freedom is ‘There is no compulsion in religion’ (2: 256). However, in verse (5: 33) it is said that, ‘Those who wage war against God and His Messenger and [the Muslims] and strive with might for mischief throughout the land [society] will have the worldly punishment of exile, or the cutting of hands and feet or execution’, and some people may understand that this applies to apostates. However, the majority of Muslim scholars claim that this verse is applicable only to apostate ‘whistleblowers’, who openly declare their disaffiliation, become enemies of Islam and spread corruption. Death is considered an option for extreme cases, but it is not the only penalty, and certainly not for those who choose to live peaceful lives after de-conversion. The Quran (4:90) states, ‘...So if they remove themselves from you and do not fight you and offer you peace, then *Allah* has not made for you a cause [for fighting] against them’, which means that The Quran specifically prohibits killing the disbelievers and apostates who want to live in peaceful terms with the Muslims (Shafaat, 2006).

Sheikh Muhammad Al Munajjid (2010: 20327), the owner of the islam-qa website, openly states that not enforcing the death penalty on apostates may ‘encourage others to forsake the truth’, whereas other renowned and influential Muslim scholars, such as Abu Hanifa and Sufyan Al-Thawri, have argued against the death penalty, instead prescribing indefinite imprisonment until repentance, so disaffiliates’ disbelief will not spread among weaker Muslims (Saeed, 2004). Abdullah and Hassan Saeed (2004) argue that those who claim Islamic law enforces the death penalty for apostasy are in conflict with a variety of fundamental tenets of Islam. Nevertheless, despite the fact that executions and physical punishments for apostasy are currently rare and illegal in many countries, apostates continue to suffer from abuse, discrimination and stigmatisation in, and from, Muslim communities (CEMB (2007); Faith Freedom (2001)).

The British Indian public figure and writer Salman Rushdie is an example of a Muslim-born apostate who was perceived by Muslim communities to be a ‘whistleblower’ and was sentenced to death by the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 for publishing

a book entitled *The Satanic Verses* (Weatherby, 1990: 126). Some Muslims found the book offensive, as it mocks beliefs that developed in early Islamic history and questions the nature of the revelation process. It is a transformed re-narration of the life of The Prophet Muhammad, in which The Prophet first proclaims a revelation in favour of the old polytheistic deities but later renounces this as an error induced by Satan. Many Muslims found the book to be blasphemous, even though Rushdie claimed it was about immigration, divided selves and attempts to investigate conflicts between religious and secular viewpoints rather than about Islam (Netton, 1996).

A UK Poll by Policy Exchange (2007) on British Muslims found that thirty-six per cent of sixteen to twenty-four year-olds believe if a Muslim converts to another religion they should be punished by death, compared with nineteen per cent of over-fifty-five's, which is worrying for many people who wish to leave Islam or who are already disaffiliates. Committees for ex-Muslims (such as CEMB and Faith Freedom) that provide support, legal protection and a platform of communication for ex-Muslims have received numerous death threats, and individuals have faced abuse, blackmail, violence, emotional trauma and murder at the hands of some radical Muslims who perceive apostasy to be treason, betrayal and an attack on Islam and its honour (Rusin, 2008).

Although worldwide research has been carried out on converts to Islam and apostates, little attention has been paid to the social, personal and identity challenges Muslim converts face when they decide to leave Islam. Closeted disaffiliates in particular, who were/are forced to live with a Muslim identity to protect themselves, often have emotional, psychological and health issues that people are unaware of. It is important, therefore, to identify and analyse the context and reasons behind de-conversion to create an awareness of the difficulties western converts experience to change religious and cultural perceptions, attitudes and punishments for apostasy. It is suggested that individuals who decided to leave Islam peacefully without threatening or harming the Muslim community, as a result of their bad experiences with Muslims, and/or their ignorance or misunderstanding of Islamic teachings, and a lack of support from Muslims during their hardships, should be helped rather than punished. This chapter enables the reader to enter the mind of the convert, so that the de-conversion journey is understood from an apostate's rather than an outsider's perspective.

12.3 Intellectual Doubts and Turning Points

Experiencing intellectual and religious doubts is considered to be the first stage of the de-conversion process in Ebaugh's (1988) theory. It was found that all the participants who had decided to de-convert experienced intellectual doubts as a result of the hardships they faced, whether with Muslims, society, family, The Quran and Hadiths, or on a personal level. The participants often questioned Islamic teachings when they encountered problems they found difficult to deal with, such as being pressured to conform to Islamic practices they did not believe in or understand.

Lauren (20) mentioned that in her last few years as a Muslim, Islam had relatively less impact on her life, both spiritually and intellectually, until she decided to de-convert after a slow and gradual process of disaffiliation. 'First, it became more and more obvious [to me] that the Islamic teachings discriminated towards women and went against scientific facts and truths we have about our universe. I [first] tried to reconcile them, re-interpret it or just ignore it.' Lauren's literal understanding of The Quran was supported by her strict, cultural and patriarchal husband who, in her opinion, was practising Islam properly. As a result of her continuous hardships and failed attempts to connect with God and The Quran, she began to question His existence. Lauren felt that being a Muslim woman limited her choices a lot, since the dichotomy between *haram* (prohibited) and *halal* (permissible), alongside Islamic obligations, dominated and controlled her whole life. She also felt resentment towards Islam, as she understood that as a Muslim she could not have any relationships with her non-Muslim friends and family members, who had already abandoned her because of her strict Islamic lifestyle.

I lost a lot of years with my family, and a lot of years experiencing new people and new places, and basically bereft me of a lot of joyous moments in my life because your whole life had to revolve around worshiping God and thus following His commands. I lost all contact with my old friends because of my new radical lifestyle, which still has detrimental effects on my social and professional life.

Lauren described herself as a 'staunch Salafi Jihadist' in the first four to five years of her conversion, and wore the *burka* in public. She only started to 'calm down' two years

after her daughter's birth when she became more concerned with women's rights and feminism. According to a narration by Abu Hurairah, The Prophet Muhammad said: 'Religion is very easy, and whoever overburdens himself in his religion will not be able to continue in that way. So you should not be extremists, but try to be near perfection and receive the good tidings that you will be rewarded; and gain strength by offering the prayers in the mornings, afternoons and during the last hours of the night' (Sahih Bukhari, Book 2, Chapter 26, Number 37, p. 70). Dealing with radicalisation was a hardship that a minority of converts went through when they were under the influence of extremist Muslims around them, which created challenges in their everyday lives. The stress, emotional issues, and pressure to be good Muslims caused converts, women in particular, to rebel and de-convert. Some converts felt they were becoming more 'backward', because feminists had fought for the rights and freedom of women in modern-day western society, which had moved on from the limitations of gender roles. These, however, had been reinstated when they converted to Islam and married strict Muslim men. Lauren was unable to accept some Quran verses and Hadiths because she felt they went against her western values, ethics and principles. She attempted to justify or change their meanings to make them more acceptable for her, so as not to be perceived as a 'bad Muslim' for not accepting what was considered by traditional and renowned scholars to be authentic, however this triggered doubts in the faith.

One incident confronted the feelings, thoughts and doubts that Lauren had harboured for a long time when she criticised female circumcision as being part of *Shariah* law. She found this to contradict Islamic principles. A student of hers, however, had responded that if the Hadith was found in the Muslim or Bukhari collections then it had to be accepted without question, as the chain of narrators and transmission had been authenticated. 'That comment made me realise that I couldn't hide behind "different interpretations" any more and that I couldn't reconcile the Islamic texts with what I knew was right.' According to Sunni scholars, if the Hadiths were considered to be authentic, then the ruling of circumcision would depend on the context and why, for example, specific girls were circumcised, how they were circumcised, and during which times. According to some scholarly understandings, a circumcision was carried out in cases of severe health problems, that is, if a woman's life was at risk because of a disease that had reached the genitals (Asmani and Abdi, 2008).

As shown in section 10.3, some women faced hardships as a result of being victims of

gender discrimination, domestic violence and oppressive Muslim husbands. Lina (22) and Janet (32) disaffiliated because everything they had hoped to benefit from in an Islamic marriage and in acquiring a Muslim identity had been far from what they had experienced in reality. On account of her marital problems, Janet no longer felt any happiness when she read about Islam and the status of women, as she felt that none of it was true. She had judged the faith by the actions of Muslims and her emotional issues had become worse instead of better, which led her to revert back to her former life and identity. She also decided to burn her headscarves, along with pages from The Quran and her conversion certificate. 'I didn't believe in God any more. ... If this is what being a Muslim is like, then I don't want Islam.' Janet's main difficulty was dealing with the regret, disappointment and reality of the loss of her time, first marriage, and family/friendship ties for Islam.

The burning process has long been used as a ritual of release and signifies the eternal destruction of physical objects associated with a particular event, period, identity, someone, or social group in individuals' lives that no longer hold any significant, personal or sentimental value. By burning her things, Janet had relaxed psychologically and emotionally, as it meant she had put an end to her life as a Muslim. It is also an open psychological, spiritual and emotional declaration, in private or in public, of the choice to permanently 'let go' of something individuals once had an attachment to. Fire burns away the old, destroys memories and makes way for something new to grow and may invite a transformation of the self and identity. Lina (22) also mentioned 'getting rid' of the material things that were connected to her old Muslim identity. 'The first thing I did when I announced my de-conversion was put all my *hijabs*, prayer mat, Islamic clothing, Qurans and Islamic books in black bin bags and dumped them at the local mosque. I felt like I had relieved the burden from my shoulders.'

Luke (34) de-converted from Islam after experiencing racial discrimination on a number of occasions in the Muslim community (see 10.2), especially when proposing marriage to heritage Muslim women. He felt the *dawah* he received was misleading, as missionaries had sugar-coated the assumed benefits he would get by being a Muslim in the community. Luke blames himself, however, and wishes he had researched Islam better before converting, as he felt he had wasted his time. It is argued that had he researched Islam properly before conversion, his experiences as a Muslim might have been more positive, and that he would have been able to socialise with like-minded

people and be less affected by cultural attitudes that were mistaken for Islamic attitudes and practices. It is interesting to note that just as people may be attracted to Islam when seeing Muslims promote various benefits and set a high standard of manners, attitudes and moral behaviour, many converts are likely to de-convert if they witness and experience a poor standard of manners, attitudes and moral behaviour. Some participants questioned how converts could benefit from being Muslims when those around them were non-practising, unpleasant, hypocritical and took advantage of others. If people do not see anything positive in becoming members of a faith group, they will have no need for it. Mark (33) also suffered as a result of not researching Islam before he converted, as he had joined a Sufi Muslim group assuming that they were Sunni Muslims. This caused him to become confused, as he felt very uncomfortable with the 'cult-like' practices he saw (see 11.2). Later, when he decided to explore a Salafi group, he was discriminated against, as some Muslims felt he was a government spy and were not welcoming (see 9.3.1), which led him to make the decision to de-convert.

In this study fifteen participants said they knew people who had converted to Islam and later de-converted (five of who de-converted as a result of a bad marriage to a Muslim), which confirms reports by The Quilliam Foundation and Solace, a British charity organisation that helps female converts in difficulties, that there is a rising number of disaffiliations from Islam. It was found that women in particular often blamed God, religion and Muslim culture for allowing men to have a high degree of controlling authority that made their lives a misery and were generally unable to accept the values of Islam and Muslim culture when their own British values seemed better. Based on his experiences, Ahmed (1) claimed there was a lot of hypocrisy in Muslim communities, and suggested that this was the main reason for de-conversion. He now runs educational classes for new Muslims in his local mosque and said, 'Most people would not disclose this information [de-converting] usually, as they would fear for their social wellbeing but we have a few cases in the local mosque where people have come to the Imam desperate for help because they are on the brink of leaving the faith and I find this really heart breaking.' Ahmed also said, 'Muslims need to be aware of these issues and work harder to improve the reputation of Islam by taking greater care of the converts.' Here he emphasises the moral and religious responsibilities of missionaries to support the people they help convert, as their *dawah* mission should not simply end when people declare the *shahadah*.

Five participants mentioned how disaffiliates they knew could not deal with family disownment, isolation, the loss of a career, social pressures and the challenges of being a Muslim in a western society, and no longer wanted to be associated with radical Muslims in the media.

The extremist group (ISIS) is the reason why millions of people will have a terrible perception of Islam, why many born into Islam will never accept the faith, and why many Muslims will leave their religion, perhaps even flocking to atheism... Their climate of fear, along with the multi-million-pound Islamophobia industry, prospers under its clouds, leads many non-Muslims to hate Islam and causes swathes of Muslims to leave the faith. Extremism, along with the challenges modernity poses, [are] among the biggest factors in causing apostasy (Shahid, 2014).

Fatima (2) was a practising convert who de-converted silently after fifteen years of being a Muslim on account of depression, isolation, hostility, poor attitudes of Muslims towards her, and the lack of support. She went on to study angelology for a while before deciding to revert back to Islam and join the Sufi community, where she felt her fundamental beliefs in God and spirituality were rooted. 'I felt bad that I let a bunch of people influence my faith and weaken it but at the time I just felt due to the negativity I faced and the pressure of the challenges it was not worth it being a Muslim and suffering.' Fatima, like Janet (32) and Luke (34), mentioned that many of the Muslims she knew did not attempt to help her come back to Islam when they found out about her disaffiliation, which disappointed her. However, she claims that after her de-conversion she learnt a lot about herself, other beliefs and the world, and found she had a natural tendency always to be drawn back to Islam.

Adam (17) who converted to marry his Muslim girlfriend was asked if he would remain as a Muslim if his relationship/marriage did not work out, to which he replied, 'I am not sure really.' It may be argued that people who leave Islam after converting to it for marital or social purposes do so when their relationship ties with those people are cut. Some may find that they like the faith, and decide to stay in it regardless of whether or not their relationships continue, but those who had converted in order to get married and who later divorce are more likely to go back to their former lives, especially if they

encounter negative experiences with other Muslims and struggle both personally and socially with a Muslim identity.

Some participants who had considered de-conversion were held back by their belief in God or managed to find support from friends, family members and/or Muslims who helped them cope throughout their hardships. Hana (16) claimed that the fear of losing her daughter to her Muslim husband was the main reason why she did not leave Islam, while others did not want to be closeted disaffiliates and lead double lives. It was found that if people felt they had nothing to lose and did not fear negative reactions they were more likely to ‘come out’ than those who did.

12.4 Post De-Conversion Experiences

This section explores the final stages of the de-conversion journey, otherwise known as the ‘seeking and weighing role alternatives’ and ‘establishing an ex-role identity’ stages. This study found that people are more likely to explore options after they experience turning points that trigger a de-conversion and changes in the identity formation process. Exploring these stages helps the reader to understand the various consequences that may occur from a de-conversion, alongside the different types of disaffiliates people become before they choose to either revert back to their former lives and identities or find a new identity and solutions to their problems elsewhere.

12.4.1 Types of Disaffiliates

In this study Lauren (20) was the only closeted disaffiliate who endured hardships on account of her fear of abuse from Muslim community members and her ‘radical’ ex-husband who took matters such as apostasy ‘very seriously’.

The risk of me getting physically hurt, and my daughter being taken away from me permanently [by my husband and his family] was a very real threat and reality for me and still is. There have been incidents where the radical husband has run off with the child and the apostate be physically, verbally and emotionally abused.

Lauren became paranoid because she had heard of apostates who suffered daily and who had their house and car windows smashed, among other similar ordeals. She offers an insight into the life closeted disaffiliates lead, in which emotional and psychological dilemmas exist, as she continues to bear the negative consequences of her conversion to Islam. When she disclosed her de-conversion, her husband had reacted with great shock and anger, and believed her decision was a result of her being possessed by evil spirits.

The study found it important that the abuse some disaffiliates experience is analysed in its context to understand the reasons behind the attacks. For example, if a victim was a ‘whistleblower’ who had fuelled hostility towards Muslims or caused problems and corruption within the Muslim society, or had caused damage to a mosque, for example, the reasons for Muslims disliking such an individual will be clear. In most cases, however, people who become ‘verbal whistleblowers’ are not punished or penalised by the British legal system, as citizens are given the right to exercise their freedom of speech. If Muslims were to call for the death of apostates or punish individuals for exercising their right to this freedom in Britain, the reputation of Muslims and Islam would be damaged and Islam would be portrayed as a barbaric faith group. Therefore, it is argued that this would be more harmful than individuals’ de-conversions would ever be, as it would exacerbate the Islamophobic opinions that many non-Muslims already have, and would encourage even more hostility. Also, punishments for apostasy would often validate the opinions and stories of disaffiliates, who would be likely to gain the support and protection of the government, police, and anti-religious/terrorism organisations. Other disaffiliates, such as Janet (32) and Mark (33), warned people against converting if they were asked about Islam and for advice on conversion. ‘I just want people to be aware of what they are getting themselves into’ (Janet). As Janet did not leave a religious community that she was a member of, or Muslim friends, her de-conversion, like Luke’s (34) went smoothly and unnoticed, which she later perceived as an advantage, even though it had initially been upsetting for her. None of the participants were considered to be ‘whistleblowers’ other than Lauren (20) who had set up an active blog under the protection of the CEMB where she publicly warned people about joining Islam and shared her experiences.

It is important that abuse against apostates is not justified or carried out as a religious practice, as many Muslims are unaware of the reasons behind individuals’ de-conversions. It therefore becomes necessary for Muslims to investigate the reasons for

de-conversion and support disaffiliates rather than perceive their apostasy as an offence or a social threat. Muslim husbands feared that a wife's de-conversion would negatively influence their children or others they knew, which led to the severing of family ties. Lauren, however, has hopes of returning to her former life as a non-Muslim with her daughter. 'I am now in a bitter custody battle in order to protect my child from abduction and Islamic indoctrination, and I have suffered both financially and socially when I left Islam and my former Muslim life.' Although she managed to 'come out' to her family and friends, she has not been able to announce her de-conversion publicly in the strict Salafi Muslim community where she lives out of fear of abuse.

It was found that the anticipation of discrimination, emotional and mental abuse, punishment and stigmatisation may cause individuals to conceal their de-conversion for many years (Chaudoir and Fisher, 2010). This may have profound effects on the lives and health of individuals who have to keep their identities secret, and who in many cases may suffer from depression and anxiety (Saxena and Mehrotra, 2010; Quinn and Chaudoir, 2009; Cozby, 1973). Many closeted disaffiliates become depressed because they are unable to live their lives in the way they wish, and feel they have lost many valuable years hiding away. Some people are unable to afford moving to another area, or, like Lauren, have to fight for their children born to a Muslim parent. Much research has shown that living with a closeted identity erodes self-confidence, and consistently relates to a lower psychological wellbeing (Quinn and Earnshaw, 2014). Lauren mentioned how she found it offensive when some Muslim women she knew had attempted to re-convert her, when they had not supported her during her hardships as a Muslim. After failing to cooperate she was rejected by her friends, neighbours and in-laws in the same way she had been rejected by her own family when she converted. This repetition of rejection contributed to her depression, and made her bitter towards Muslims. It is argued that had she married a more moderate Muslim and not joined the Salafi community, her experiences of being a Muslim might have been very different.

Mark (33) mentioned the story of a man who left Islam, as he was not comfortable with the religious practices he had to endure as a result of marrying a Shi'ite woman. He had felt forced to live as a closeted disaffiliate for five years so that he did not lose his family. However, due to the build-up of psychological pressures that he was unable to deal with, he informed his wife and in-laws that he had de-converted, and they became very aggressive towards him, threatening him with death and violence because he had

deceived them and caused their sister/daughter to live in sin for five years, as it is unlawful in Islam for a Muslim to remain married to someone who disaffiliates. 'He moved to another city and doesn't tell anyone where he lives out of fear they will find him. He changed his name as well. ... He has serious emotional and psychological issues from the trauma he faced.' It is argued that this particular crisis is partially the fault of the individual who did not study Shi'a Islam before marriage, and shows that a marriage is often troubled when the religious beliefs and cultural values of the couple are in conflict, as they will often determine the way people choose to live their lives, raise children and influence the way individuals think and perceive the world. It is suggested, therefore, that people considering marriage to someone from another religion or a different sect should carefully assess the possible issues that might arise to avoid problems in the future.

Lina (22), although an open disaffiliate, encountered similar experiences to Lauren when she informed her husband and in-laws of her de-conversion, and claimed that she is now completely ignored by them and her former Muslim friends who distanced themselves from her out of fear for their own reputations. She fought for custody of her youngest daughter, as she feared that she would be radicalised if raised by her strict Muslim father. 'My ex-husband wants full custody of the child I had with him, as he wants her to be brought up Islamically but I don't want her to be a Muslim. I told everyone about my de-conversion.' Lina chose to return to her former society after she was supported by the court and granted custody on the grounds of potential radicalisation. In this connection, in 2014, Boris Johnson, Mayor of London, called for children at risk from extremism to be removed from their families to stop them being turned into 'potential killers or suicide bombers'. 'Muslim children at risk of radicalisation at the hands of their parents are victims of child abuse and should be taken into care' (Johnson, 2014).

After many struggles and hardships, disaffiliates tended to be more appreciative of the things they had taken for granted in their former lives and for which had abandoned their Islamic beliefs to have them back. Luke found it easy to go back to his former life as an atheist, as he had never informed his family of his Islamic conversion, and, like Janet (32), he felt he had an easy disaffiliation from the Muslim community and did not fear any abuse because people were 'not bothered'. For some, Islam was a faith that burdened them with many tests, and which made their previous lives more appealing.

Some converts were easily able to give up their Muslim identities without feeling guilty, as they felt that God had failed them, rather than feeling that they themselves had failed God and were unable to be good Muslims.

The participants viewed their challenges in different ways and from various perspectives, which affected their attitudes, psychological mindsets and decisions. Mark (33) cut ties with his former Muslim community to move on peacefully with his life and avoid any negative consequences; he felt he did not owe anyone an explanation for his de-conversion. 'I was just a bit worried because I didn't know how they would react with apostates and so I didn't tell anyone that I had left Islam.' Although Mark did not live in the Muslim community as a closeted disaffiliate, he had to endure the inconvenience of moving to another apartment and also kept his distance from Muslims at work. Mark disaffiliated from the Muslim community but claimed that he had not lost his fundamental belief in God. He did, however, abandon his Islamic beliefs, as he thought he did not need them. 'I believe He [God] exists and I believe that there is a heaven and hell – I like the justice in that concept but I do not call myself a Muslim and I do not follow any Islamic practices.' Mark felt comfortable believing that there is a justice system in the hereafter for all humans, as this was his main issue with Christian teachings as a child, when he was told that everyone would go to heaven regardless of what they had done, as Jesus would forgive them. The conversion journey for Mark was an exploration of his identity within a religious context. He acknowledged that his conversion to Islam had improved some of his behavioural characteristics, but that it did not transform his personality or worldviews significantly. It may be seen from these instances that some people choose not to associate themselves with a religion because they prefer to live more independent and flexible lives, which may be easier for those who do not wish to live by set rules, some of which they may find unacceptable, as they go against their own values or are difficult to conform to. Others, however, feel that they can only know and worship God via the teachings and rules of a religion if they strongly believe that they guide people towards the path of righteousness. It is also suggested that those who are 'out of the closet' and do not care about what others think of them may not have to deal with depression, isolation or abuse, and have a better ability and opportunity to move on with their lives without much difficulty. In this connection, it was found that relocating to a different area and starting again helped some disaffiliates to live without worry or fear.

Some converts, such as Khadija (6), who suffered when dealing with Muslims and with an oppressive Muslim husband nevertheless understood Islamic teachings to be ‘beautiful and merciful’, and knew that the Muslims she had met had misinterpreted what she believed to be the correct understanding of Islam. As a result, she became a community disaffiliate and abandoned her marriage, community and relationships with ‘troubled’ Muslims, but not Islam itself. Ruqayya (9) had also made the decision to disaffiliate from the Muslim community rather than Islam, as she believed that Islam is a misunderstood religion, but felt that as long as she remained in the Muslim community she would always have issues. She made her disaffiliation from the community known by moving away, removing the *hijab* and wearing western clothing until she felt she was spiritually and psychologically ready to wear it again and commit to Islam. Mark believes that heritage Muslim communities are unsuitable environments for new British Muslims to live in, and highlights the issue of being confused when living among Muslims who are divided by different sects and torn between different ideologies, religious opinions, cultures and motives.

12.4.2 Establishing a New Identity

Despite the negativity that arises from a de-conversion, participants were able to identify the positive aspects of their experiences. They were also able to pinpoint what had gone wrong during their conversion journeys and so identity issues were often solved, as the experiences made them realise what they wanted from life and the type of identity with which they were most content, happy, confident and comfortable, whether by returning to a former religion, making adjustments, or becoming an atheist. This stage was what Maslow (1943) described as the ‘self-actualisation’ stage, as they had reached it after fulfilling the needs of safety, belongingness (associated with their former lives and identities), love (found among non-Muslim family and friends) and self-esteem, which Breakwell (1986) associated with the identities people felt most comfortable with. Lauren (20) mentioned how she was much happier and more content with her new life, as she was able to see a bright future for herself and claimed to value her life much more now than she had ever done before. Like Luke (34), Lauren now calls herself an atheist and is no longer interested in the concept of any religion as a way of life. She had initially perceived her conversion to be a solution for the crises she faced as a teenager, which helped to get rid of her suicidal thoughts. ‘Islam [also] made

me more confident. ... I grew as a person and had a lot more courage to stand up for my opinions even though everyone was against me. ... The Islamic code of conduct and morality [how a “good” person should be] helped me become a more mature and better person.’ Despite gaining moral and psychological benefits from being a Muslim, her daily interactions with strict Muslims ruined her conversion experience and because she felt that God could not help her, she decided to pursue her search for the truth and the purpose of life within a non-religious context. Luke also came to a conclusion that there was no God. ‘God hasn’t helped me with anything in my life; when I depend on God to help me or show me the right way my life gets worse.’ Luke felt that he had not gained much from being a Muslim apart from some improvements in his character, and his response indicates that he had many expectations of God and Islam that were not fulfilled, including a solution to his emotional problems.

Lina (22) mentioned she was grateful to have her youngest daughter who is a joy in her life, and that being a Muslim helped her to quit smoking and drinking, which improved her health. She realised, however, from her experiences that her former life had been more liberating and so decided to go back to the church, which in her opinion, offered a great deal more than the mosques she had been to, and she found that religious Christians were more helpful and friendly than Muslims. Her conversion to Islam helped her to realise that being a Christian was her true identity and what made her happy. Lina now says that she appreciates her freedom after experiencing a lack of it as a Muslim wife, and enjoys going out without being covered and having permission from anyone, and this helped her regain her self-confidence. She claimed that her children also now live happier lives and have a great relationship with their Christian grandparents. Lina had her daughters baptized as a psychological attempt to remove the Muslim element from them, and claims they can now be ‘normal’ children.

Mark (33) realised he did not need to belong to a religion to know who he was or have a connection with God, and re-found himself and his identity in his former society. ‘A couple of years down the line [after de-conversion] I met someone and we got married and I now have two children. My wife is an atheist. My life has been normal since. I am happy now.’ Mark and Lina use the term ‘normal’ to describe their new life, which refers to a typical secular British lifestyle and culture that is very different to an Islamic lifestyle. For some, living in a Muslim community was similar to living in a Muslim country, as it made them feel that the gap between their British and Muslim

communities was too wide. Mark preferred the comfort zone of his own society, and enjoyed what he perceived to be the daily luxuries, companionships, freedoms and traditions that he took for granted. He perceived his conversion as a learning experience, and was happy to know how it feels to be a Muslim and how the journey helped him to find himself. He also claims to have gained a deeper understanding of different cultures, Islam, Muslims and new religious beliefs during his time as a Muslim, and now attempts to perceive his negative experiences in a positive way related to character improvement and an increase in knowledge. 'It helped me to discover who I really am and what I really believe in. I have no regrets doing what I did. I am at peace now. I would say that maybe I am a more understanding and compassionate person now, as I can see how people can be easily brainwashed and manipulated into following religious groups.' It is also suggested that because Mark did not sacrifice many things to be a Muslim, like Janet, he did not feel any regrets about converting, and it was a relatively easy process for him to leave Islam, as he did not get married or have any children. Janet (32), like Mark and Luke (34), perceived her experience as a learning curve and although she did not mention any significant positive impacts that Islam had had on her life, she, too, felt that her experiences had opened her eyes to how people can be 'easily brainwashed'. She blames her bad experiences of conversion on Muslims who had failed to support her during difficult times and, like others, realised that being in an environment where people loved her, cared about her, and supported her was more important than following a religion and being alone. This highlights the importance of a religious community that acts as a family for its members so they may live happily.

Non-Muslim family and friends were the main supporters throughout the de-conversion journey. Lauren said, 'My relationship with my family is somewhat good now, it has taken years to build up that relationship and they have been a very strong support during my de-conversion from Islam.' It was found that family members who were not happy with an individual's decision to convert will often make great efforts to support and welcome them back as soon as they feel they wish to return to their former lives. Janet (32) expressed her gratitude for this and said, 'I was lucky enough to have my parents take me back in after everything that happened. They were just so happy I didn't have any children and that I had left Islam.' Solace reported a growing number of Muslims who de-convert and become Christians because they found the support they needed from Christian missionaries, friends and families rather than from Muslims. Lauren mentioned that advocacy groups and the CEMB were a great support and helped her

throughout her de-conversion journey, as they provided her with the strength, positive energy, and confidence to ‘come out’. Janet (32) also said, ‘After my de-conversion I contacted the CEMB and I met a lot of people who shared their stories with me and it made me feel better.’

12.5 Summary

The majority of participants faced problems with Muslim communities and suffered from a lack of support, belonging, isolation and marriage issues, which caused some converts to consider leaving Islam or de-convert. Religious and intellectual doubts surfaced throughout the de-conversion journey, which prompted the questioning of Islamic teachings. Negative experiences with Muslims later also became turning points for some who began to have religious doubts after witnessing hypocritical behaviour. It was common for converts to leave Islam if they felt they did not find anything positive about Islam or its followers, or if they felt their previous lives, beliefs and societies were better. Some were likely to de-convert if they felt that Islamic teachings went against their own values, and if the purpose they had converted for, such as to get married or to solve their emotional/psychological/spiritual problems, failed, whereas others disaffiliated from the community rather than the religion.

This study found that although punishment for apostasy is illegal in Britain, some nevertheless suffer at the hands of radical Muslims who perceive apostasy as a crime. This causes many to become closeted disaffiliates. Punishments ranged from being ignored by the community to being deprived of their children and being physically abused, which had negative impacts on apostates’ social lives, health and emotional state. Some disaffiliates managed to leave Islam easily and peacefully if they had no children or strong ties with Muslims and/or their Muslim communities, while others publicly declared their disaffiliation by abandoning Islamic practices, such as praying and fasting, disposing of religious objects and symbols, and moving away from their Muslim communities. None of the participants received death threats or became active public ‘whistleblowers’ apart from Lauren (20) who used her blog to warn people about Islam.

The disaffiliates agreed that they were happier not being Muslims and were able to

move on with their lives that they felt they had taken for granted. They also appreciated their families and the freedoms of a secular western society. The inability to integrate both British and Muslim elements successfully into one identity in the society they lived in encouraged them to return to their former lives where they did not have to juggle between different identities and values. They also expressed happiness at being supported by their non-Muslim friends and family members throughout their de-conversion journeys and being welcomed back home, which raised their self-confidence and helped them to approach their new lives with optimism. They unanimously agreed they had benefited from improvements in their character, morality and health and an opportunity to experience life as a Muslim. All disaffiliates had been through a process of identity change and reconstruction and believed that the identity they became happy and comfortable with after de-conversion was their 'true' identity. This stage is what Maslow (1943) claims to be the 'self-actualisation' stage that individuals reach after feeling and being loved, supported and accepted by their families, communities, social groups and country. This helps individuals to grow in confidence and reach the self-actualisation and transcendence stages in which they settle with identities they choose, are happy with and are able to freely express without anticipating any negativity or being discriminated and unfairly labelled by others.

Chapter XIII

Conclusions

13.1 The Main Findings of This Study

This chapter presents significant findings that were obtained from the personal narratives of the participants based on their understanding of Islam, decisions, motives, turning points and experiences that shaped and influenced their entire conversion journey and the creation of a new British Muslim identity. It was primarily found that the understanding of Islam that individuals have, which is applied to their daily lives, determines the outcome of their conversion experiences, as it influences the type of challenges, identity developments, experiences and hardships they are likely to come across, and governs how they deal with them.

According to the experiences of the participants, it was found that a broad and sufficient Islamic education had been obtained by reading the biography of The Prophet Muhammad first before The Quran or any other Islamic literature. Some participants felt confused if they read The Quran first, as they did not know who Muhammad was or why he had been specifically chosen by God to be a prophet and receive the final revelation. The eight participants in particular who had read and studied the biography, however, were fully able to understand who he was, why he is known to Muslims as being the greatest man ever to have lived, and why God had given him the mission of *dawah*. In addition, the biography explains the rulings found in The Quran, when they were applied, to whom they were applied, and in what context they were applied, to eliminate misunderstandings and confusions. They also claimed that the biography helped them to make sense of The Quran and that they gained knowledge about Islamic history, law and politics, Muhammad's companions and family members, and his relationships with Muslims and non-Muslims. After having being greatly inspired by The Prophet Muhammad's biography (Al-Mubarkpuri, 2002), Jack (27) decided to further his studies by reading the biographies and stories of other prophets mentioned in The Quran, to gain an even broader and deeper understanding of Islam and its teachings. As a result, he acknowledged that his character was transformed in a positive manner and it was found that he shared a similar understanding of Islam as some advanced learners/highly educated converts. This was a significant finding, as Jack only

has GCSE qualifications, and so this proposes an educational procedure that converts and non-Muslims alike would find easy to follow if they wanted to learn about Islam, regardless of their educational level and social class.

The biography, in particular the translation entitled *The Sealed Nectar* (Al-Mubarkpuri, 2002) was found to be popular among converts, as it is easy to read and understand, and is rich in Hadiths and Quran verses. It is therefore suggested that if people were to read the biography before any other Islamic text, it may eliminate many confusions that arise from reading different translations and interpretations of The Quran and Hadiths that are made available for people belonging to different sects and *madhabs* (the four schools of jurisprudence). Reading the biography and stories of other prophets, followed by The Quran, helped individuals to understand the contents of The Quran and form similar opinions of what they believed to be correct practices, which some later verified with the teachings of renowned scholars. These converts were able to identify scholars and Muslims who did not share the same opinions as themselves and thus avoid them, as they came across as being political, radical, or in other ways perhaps incorrect in their understanding. Their own understanding also helped them to make better judgements with regard to who they chose as friends and marriage partners, and helped them to find various solutions for their crises and daily issues. The biography helped women in particular to know and understand their rights, and made them aware of how to avoid becoming victims of oppression and abuse in the name of Islam. (Here it should be noted that this study found that many women were unaware of their Islamic rights, as they had been taught strict literal meanings of The Quran.) The study also found that watching Islamic films such as ‘The Message’ (1975) about the revelation and life of The Prophet, helped people to understand The Quran in a better and deeper manner and that those who were happy British Muslims were familiar with Quilliam (Geaves, 2010) and Pickthall’s (Hadhrami, 1998) strategies that inspired them to find various ways of making Islam a part of their British identity and lifestyle.

After studying the biography, some participants became interested in learning Arabic so they could read The Quran in its original language. Those who learnt Arabic found that the verses of The Quran contained a deeper meaning from an emotional, spiritual and intellectual point of view. One participant (Ryan, 18) chose to learn Arabic because he knew there was a difference in meaning when reading the Torah in English rather than in Hebrew, as many Hebraic words and grammar did not have suitable equivalents in

English, which meant that what was read was not being understood correctly. He was therefore able to engage with The Quran in a more intimate and spiritual way than those who read it in English and struggled to understand what the words meant. This was especially the case for those who did not read the biography first and resorted to learning about Islam from various websites and other Muslims, many of whom were ignorant about Islamic teachings. Some made the effort to learn Arabic to perfect their acts of worship, such as the daily prayers, and reading The Quran or to pursue further Islamic studies, while others who did not have the time or opportunities to do so followed the teachings of English and Arabic-speaking Muslim scholars who could interpret and translate The Quran and Hadiths efficiently and clearly.

New Muslims and many heritage Muslims alike find it overwhelming to study Hadith collections and the teachings of the four schools of jurisprudence, as this requires a lot of time and knowledge of Arabic to understand them properly. Because of this, the biography was found to be sufficient, as it contains the most important Hadiths that Muslims need to follow on a daily or regular basis. Those who wanted to further their studies to an advanced level often studied the Hadith collections under the supervision of highly qualified scholars.

Participants who had been influenced and inspired by the character of The Prophet Muhammad and other prophets showed significant positive changes in their personalities and relationships with others, especially their parents, which became a form of indirect *dawah*, as they were exhibiting good examples of how Muslims should be. *Dawah* by example was found to be successful in changing the negative views non-Muslims had of Islam, and also encouraged other conversions.

This study found that converts read, understand and interpret texts in different ways according to their own personalities, educational level, gender, intellect, biases, life experiences and attitudes. For example, some feminists may perceive Muslim women as being oppressed, while other feminists may perceive them as being liberated. Some people become more hostile towards Muslim immigrants when they read about terrorism in the newspapers while others become curious about their culture and religion and choose to explore them. People who have good Muslim friends are likely to perceive media portrayals of Muslims as being unjust and deficient, whereas those who have had bad experiences with Muslims tend to agree with these portrayals. With regard

to The Quran it was found that those, such as Lina's (22) husband, who had a tendency to become violent when angry were more likely to adopt extreme views with regard to verses about punishments. For example, a Quran verse that is often misunderstood is 4: 34. Most of the participants believed Islam to be a peaceful and loving religion, and interpreted the verse in a way that suited their western values and ethics. They did not accept that the verse meant women were to be subjected to men's domination by violent means. However, those, such as Henry (24), who liked the idea of men having superior power and authority over women perceived this verse to lend acceptance of the strict control of women and towards an oppressive and patriarchal understanding of Islam. Many women may perceive the verse as being oppressive, discriminative and unfair against women, while other women accept it because it is the command of God.

Because people perceive and interpret texts in different ways, this thesis recommends a study of the biography, as those participants who read it shared the same or similar opinions and were able to understand The Prophet's role as a husband correctly, for example, and how he applied Quranic teachings to his life with his wives that were far from the understanding of some harsh interpretations found today. This helped to eliminate various biases to enable people to learn about Islam in a neutral manner. Those who did not read the biography or follow the teachings of reputable scholars differed in their personal opinions and understandings of The Quran, which was problematic, as it created religious divisions between family members and Muslims in general. Jonathan Brown's (2014) book *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*, supports this finding, and highlights many family and social issues that arise from a poor understanding of The Quran and Hadiths (2014: 272–285). The biography explains, for example, how The Prophet often reminded and encouraged people to control their anger and warned them against hitting people and other creatures; however, media reports show how some Muslim husbands practice violence against their wives and others in the name of Islam, which creates confusion and fuels a negative opinion of the faith.

This study answers the four research questions that were presented in Chapter I.

1. What are the anticipated benefits and positive elements that encouraged the start and continuation of an Islamic conversion journey?

The various elements and experiences that shape or influence an individual's decision to convert is often based on the personal and social benefits they anticipate to receive from the Muslim group and/or God. A minority of participants had troubled childhood and adolescent periods that involved abuse and being emotionally affected by the death of a loved one or a divorce, for example, which made them question their parents' religious beliefs and God's problem-solving powers. The majority, however, reported that they were raised in loving homes, some more religious than others, and associated their moral upbringing with the teaching of the faith they were raised in. It was found that the participants' opinions about God contributed greatly towards a better understanding of how and why individuals choose to search for solutions to their problems or crises via Him and what they expected to gain. Therefore, studying the early period of their lives helped to project a deeper understanding of where motives for conversion originally come from. For example, it was found that some individuals who had a more religious upbringing and held previous beliefs in God were more likely to turn to God and religion for answers and solutions via prayer, whereas others pursued a more non-religious route to find the purpose of life and solutions to their problems and then came across Islam and Muslims who they admired at a later stage. Despite the differences found in their upbringing, values, religions and ethnic backgrounds, the majority of participants believed in God at some stage in their lives.

The majority of participants claimed to have experienced an existential and intellectual crisis from a young age, after encountering Muslims and/or information about Islamic beliefs via university, travels, missionaries or public events, whereas others felt lonely and wanted to belong to a community in which they could develop strong identities and a sense of self. It was important for most converts that they achieve intellectual satisfaction and follow a moral way of life or a set of beliefs that they were convinced of. A couple of participants converted in jail or shortly after being released from jail in order to feel socially empowered due to coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. It was found that some prisoners were often tempted to convert by the financial and social benefits offered by radical Islamist groups. Therefore, the study findings suggest that it is a mixture of experiencing an identity, emotional and psychological crisis, curiosity and intellectual and/or religious doubts that encourage most individuals to explore

different beliefs to seek the truth, an improved social status or a more suitable lifestyle and identity.

Many participants claimed to be touched by what they perceived to be the humility, kindness and generosity of a number of Muslims they came across, whose moral behaviour encouraged them to actively learn more about Islam. This type of indirect *dawah* affected the participants' attitudes towards religion and changed their views about Islam. Those who were affected and inspired by such Muslims, especially other converts, hoped that an Islamic conversion would help them to benefit from a better character and an improved version of themselves.

It was found that the participants who had taken their time reading the Prophet Muhammad's biography and experimenting with Islamic practices and values before converting were highly likely to remain Muslims for life. Experiencing the prayers, fasting, wearing the *hijab* and abstaining from things that were forbidden in Islam helped the individuals to get used to life gradually as Muslims, so that when they eventually decided to convert they found it easier and were able to start practising the faith properly. Those who did not experiment before conversion found it difficult to practice Islam properly, as they were not used to it and struggled under the pressure from other Muslims to conform to an Islamic lifestyle, laws and rituals. They also found it difficult to deal with family reactions after their conversion. Friends and family members who knew that individuals were experimenting with Islam, however, found it easier to accept their conversion later on, as they were given the time and chance to prepare themselves for the change and understand their reasons for conversion. People who experimented before converting knew if they were able to continue living in such a manner for the rest of their lives, and either abandoned their conversion plans or decided that being Muslims was what they wanted and needed. It was found that those who had been disowned or rejected by their families for being Muslims tended to live in Muslim communities and had strong Muslim identities that were influenced by heritage Muslims, whereas those who were accepted by their families found ways to subtly implement Islamic beliefs, values and practices in their own societies to create a balanced hybrid British Muslim identity.

Some families and friends considered and accommodated participants' new Islamic interests and/or beliefs to maintain relationships, which made converts very happy. For

example, the Christmas and Sunday roast dinners were made with *halal* meat and participants were no longer expected to take part in church services or meet their friends in pubs. Instead, other places were suggested where converts might feel more comfortable to socialise in. Converts also privatised and toned-down various Islamic practices to make their conversions acceptable, such as praying in empty rooms, wearing western alternatives to the *hijab*, such as hats, and loose, modest clothing rather than traditional Muslim attire, not growing a large beard, and refraining from adopting Muslim names and other practices non-Muslims might have felt uncomfortable with.

The majority of participants did not face any major physical hardships or consequences that resulted from a de-conversion from their former religious communities; however, those who were from practising Jewish and Hindu communities and households were more likely to suffer than others. These de-converts were perceived to have betrayed and rejected the values, beliefs and traditions of the community and had brought shame upon their families. Therefore, a conversion to Islam here was perceived as a grand act of selfishness, as it ruined the reputation, honour and social status of an entire family, especially because of the political issues between both faith groups. These participants mentioned that they were abused emotionally, psychologically and were discriminated against alongside being pressured by community members to revert back to the religion or being exiled and excluded from community, family and religious events. Despite this, the participants were not willing to give up their new beliefs and were convinced that they were doing the right thing for themselves and hoped that their disappointed friends and family members, who believed they had been brainwashed by radical Muslims, would one day understand. This indicates the seriousness of having to choose between one's faith and one's family, and the degree of sacrifice individuals may need to make for the sake of God, the anticipated benefits from an Islamic conversion and finding a solution for their problems. Moving away from one's family as a result of being exiled can have personal and social implications on individuals' wellbeing throughout their lives, as their families may harbour resentment towards them and refuse to communicate.

It was found that modern-day Christians were more lenient than other religious groups when it came to disaffiliation, especially as a rapidly growing number of people begin to lose their grip on religious beliefs in a secular society, however those who had converted to Islam in the 1970s and 1980s had experienced hostility and verbal abuse

from religious Christian community members. A conversion from Islam during this period of time was perceived as an act of disloyalty and a rejection of Christian beliefs and a White heritage and status, especially because Islam was associated with who they perceived to be uncivilised, colonised and foreign immigrants from the lower class. Today, however, many non-practising Christians no longer face abuse or social hardship if they leave the Christian faith, but are more likely to face negative reactions from their friends and families if they abandon or reject British values and culture for the sake of their new beliefs that they associate with terrorists and problematic Muslims in the media.

The study found that many converts, especially those who lived in Muslim communities, needed social and emotional support from Muslims to help them deal with family disownment, former community abuse and exile, isolation, obtaining an Islamic education, Islamic practices, marriage, children and integration so they could enjoy their lives as British Muslims. Many participants felt happy and inspired when they met and socialised with other converts, before and after their conversion, as they were able to relate to them and address their concerns, learn together and provide support for each other. Potential converts and new Muslims who were welcomed into convert communities and the homes of heritage Muslims to celebrate *Eid* and fast *Ramadan* in an Islamic environment also enjoyed the conversion experience and being Muslims, as they felt supported, especially if they were shown how to wash for prayers, how to pray, and were helped with their problems. This made a great difference to the lives of participants who perceived their Muslim friends to be family. Local Islamic centres, Imams and mosques that looked after the needs of new Muslims also made a positive difference to their lives and wellbeing.

The study found that there is a need for easier ways for converts to contact western scholars so they could receive Islamic help quickly, alongside professional counselling services and safe marriage bureaus, to help them find and meet suitable Muslim partners. It is also suggested that Muslim communities provide safe houses and refuges, where women in particular who have been made homeless, as a result of their conversion, or who are victims of domestic or physical Islamophobic abuse, can seek sanctuary and legal help. This may help to reduce the number of vulnerable converts who are taken advantage of and who become victims of aggressive and violent people. The study also highlights the need for a higher level of commitment from Muslims who

give *dawah* to be responsible for the people they help convert to Islam, by teaching converts about the faith, providing workshops and offering guidance and support when required.

2. What constitutes a comfortable and balanced British Muslim identity for westerners?

Alongside the struggles, hardships, obstacles and challenges, many participants had positive experiences as Muslims that contributed towards the formation of balanced British Muslim identities. The study found that the most comfortable and balanced identity for western converts was one that brought together the positive and compatible elements of being both British and Muslim. The happiest converts who managed to balance both identities had received a broad and sufficient Islamic education according to what has been determined in this study based on the experiences of the participants (see 11.7) that helped them to enjoy being Muslims and solve their problems. These converts had remained in their own non-Muslim environments, and had found their own ways of integrating their Islamic beliefs and values into their everyday lives, relationships and culture.

A conversion to Islam, for many, was perceived primarily as an internal belief system that purified them as people, as it helped them to explore a sense of self, improve their level of morality and character, and establish a spiritual connection with God. It was therefore important for individuals to take their time exploring and experimenting with Islamic practices before conversion, and integrating Islamic values into their identities as they moved along in their journey without being pressured by other Muslims to do so. This helped them to avoid problems and contributed towards the development of a balanced identity they would be comfortable and content with for the rest of their lives. These converts attempted to camouflage themselves in a non-Muslim society by wearing western clothing that met modest Islamic standards and exchanging non-*halal* food and drink for *halal* food and drink when out with friends and family. Some participants expressed their happiness at how it is fairly easy to find *halal* restaurants, food and drinks in London due to it being such a multicultural city. As a result, many participants enjoyed being Muslims without feeling isolated as a result of losing their relationships and social lives with loved ones. They also claimed that ‘blending in’ helped them to avoid Islamophobic abuse, stereotypes, racial and religious

discrimination and unwanted public attention. The study found that when converts found ways of integrating Islam into their lives, societies and culture without rejecting their British values, they gained the respect of others who began to perceive Islam as a peaceful and flexible religion. A Muslim identity therefore became an extension of their former identities, and was perceived as a valuable asset to their lives rather than their entire identity. Some participants strongly believed their new identities reflected their true selves, and considered themselves as ‘reverts’, as they felt they had been guided back by God to the *fitrah*, rather than as ‘converts’ to a new religion.

The creation of a hybrid western Muslim identity in a post-colonial western context challenges the idea of Islam being a religion that only belongs to the colonised, non-White and foreign immigrants. It also challenges many negative media and public views of Islam, Muslims and converts that are associated with terrorism, as converts demonstrate their ability to adopt Islam within their British identity without making any major changes to their lives unless absolutely necessary (such as leaving jobs in environments that encourage non-Islamic behaviour). This study shows that being a Muslim can be a valuable part of a western national identity, as Islamic principles encouraged these converts to be better British citizens who contribute positively to their society. These converts preferred to be known and identified as Muslims according to their improved characters and morality rather than by an outward appearance (Muslim cultural clothing), which they considered might result in their being unfairly judged and stereotyped.

3. What are the main problems and challenges new Muslims face that can lead them to de-conversion?

This study identified seven major challenges participants shared that encouraged them to de-convert. They were: (1) lack of support from the Muslim community and family; (2) racial and gender discrimination; (3) isolation and social integration issues; (4) Islamophobia; (5) marital problems; (6) intellectual/religious doubts; and (7) issues with Muslim culture. Some participants were able to overcome these issues, whereas others who did not find any support either chose to de-convert from Islam, or unwillingly and unhappily remain as Muslims, often for the sake of a marriage or children.

Many participants found heritage Muslims to be different to what they had expected, especially when they did not practise what they believed to be the tenets of Islam. Black converts, for example, often felt discriminated against, whereas White converts were valued more in heritage Muslim societies and were more likely to be accepted. Some participants felt there was too much hypocrisy, interference and pressure from Muslims who were more extreme; some with good intentions, but some whose main purpose was a desire to control. A few who had depended on Muslims for support were taken advantage of or abused, as they were vulnerable, confused, or did not know their Islamic rights, particularly with regard to marriage. Being married to a strict heritage Muslim who considered an Islamic marital relationship to be patriarchal was by far the most problematic aspect of some female converts' lives. In this situation women are highly likely to de-convert, unless they have enough knowledge to be able to identify and separate oppressive Muslim behaviour and 'backward' cultural practices from Islamic teachings. Raising children to be good Muslims was also difficult for those who lived in Muslim communities, as they worried about their children mixing with problematic and radical Muslims, while those who lived in non-Muslim communities worried that their children would drift away from Islam and be influenced by atheists or other beliefs. The study found that the children of White converts in particular were highly likely to suffer in non-Muslim environments, as a result of being confused, teased and bullied for being Muslims or labelled as 'Pakis'. As a result, a few parents gave their children the freedom to find their own paths to Islam rather than pressurise them to conform or belong to a faith they did not understand and appreciate the same way they did.

Being disowned by family members was considered to be a crisis for most converts, both emotionally and psychologically, and they were often torn between their strong religious beliefs and maintaining ties with their families. Those who felt that they could not compromise on certain practices, such as wearing a *burka*, often chose to live in a Muslim community, which offended friends and family members who were unable to accept what they perceived to be an extreme transformation. This rejection from friends and family members caused some participants to consider a de-conversion, especially when they did not feel supported by their Muslim community and its members either.

Converts who were victims of Islamophobic abuse struggled to get the right support and suffered from psychological problems, as they no longer felt safe going out in public.

Some of them perceived the abuse as tests from God and bore the abuse with patience, whereas others were forced to remove items and symbols, such as the *hijab* that identified them as Muslims to avoid attacks. This made some feel guilty and ‘less Muslim’, as they felt unable to honour the values and laws of Islam. The removal of religious symbols eventually led some people to become less practicing and in some cases disaffiliate from Islam, as they felt it was not possible to live with a Muslim identity, whereas others focused more on strengthening their inner beliefs rather than their external identity. It was also found that a quiet de-conversion from Islam was not an issue for converts if children were not involved, if they did not fear being abused by radical Muslims and if they did not become ‘whistleblowers’ by promoting hostility towards Islam and Muslims, as a result of their negative experiences. Some individuals who had children from Muslim partners were forced to become closeted disaffiliates so they would not lose them.

The five disaffiliates in this study spent between two and eight years as Muslims in Muslim communities before deciding to disaffiliate and it is shown that their negative experiences were a result of not obtaining a broad Islamic education and not having the needed support from Muslims and their families. On account of the misunderstandings and confusions they had regarding Islamic teachings they were unable to find ways of dealing with their problems and balancing a British Muslim identity. The five participants decided to return to their former identities and societies where they could feel confident again and live among people who loved and supported them.

13.2 Creating a Theoretical Framework to Study Muslim Converts

4. Is Lewis Rambo’s stage model, alongside Helen Ebaugh’s de-conversion stages appropriate for the study of conversion and de-conversion to and from Islam?

This study attempted to critically engage both Lewis Rambo (1993) and Helen Ebaugh’s (1988) frameworks in order to determine if they are suitable in studying the conversion and de-conversion processes of Muslim converts and offers plausible explanations as to why there are variations in the definition of their stages and sequence in the conversion process. After analysing the conversion journeys and the various experiences that

participants had been through, it was found that both frameworks required some modifications to render them more suitable for the processes of a conversion and de-conversion to and from Islam. The interview data was rich and varied, and throughout the procedure common patterns of experiences, behaviours, decisions and consequences surfaced, however the processes were not the same, relevant or sequential for all, which was the main significant finding and prompted a re-assessment of the stages and their sequence. The study also found that the stages could be perceived as factors or elements that interact with each other rather than as individual stages that each individual passes through.

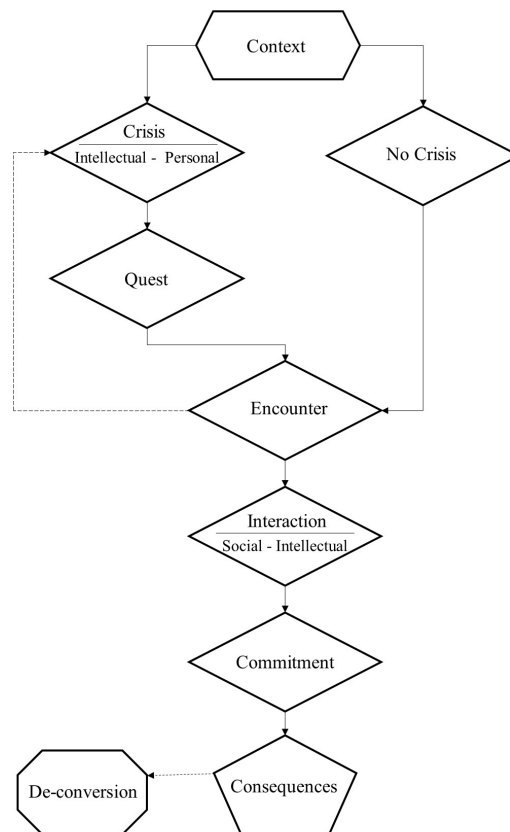
Another significant finding produced by this research is the indication that a context is not considered as a stage but rather a foundational setting of a conversion process, which can produce different outcomes and stage sequences depending on the religious, social, ethnic and intellectual background each individual comes from. It is this variation which produces a different stage sequence for a different type of religious context. For example, the participants who were from disadvantaged areas, abused when young and raised in troubled homes tended to follow the sequence of Rambo's stages, as they actively searched for solutions to their problems, whereas those who were raised in educated, religious or non-religious loving homes did not, especially if they did not experience significant crises to begin with. Those who were raised in loving homes tended to have religious and/or intellectual doubts in early adulthood, as they questioned various aspects and practices of their parents' religion, such as a religious burial. For some, this was perceived as a significant crisis, whereas others perceived crises as being more major events such as the death of a loved one, depression or physical abuse. Due to this subjectivity, Rambo's stages were defined, perceived and understood in different ways by different people. It was therefore found that it was not necessary to experience or place a crisis before the quest stage, as some people did not acknowledge various problems in their lives as being crises, however they often did acknowledge that they experienced a crisis during the encounter stage, usually an intellectual and/or theological crisis, *after* coming into contact with Muslims and information about Islam, which led them to the quest and interaction stages in which they pursued their interests in the faith.

This study also found that the encounter stages may not necessarily involve meeting Muslims, but rather material and literature about Islam and Muslims. This was an

important finding, as it determined who were more likely to be affected by the Muslims they first meet in the encounter stage. For example, it was found that those who interacted with Muslims after encountering information about Islam were more likely to form their own opinions about the faith based on the knowledge they gained and choose what types of Muslims they preferred to socialise with, whereas the participants who had met Muslims before studying Islam were more likely to be influenced by their attitudes, behaviour and knowledge. As a result, the interaction stage for some involved closer contact with Muslims, while for others it involved a deeper interaction with Islamic literature and studies.

It was considered important to differentiate between what this study found to be two different types of consequences (the last stage in Rambo's framework). Many of the participants had experienced hardships, challenges and problems that they found difficult to solve or that encouraged them to consider de-conversion, which is the first type, whereas some had already made the choice to disaffiliate from Islam and/or the Muslim community and in many cases suffered personally and socially as a result, which is the second type of consequence. Due to this an extra 'de-conversion' stage was added to the framework to analyse the unique narratives and experiences of ex-Muslim converts, which is based on Ebaugh's framework.

I found this new modification, which is a theoretical proposal based on the findings of this study, to be more beneficial than creating a separate theory, as Rambo's framework is a part of an ongoing theoretical process.



1) **The Context** takes into account an individual’s social and personal context, alongside the upbringing, location, childhood and adolescence, family circumstances and any beliefs he or she was raised to have about God and religion. Here, the context is not considered as a stage, however it is important to analyse, as it provides a base from which the start of a religious conversion journey can be studied. Early motives, intentions, problems and desires for a problem-solving solution, God or new beliefs are often identified or located here.

2) **The Crisis** is split into two types of crises: *intellectual* and *personal*.

An *intellectual crisis* involves religious doubts and the questioning of God’s existence, religious teachings, and the purpose of life. It is important to note here that some individuals did not experience an intellectual crisis until after the encounter stage (rather than before the encounter stage) when they had come across information about Islam by chance that triggered doubts regarding their former beliefs.

A *personal crisis* accounts for any significant personal experiences or turning points in an individual's life that he or she perceived to be a crisis, such as the death of a loved one, natural disaster, war, abuse, or health issues, which triggered a search for God or a solution to problems.

- 3) **The Quest** was the search for a problem-solving solution. For some, this involves a search for God, guidance, religion, purpose of life, spirituality and salvation, while for others it is a search for facts, answers, counselling and emotional healing. The Islamic concept of the *fitrah* (see 2.3.1) can be discussed at this stage, and how it applies to individuals.
- 4) **The Encounter** stage involves exploring the type of Muslims the individual comes across. This will help to understand why converts are drawn to specific Muslim groups and understandings of Islam. For example, individuals who convert in jail are likely to be drawn to those who have very different ideologies than those who come from a highly educated background. Another example is if they fall in love with a Muslim in the encounter stage. Here, it is likely they would experience a new crisis, whether personally or with their family, as they would most likely need to consider the implications, consequences and requirements of converting in order to get married later on. This new crisis then leads them towards the quest for Islamic knowledge, interaction with other Muslims and commitment. Direct and indirect *dawah* is also explored here and how individuals are affected by it.
- 5) **The Social and Intellectual Interaction** stage explores the relationships individuals form, or already have, with Muslims, and how they seek knowledge.

Social Interaction usually occurs after an individual has received *dawah*, which encourages him or her to socialise with Muslims and learn about Islam and its teachings. It is rare for anyone to make the decision to convert without coming into contact and establishing relationships with Muslims beforehand. This stage may identify any potential radicalisation and cultural influences that may later shape identity development.

Intellectual interaction focuses on how individuals obtained their Islamic education, how it affected their attitudes towards Islam and their understanding of it, and how they chose to practise and integrate Islam in Britain and make it a part of their identity. It is suggested that this stage may come before or after an individual's interaction with Muslims, however this study found that most people read The Quran, The Prophet Muhammad's biography and other Islamic literature after they met Muslims for the first time.

- 6) **The Commitment** stage explores the individual's personal surrender to God, *shahadah* experiences, challenges, hardships, Islamic practices and sacrifices that converts face during their time as Muslims, alongside their positive experiences. This stage also analyses identity changes and/or transformations, attitudes and behaviour, and how converts applied Islamic values to their lives.
- 7) **The Consequences** stage analyses the negative consequences resulting from an Islamic conversion, alongside reasons that led some Muslim converts to consider de-conversion.
- 8) **The Disaffiliation** stage acknowledges that conversion is not always a pleasant experience for every individual, and explores the social and personal consequences of de-conversion/apostasy. The de-conversion stages are analysed using Helen Ebaugh's theory.

Based on the outcomes and findings of this study, I have slightly modified Ebaugh's (1988) de-conversion stage theory. The study proposes the re-arrangement of the de-conversion stages as follows:

- (1) first doubts, leading to (2) a turning point; or
- (2) a turning point and (1) first doubts;
- (3) seeking and weighing role alternatives; and
- (4) establishing an ex-role identity.

This study found that the first two stages of Ebaugh's theory may be reversed, as some people experience doubts before experiencing a turning point that may confirm their doubts, while others may experience a turning point that will trigger doubts.

As this study is limited to a sample of thirty-four converts in London, five of who left Islam, it cannot be representative of all the experiences converts and disaffiliates face, and caution should be exercised when generalising from the findings of the study. Most converts were found to be active rather than passive in their conversion journeys, and the changes in their lives are seen to be ongoing processes. Also, although some of the participants had a more extreme understanding of Islam, none had been involved in any acts of violence or terrorism. The study found that despite the types of Muslims people became and the various experiences they had, the basic aim of conversion was the same, which was to solve their various problems, find God, spirituality and the purpose of life, and to live peacefully and happily with a hybrid British Muslim identity in Britain.

13.3 Suggestions for Further Research

To further test the influences of The Prophet Muhammad's biography on individuals, a study sample of at least five non-Muslims and five converts is required to only read the biography in order to analyse their understanding of various Islamic subjects and record any similarities between them. Another study sample of five non-Muslims and five converts is required to only read The Quran to analyse their personal understandings of various verses. The understandings and opinions of the two groups will then need to be compared to see how people read and understand Islamic literature. Following this, the group who read The Quran first will be given the biography to read and the group who read the biography first will be given The Quran to read, to see if their opinions of The Quran verses change, and if individuals manage to understand The Quran more, as a result of reading the biography. It is important to compare the attitudes and opinions of non-Muslims to new Muslims to address different types of biases, intellectual opinions and understandings of Islam. Because of time restraints I was unable to include this study as part of this thesis.

This study was based on one interview session with each participant, on account of the time limitations of the research, so it is anticipated that longitudinal research (research that follows up each participant over a number of weeks, months or years) may provide different findings and statistics, as circumstances change in peoples' lives, and various new experiences may influence their decision-making processes and identity developments. Longitudinal studies are likely to produce more in-depth analysis,

theories and detailed findings. It would also be beneficial to study religious conversions to different Muslim sect groups to compare individuals' experiences.

It is recommended that a macro-sociological study of the impacts of conversion and de-conversion from Islam within Muslim communities is carried out to gain a broader understanding of the ways converts shape, influence and affect Muslim societies. It is considered an important subject to investigate further, as it may be argued from the findings of this study that de-conversions can cause substantial damage and harm to Muslim communities. 'Whistleblowers' and ex-Muslim converts who share their negative stories with other non-Muslims can significantly contribute towards the fuelling of Islamophobic opinions and abuse alongside influencing and encouraging people not to join Islam and trust Muslims, which does not favour the reputation of Muslims, Muslim communities and *dawah* organisations that will need to work harder to address issues non-Muslims have with Islam. It is therefore suggested that Muslims need to be more aware of the issues converts face during their lives as Muslims, in particular when they first convert to Islam, and offer solutions and support.

More studies of British Muslim convert apostates and closeted disaffiliates are required to better understand the ordeals they may face from a de-conversion or a hidden identity. Due to the difficulties of finding a suitable study sample within a specific time period, and owing to the sensitivity of the subject matter, people refused or were reluctant to participate out of fear for their privacy and social wellbeing. This type of research, however, may help to create an awareness of these individuals' ordeals that may influence and encourage a change in the way people perceive, tolerate and judge both Muslim apostates and apostates in general. Providing a deeper insight into converts' reasons for de-conversion may encourage the building of more efficient social support networks, based on the suggestions and needs of the converts in this study that will help contribute to a more enjoyable conversion experience.

Appendix I

BRITISH MUSLIM CONVERTS: AN INVESTIGATION OF CONVERSION AND DE-CONVERSION PROCESSES TO AND FROM ISLAM

Dear _____,

I am asking you if you would kindly help me with a study, which involves British Muslim Converts. I am conducting this study to investigate the different types of challenges and difficulties that are faced when people convert to Islam. If you agree, I would ask you to meet me for a one to one interview in a place of your choice where you would feel comfortable, as soon as you are available to do so. Your name as a possible participant was accessed via _____.

You will only be requested to attend one interview and it may last up to 90 minutes, depending on the discussion, case study and the answers given. Your participation in this study will greatly help in contributing to new knowledge on the difficulties many Muslim Converts face and will create an awareness of the types of hardships experienced. The research aims to generate enough knowledge in this subject area in order to create a more efficient and beneficial support network for British Muslim Converts in the near future. Please be assured that the information given by you will be dealt with very carefully and will be maintained in a strictly confidential manner. The only person who will have access to the personal and contact information will be myself. After the entire interview procedure is complete, all the raw audio data that can identify individuals will be destroyed quickly and efficiently. No information will be released which will enable the reader to identify who the respondent is and each participant will have their name replaced with a pseudonym.

If you have any questions or problems, please contact me. My telephone number is 07715392742 or you can email me at k1170891@kingston.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely,

Mona Alydreessy

My supervisors' contact details:

1. Dr. Rupa Huq (r.huq@kingston.ac.uk)
2. Dr. Heidi Seetzen (h.seetzen@kingston.ac.uk)
3. Professor Julia Davidson (j.davidson@kingston.ac.uk)

Participant Information Sheet

Statement by participant

- I confirm that I have read and understood the information letter of invitation for this study. I have been informed of the purpose and benefits of taking part.

British Muslim Converts: An Investigation of Conversion and De-Conversion Processes to and from Islam

- I understand what my involvement will entail and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without prejudice.
- I understand that all information obtained will be confidential.
- I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published provided that I cannot be identified as a subject.
- Contact information has been provided should I (a) wish to seek further information from the investigator at any time for purposes of clarification (b) wish to make a complaint.

Participant's Signature-----

Date -----

Statement by investigator

- I have explained this project and the implications of participation in it to this participant without bias and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

Name of investigator: **Mona Alyedreessy**

Signature of investigator -----

Date -----

Online Advertisement to be used in social networks

British Muslim Converts: An Investigation of Conversion and De-Conversion Processes to and from Islam

I am a PhD student conducting a study on British Muslim Converts that aims to create an awareness of the challenges they encounter in their lives as Muslims that can lead some to de-convert from Islam. If you are a British Muslim Convert and would like to voluntarily participate in this study by taking part in an interview please contact me. Your contribution will greatly benefit this academic research by enabling both the Muslim and British societies to gain a wider understanding of the issues faced in order to highlight any deficiencies in the support networks within the Muslim Communities for new Muslims. It will also identify the consequences faced from the challenges experienced in their lives and the impacts they have had on their lives and the lives of those around them. All interviews are strictly confidential and the data will be anonymous. All interviews must take place before October 2013. For more information or to ask any questions kindly contact me on 07715392742 or email me at k1170891@kingston.ac.uk. Kind Regards, Mona Alydreessy.

Semi-constructed Interview Themes/Topics

5. Background information on the person's upbringing, childhood, status, education etc.
6. The conversion process and what was expected from life as a Muslim and the Muslim community.
7. The Islamic education received, what new Muslims know about Islam and how it was taught to them.
8. The types of challenges, difficulties and obstacles experienced as a Muslim and if any support or help was offered.
9. The consequences experienced after the challenges, whether they were overcome or not alongside the impacts they had on an individual's wellbeing and later decisions.
10. De-conversion and its challenges (for those who wish to leave or have already left Islam).
11. Suggestions on what could be done to create a better awareness of the challenges British Muslim Converts face.

Appendix II

Pilot Interview 1

1. Gender

Female.

2. Age

Twenty-five.

3. Education

MA in Biology.

4. How long have you been a convert?

Two years and seven months.

5. What is your ethnicity?

White British.

6. What is your marital status?

Divorced.

7. If you are married, is your partner a convert too?

N/A

8. Do you have any kids?

No.

9. Where in Britain do you reside?

London – Wembley.

10. How did you learn about Islam?

From my Muslim friends and from TV.

11. Were you satisfied with the Islamic education you received?

Not really. I felt that my friends didn't have enough knowledge themselves about Islam and I ended up reading many books about it and watched many YouTube lectures before I decided to convert.

12. Where did you convert?

In my local mosque.

13. What religion were you involved in before converting to Islam?

Christianity. My family members are strict Catholics, however my brother and I were not particularly practising and were mainly a Christian by name only and only attended religious ceremonies and church gatherings on occasions only like Christmas, because we had to, whereas my parents in particular were a regular at these things.

14. When was your decisive moment to embrace Islam?

When I heard a YouTube lecture given by Hamza Yusuf about the meaning of life.

15. What expectations did you have of being a Muslim before you converted?

I expected my life to change dramatically, as I was looking for spirituality and was seeking the reason for my existence. I liked the way my Muslim friends were brought

up and the whole concept of covering up and being respected. I was also attracted to the status of women in Islam and how Islam brings people together and accepts anyone regardless of their status, colour and background.

16. What expectations did you have of the Muslim community before you converted?

I wanted to be a part of it. I loved how they come together at special events and pray together in the mosque. I felt like I would belong to a family where I would be taken care of by sisters and looked out for.

17. Has being a Muslim had any significant negative impacts in your life?

Yes. My family pretty much disowned me after they found out I became a Muslim and they made me leave home. Unfortunately they really hate Muslims and perceive them as barbaric people and they cannot understand at all why I converted to a religion they despised so much. I haven't seen my family in two years and I have struggled incredibly since financially, emotionally and mentally. However, I have faith in Islam and believe it is the right path and have been able to cope, but it has been really hard.

18. Has being a Muslim had any significant positive impacts in your life?

Yes. It is sufficient for me to have faith in God and Islam has made me a stronger and more independent person. I feel more respectable and worthy in God's eyes as a human as I left my old ways of drinking and partying and I have become a more grounded and responsible person since.

19. Have you ever considered leaving Islam? If Yes, Why?

I did at one point when I was married. I married a Muslim Arab man thirteen months ago and I was introduced to him in the mosque. Many brothers recommended him to me because of his good character and faith in God. However, after I married him he treated me terribly. He used to beat me, come home drunk, disrespect me and even admitted that he married me for the sake of getting a British passport. That particular experience nearly made me leave Islam and everything to do with Muslims. I spent six months in a

council hostel suffering from severe depression after the ordeal, as I had imagined marriage to a Muslim man to be completely different and something special, how God wanted it to be and I felt used and miserable instead. He didn't pay my maintenance or help me learn about Islam. Instead his character was awful and nearly caused me to leave Islam. I will never look at religious looking Muslim men the same way again as it was all a deception and a front to me unfortunately. A wolf in sheep's clothing you could say.

20. Do you know any converts who have left Islam? If Yes, why?

Yes, one Muslim sister who went through a similar ordeal.

21. Do you receive support from your local Muslim community? If so, how?

None at all. I used to go to weekly Arabic classes so I could learn how to read The Quran and they stopped that. My local mosque is not great at providing educational programmes for new Muslims and, apart from some support from some Muslim friends, I have been disappointed by the lack of support provided. After my divorce I was not offered any counselling, help or advice by anyone in the mosque including the Imam who is always too busy to talk and finds it uncomfortable talking to women in general.

22. Have you faced any negativity from your local Muslim community? If so, what?

I live in a predominantly Asian community and being a white Muslim in this community is sometimes frowned upon. I feel there is some racism in the community unfortunately.

23. Why?

The people are not friendly and they find it hard to accept that an English girl has become 'one of them'. They see us English girls as loose women who party all the time and find it hard to accept that we have joined their community and want to be a part of their religion and way of life. I do not agree with much of their culture as it has nothing to do with religion and therefore I do not wear their clothing and for that I am looked down upon by the elders in the community as I wear normal clothes everyday and I am

pretty much outcast at events. The majority of the elders do not speak English and Islamic lectures in the mosque are usually in Urdu, which I don't understand and I see it as an indirect hint to people like me to keep to our own people and societies.

24. Have you faced any discrimination at work for being Muslim?

No.

25. Are your family members all non-Muslims?

Yes.

26. What hardships had you faced when becoming a Muslim?

It was very hard to practise Islam when I was living at home. It took me a while to learn how to pray and I had to do it in secret at home and of course I couldn't wear my *hijab*. I felt like I was torn between two identities and I wasn't free to be who I wanted to be. My parents especially do not like Muslims at all and brand them all as terrorists with negative images from what they see in the media, so it was a really big shock for them when they found out I converted.

27. Were you able to overcome any of those hardships? If not what are you doing to try and overcome them?

Kind of. I am still hurt because of my family and being cut off from them, however I have moved on with my life and I share a flat now with a Muslim girl who is a good friend of mine. She invites me to all her family events, I feel like a part of her family and this has helped to ease my pain so much. If it wasn't for her I don't know where I'd be now.

28. What was the cause of those hardships?

Family and my ex-husband and not finding much support in both situations.

29. Do you receive any support from your non-Muslim family?

No.

30. Has Islam fulfilled all your expectations in a religion and way of life?

Islam has yes, but Muslims haven't. If it wasn't for my faith I would have most likely left Islam and gone back to my family. At the time of conversion everyone is congratulating you and after you become a Muslim it's like they don't know you. They aren't bothered to help you or offer their time to help you out with Islamic things like learning how to pray.

31. Who is the most inspirational British Muslim convert to you?

Hamza Yusuf. I love the way he explains Islam. I learnt a lot from him.

32. Who is the least inspirational British Muslim convert to you?

Radical converts in the media like Richard Leech.

33. Do you feel you have contributed positively to British society since converting? If so, how?

Yes. I work as a teacher in a secondary school and I feel that my experiences have helped me become a more understanding and stronger person and this has helped me be more efficient in my job. My role as a teacher is to educate the kids so that they can benefit this society too.

34. Do you feel you have contributed positively to the Muslim community since converting? If so, how?

Not yet unfortunately but I would like to.

35. Do you get involved with your local Muslim community activities? i.e., Islamic festivities, charity events.

Eid parties only and bazaars. I don't get involved but I do visit them in order to be around Muslims and socialise at those times.

36. Does your local mosque offer support services for new Muslims? If so, please state what they are and if they have been beneficial to you.

Just a few introductory classes about Islam where there was the opportunity to ask questions at the end. They stopped that also.

37. Can you speak and read Arabic? If not, are you currently learning to?

Unfortunately not. I intend to learn one day.

38. Before you converted, did you find support for non-Muslims who are interested in Islam in your local mosque?

Very little. I was taken on a guided tour of the central mosque in London and that was all. Most of the information was obtained from my local Islamic bookshop and lectures.

39. In British society how can someone identify you as a Muslim?

I wear *hijab*.

40. Do you have non-Muslim friends?

Yes.

41. Have you lost any non-Muslim friends since becoming a Muslim?

Yes, many. Most of them didn't want to know me anymore. A couple didn't mind it and we are still in contact.

42. What has been the largest sacrifice you have made since becoming a Muslim?

Giving up my family.

43. What could be done to support Muslim Converts in your opinion?

More Islamic classes, more social events, groups and networks, workshops and counselling sessions for those of us who have hardships with our non-Muslim families especially and need support.

44. Do you feel it is important for one to be open about his/her de-conversion if someone was to leave Islam?

Yes because everyone is free to choose what religion they wish to follow it is not for people to decide. I know how it feels to have to hide your identity and it's horrible, stressing and emotionally draining so I don't agree that it's the best thing to do. Concealing who you really are only brings more problems than it solves them.

45. Do you have any advice for non-Muslims who are interested in converting to Islam?

My advice would be to read independently about Islam before converting because if you rely on people to help you then you're wasting your time. To enjoy Islam you need to discover it yourself and not depend on other Muslims to teach them what they need to know. They need to take into account how they will deal with their families and friends and have a plan to secure themselves emotionally beforehand in preparation for the hardships to come. By doing this they will be able to deal with these situations quickly.

Pilot Interview 2

1. Gender

Female.

2. Age

Thirty-seven.

3. Education

BA in English.

4. How long have you been a convert?

Three years.

5. What is your ethnicity?

White British.

6. What is your marital status?

Married.

7. If you are married, is your partner a convert too?

No, he's an Asian Muslim.

8. Do you have any kids?

No.

9. Where in Britain do you reside?

London – Acton.

10. How did you learn about Islam?

From TV, the Internet and my husband before I married him.

11. Were you satisfied with the Islamic education you received?

Yes. At first I wasn't convinced Islam was the right religion for me. I had tried other religions such as Christianity; my family members are Christians but not practising. They never read the bible or care much about religion. I tried the Hindu religion and didn't like it and I ended up feeling more comfortable with the teachings of Islam as I felt they made more sense to me. My husband at the time was very supportive and helped me to learn more about Islam and answered my questions. If he couldn't answer my questions due to lack of knowledge on his part he would go with me to a Muslim scholar to get the answers to my questions. He inspired me to convert.

12. Where did you convert?

In my local mosque.

13. When was your decisive moment to embrace Islam?

When I saw the *Eid* prayer in the great central mosque. I was overwhelmed at the number of people all coming together to pray and it really moved me. I loved the social connection that Muslims had and I wanted to be a part of it.

14. What expectations did you have of being a Muslim before you converted?

I knew it was going to be difficult to give up a few things when being a Muslim. For example, I had to be careful with what I eat and drink, the places I go to, the types of people I mix with etc. but after reading about Islam and researching about it I found that it would give me stability and a meaning to life.

15. What expectations did you have of the Muslim community before you converted?

One of the reasons I converted was to be a part of the Muslim community in London, which is full of Arabs and Asians mainly. I loved their brotherhood and sisterhood and how they come together at special events. I imagined that they would be very welcoming to have new Muslims in their community, as I was given a lot of assistance before I converted by them in the mosque. I didn't find this amongst people from other religions.

16. Has being a Muslim had any significant negative impacts in your life?

Yes. I did lose a few members of my family. They are all non-Muslims. My father refuses to speak to me until now and my brother too; however my relationship with my mother is still ok and if I wish to speak to her she has to do so without my father or brother being around. It has caused a lot of stress in both our lives. I have two children and they are unable to see their grandparents because of it.

17. Has being a Muslim had any significant positive impacts in your life?

Yes. I have become a different person, a better person. I am calmer, I used to have a terrible temper, no direction in life, no spirituality and I feel with Islam I have become a more settled person and it's reformed my character to the better. I also met my Muslim husband throughout the whole process and he's a very kind and supportive man.

18. Have you ever considered leaving Islam? If yes, why?

When I was first learning about Islam I had some doubts as my family was totally against it, however once I converted I didn't consider leaving.

19. Do you know any converts who have left Islam? If yes, why?

No.

20. Do you receive support from your local Muslim community? If so, how?

I didn't find the support that I had hoped to find in my local community when I joined in terms of offering emotional support, advice, Islamic education etc. I found that the Arabs in my community are friendlier and more open to new Muslim converts than the Asians are and the Asians tend to stick together and have their own mosques in their own languages, whereas the Arab ones translate everything in English too so in that sense it has been really helpful. In times of difficulties we don't know who to turn to as our difficulties are different from theirs, as we have to deal with non-Muslim family members, abuse and other issues and we find that sometimes they don't really understand what we go through.

21. Have you faced any negativity from your local Muslim community? If so, what?

Nothing significant no. I only tend to get treated as an outcast in the mosque sometimes as everyone is speaking in their own languages and I am unable to participate socially with them.

22. Have you faced any discrimination at work for being Muslim?

No.

23. What hardships had you faced when becoming a Muslim?

The hardships I faced were mainly due to my father. He doesn't approve at all of my conversion and told me if I decide to go ahead with it then our relationship will be over. I was torn between Islam and my family. I suffered much verbal abuse from my own brother when he'd catch me wearing the *hijab* and praying and I ended up leaving home and stayed with a friend until I moved to a council hostel. It was a horrible place to be in, in a grotty place in East London, living amongst drug addicts, prostitutes and people with mental illnesses but I had nowhere else to go.

24. Were you able to overcome any of those hardships? If not what are you doing to try and overcome them?

The council hostel was near my local mosque and I used to go there everyday and find peace in what I believe in. My mother felt sorry for me and she would talk to me when she was out of the house and I found comfort in her telling me dad would come round to it one day and that she still loves me no matter what etc. Eventually I met my husband one day in the mosque, he is Pakistani and we got married and I now live with him and my in laws in one house and they are nice people *alhamdulillah* (praise be to God). This has helped me overcome most of my family problems, as he and my in laws are very understanding of the situation.

25. Has Islam fulfilled all your expectations in a religion and way of life?

Yes it has. I'm very happy I converted. I just wish more could be done in Muslim communities to help people like me.

26. Who is the most inspirational British Muslim convert to you?

Hamza Yusuf and Yusuf Estes.

27. Who is the least inspirational British Muslim convert to you?

Radical converts that you find in Hyde Park (Speakers' Corner).

28. Do you feel you have contributed positively to British society since converting?
If so, how?

I abide by British laws and respect them; I don't hurt anyone; I respect everyone's faith and way of life, and do not in any way believe in any extremist practices that you find on the news. I have non-Muslim friends still and even though I wear the *hijab* I have never had any problems with them or any colleagues at work.

29. Do you feel you have contributed positively to the Muslim community since converting? If so, how?

I volunteer my help at the local bazaars and events. I like to get involved in them as through them I get to know other converts and Muslims.

30. Does your local mosque offer support services for new Muslims? If so, please state what they are and if they have been beneficial to you.

Not much, just a few lectures every now and again that are usually advertised in the mosque, at prayer times or on Facebook.

31. Can you speak and read Arabic? If not, are you currently learning to?

No, unfortunately there aren't classes for people like me in my area. I'd love to learn Arabic but people haven't really taken the initiative to set them up for new Muslims.

32. Before you converted, did you find support for non-Muslims who are interested in Islam in your local mosque?

No.

33. What has been the largest sacrifice you have made since becoming a Muslim?

Being separated from my family.

34. What could be done to support Muslim converts in your opinion?

More social events for new Muslims, Arabic and Islamic educational classes and support networks.

35. Do you feel it is important for one to be open about his/her de-conversion if someone was to leave Islam?

Yes, because if you don't then you will be living a lie, which in itself is worse. People shouldn't be afraid to come out if they have decided to de-convert. I believe it is a matter between them and God. Not everyone is able to cope with the challenges and it's not for people to judge.

36. Do you have any advice for non-Muslims who are interested in converting to Islam?

My advice would be to think carefully about how it will affect the relationships in their lives and how they are going to solve them. Being a Muslim is a great experience if they can find the social support for it and without it they will be miserable. They need to research Islam properly beforehand and perhaps make friends within the Muslim communities so that they have people they can turn to in times of hardships.

Appendix III

British Muslim Converts and Ex-Converts: Semi-Structured Interview

This interview is for a PhD research at Kingston University about conversions and de-conversions to and from Islam in Britain.

This study is aimed at British Muslim converts and ex-Muslim converts. It will investigate the challenges, hardships and experiences faced by individuals and in their time spent as a Muslim. The study looks into the root/main causes of the hardships that influenced/pushed individuals to convert and/or leave Islam, and what was experienced in those processes (such as emotional/physical/social/psychological problems). The study also explores apostasy issues in Britain (that is, any consequences faced after leaving a religion or group to join Islam and after leaving Islam) to compare different religious practices/policies in this subject.

Please be assured that all answers will be anonymous and all data received will be protected and used for my research purpose only. Your participation is very much appreciated and is of great value to this study. I will inform you of the research outcomes when the study is completed in early 2016.

Start of questions:

Gender:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Educational Background:

Marital Status:

How long have you been a convert for?

Area of Residence (i.e. North London):

Kindly explain your upbringing in a few sentences (if you were raised in a religious household, non-religious etc.)

How did you come to learn about Islam? What attracted you to the religion?

Did you read about Islam? If so what kind of material did you read? (Book names, online articles etc.)

Can you read or understand Arabic? If not, have you been attempting to learn it? If not, why?

How long were you interested in Islam before converting to it?

Do you belong to any particular sect? (Sunni, Shia, Sufi etc.) and why this particular sect?

How did you inform your family/how did they find out you had become a Muslim and how long after your conversion was this?

How did they react to your conversion? Please explain why.

If you were involved in a previous religion, did you face any hostility/hardships from its members/family or friends when you abandoned it?

If so, how did you deal with this?

Do you wear the Islamic dress in public? If so, please describe it.

Please list three major positive impacts being a Muslim has had on your life and the lives of those around you.

Please list three major negative impacts being a Muslim has had on your life (challenges, obstacles, hardships) and the lives of those around you.

Were you able to overcome the major hardships? If so, how?

Are you still currently suffering/or have previously suffered from any consequences resulting from the challenges faced? If so, what are they?

Were you able to receive any support with your challenges and hardships? If yes, from who? (Muslim communities, organisations, family, non-Muslims etc.)

Please list a few of the smaller daily challenges you may face/or had faced as a new Muslim and explain how you deal with them, if you do/did.

Please explain in a few sentences how your experience has been in general with other Muslims and Muslim communities.

Please list three major positive experiences with other Muslims.

Please list three major negative experiences with other Muslims.

Were your expectations before converting to Islam of other Muslims and the Muslim community met? If yes, how? If not, why?

How are you currently receiving your Islamic education and what is provided for new Muslims by your local Muslim community as an educational venue?

Do you/did you get involved with any local Muslim community events? If not, why?

Does your local mosque/Islamic centre provide any beneficial services for new Muslims? If so, what are they?

How do you feel about the way Muslim converts are portrayed in the media?

Do you have any good life-long Muslim friends and do/did they offer you continuous support as a new Muslim? If so, please list three positive things they do/did to help you, and if they stopped supporting you, what do you feel was the reason for it?

Have you faced any significant hardships or positive experiences after your conversion within the non-Muslim British community?

What do you love the most about being a Muslim?

Do you still have contact with your non-Muslim family? Kindly explain in a few sentences your relationship with them now.

What type of support do you feel is the most needed for new Muslims in the UK?

Have you ever considered leaving Islam? If yes, what was the main reason for it?

What was the main reason/s for you to leave Islam?

Is your de-conversion a secret or do you make it known? And why?

If you told your Muslim friends and community, how did they react to your de-conversion?

Have you faced any negative consequences from your de-conversion?

Have you experienced any positive outcomes after your de-conversion?

Did you convert to another religion after Islam? If yes, which one and why?

Do you know anyone who has left Islam? If yes, why did they leave?

Is there anything else you would like to add/mention?

Thank you so much for your time in answering my questions.

(End of questions)

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