REPORT

Muslim Converts

A Lens to Focus on Integration Complexities

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MUSLIM CONVERTS: A LENS TO FOCUS ON INTEGRATION COMPLEXITIES

Executive Summary

The exact number of people who have embraced Islam in Western Europe remains subject to speculation. However, the involvement of a tiny minority of converts in terrorist attacks within Europe has prompted a lot of media coverage. The discourse around home-grown terrorism has presented this group of converts to Islam as a shadowy internal threat to national security.

This report argues that converts represent a transitional population that has the potential to form an effective bridge between heritage Muslim communities and the larger non-Muslim European societies. Rather than dealing with them from a risk perspective of potential terrorism, they can be seen as part of the solution in bridging communities at an epistemological level.

Political and religious recommendations need to be based on a deep understanding of the social and spiritual aspects of the reality of the Muslim presence in the European context. In this regard, the convert community provides an authentic internal sample through which opportunities and challenges to social cohesion could be deeply explored. In addition to discussing findings from previous research, this report shows how the lack of cultural awareness and understanding from heritage Muslim communities towards new converts could lead some to reject their newly adopted faith.

The report also highlights the need for contextual religious scholarship that takes into consideration converts' specific circumstances. Although this area of scholarly research would include some shared experiences with the heritage minority Muslim communities in Western societies, it would also contain some facets that are specifically bound solely to the converts' journeys and transitions. These contain, for example, a range of psychological, social and financial challenges that can arise from entering Islam without having extended family support.

These areas of research are at the heart of the field of study examining the higher objectives and intents of Islamic law (Maqasid al-Sharia). Hence, further interdisciplinary research is needed to explore these areas in more significant depth, especially the ways in which conversion is impacting on the spiritual, intellectual, social, health, and financial aspects of converts in general, and young and vulnerable converts, in particular.

Policy recommendations

This research makes the following recommendations:

- The approach of risk towards the community of converts to Islam needs to be revised in order to direct the debate towards the potential role that converts could play in the process of fostering social cohesion and mutual respect between the Muslim community and its broader non-Muslim social context in Western Europe. This communicating role has the potential to advance relations at an epistemological level, as well as, at the practical level.

- Muslim community organisations interested in supporting convert Muslims need to consider the provision of interest-free loans (Qard Hasan) as financial support to the most vulnerable individuals who have lost their social networks.

- The Muslim community and civil society organisations should actively ensure converts are represented in organisational bodies, mosques and other representative capacities. This will place converts at the grassroots, in an active position to invest in their unique experiences and journeys, and make positive contributions as being an authentic part of the Muslim community's fabric.

- It is also crucial to raise awareness amongst the heritage Muslim communities about the needs of this minority within their ranks, highlight the challenges they face and encourage open debate on issues related to culture, nationality and religious complexities, for example, via seminars, mosque activities, workshops and other local events.

- Introductory programmes should be provided for new converts, which aim to raise awareness about the possible opportunities and challenges they may encounter with heritage Muslim communities, for example, those that have emerged from psychological and social research. Programmes should also signpost the support services available to them within the community (religious knowledge, financial, social, and mental health facilities).

- Scholarship funding should be provided to imams and teaching staff in mosques and Islamic centres, to facilitate their access to university courses in the areas of counselling, education, chaplaincy and sociology, incorporating practical projects directly related to their work. Such training will help those practitioners to gain much needed skills, and assist with building bridges between traditional Islamic knowledge and British contextual complexities.

Introduction

From a background of national and international socio-political changes and challenges, the integration of Muslims into European societies becomes a concern that revolves around security risks and invading foreign values, which are perceived as a threat to principles of freedom and democracy. At the heart of such debates are European born Muslims and, more specifically, native European converts. While the literature on Muslim converts is growing, proportionately less effort has been devoted to building interdisciplinary frameworks that would allow an examination of integration issues, considering both sociological and theological aspects.

The European Muslim convert community provides a sample that presents the possibilities and challenges of integration from both sides. For example, how does a Western cultural background interact with heritage Muslims? What avenues need to be explored through research with regards to issues of identity, religion, culture and politics? Exploring these questions when using a theological framework would allow a religious discourse that investigates 'social cohesion' at an epistemological level and does not remain dependent on socio-political discourses.

To investigate the issues outlined above involves two aspects. The first concerns Muslim converts interacting with their non-Muslim communities of origin. This particular aspect highlights some opportunities and obstacles to the integration of Muslim minorities when culture is shared, but religious affiliations are different. The second is to investigate the outcomes of the interaction of native Western converts to Islam with the heritage Muslim communities. Hence, Muslim converts in this regard serve as an authentic voice from within that challenges both the non-Muslim majority and the traditional Muslim minority about issues of religious identity and cultural integration. Accordingly, on the one hand, this raises the need for socio-political discourses to take into account influences that host majority attitudes might have on minorities regarding integration processes. On the other hand, it challenges Muslim religious scholarship to consider, in further depth, some emerging issues of integration: both theoretically and practically, via jurisprudential research. It is here where it becomes necessary for integration complexities to be discussed at the theoretical level of Maqasid al-Sharia (the higher objectives and intents of Islamic law) rather than from a defensive position against forced assimilation, found in dominant political discourses. The defensive mode may result in the isolation of, and resistance against, the dictated representatives or models of integration (Haw, 2009). Successful integration stems

from mutual respect and conviction, in devoted religious communities that demands authentic trusted voices and not imposed ones (Ramadan, 2004).

This article moves the discussion forward. Firstly, it gives a contextual background picture of Muslims in Britain. Although this section is not directly related to the issue of conversion, it contextualises themes that will emerge in the second part of this report associated to converts to Islam in Britain. Secondly, it reviews the literature around conversion to Islam in Europe, and specifically in Britain, to form a basis for the theoretical discussion in the third section. Thirdly, it builds links between the sociological findings presented in the study and the Islamic values of higher objectives with regards to Muslim converts in particular, and the heritage Muslim community at large. In doing so, the report argues that the European Muslim convert community provides an internal sample that signifies the possibilities and challenges of integration via both directions. Accordingly, their experiences need to be taken seriously by Islamic scholarship at the level of the higher objectives research with regards to the Muslim presence in Western Europe. Moreover, this report argues for the need for interdisciplinary research collaboration

that involve both sociological and Islamic traditional scholarship when engaging with the complexities of identity and debates around the 'integration' and 'social cohesion' of Muslim communities in Britain.

This interdisciplinary wealth of research findings would better inform discussions of the Muslim presence in Europe. Hence, the report urges policymakers to regard Muslim scholarly institutions as counterparts to enriching the debate, through their research which takes diverse theological perspectives, and by contributing to the development of informed religious training programmes delivered to Imams and counselling providers. Successful integration requires the efforts of all involved parties, and those voices that are widely represented in Muslim communities should not be excluded. Converts provide an internal narrative and an authentic Muslim voice as they have similarities and differences with both heritage Muslims and non-Muslim communities.

Methodology

This report is mainly based on the findings of previous research in the field of conversion.

First, it mainly uses a literature review around the area of conversion to Islam in Europe, and specifically in Britain, to build a basis for discussion and suggestions of how this research could be extended.

Secondary to the above, the report applies data from a previous PhD fieldwork study of dealing with diversity in Muslim schools in Britain (Lahmar, 2012). The work was carried out in six case-study Muslim schools located within four different geographical contexts in England. A multiple qualitative case-study approach enabled the exploration of participants' experiences and meanings of Islamic schooling within a British socio-political context. The analysis in the main PhD research is based on data derived from a total of 157 returned questionnaires, 9 focus groups of children, 1 focus group of parents, 22 individual semi-structured interviews with teachers, 9 individual semi-structured interviews with parents, 11 individual semi-structured interviews with school managers and the consultancy of the prospectus, website and Ofsted report of each case-study school. To manage data, NVivo 9 software was applied to the analysis of qualitative data and SPSS software used to analyse the closed responses of the questionnaire.

The theme of Muslim converts emerged from such data analysis but was not directly relevant to the main

PhD study question. This report follows this theme that emerged from the face-to-face semi-structured interviews. In addition, four participants agreed to follow-up via emails, contributing further, by providing expanded semi-structured written accounts of their perspectives and experiences of conversion. Accordingly, four diverse Muslim convert participants gave their informed consent to share their experiences of conversion in the form of written accounts contributing to this report. The four participants are all women of different backgrounds: two are unmarried, and the other two are married to heritage Muslim husbands. Their backgrounds are as follows: one White British, one South-Asian plus two subjects of different Eastern European origins. The data underwent thematic analysis. All names used in this report are pseudonyms.

Regarding analysis, this report focuses on the shared themes that emerged from research about Muslim conversion in Western Europe, and ways in which these emerging issues could enrich debates about the integration of Muslim communities within Western societies. In doing so, this report follows the journeys of converts using Gadamer's (1989) concept of 'practical wisdom' in understanding their attempts to find 'the right measure' in constructing their new identities and integrating into their two communities, which have different worldviews. To find that 'right measure' of religious application considering changing contexts, however, Muslim converts need help from Islamic Studies research on areas of the higher objectives and intents of Islamic law. It is this theoretical lens through which literature on Muslim conversion is

analysed. I attempt to focus on the potential contribution that interdisciplinary research, combining Islamic Studies and sociological disciplines, could provide.

Some individuals who have become Muslims reject the description of the word 'convert'. For example, in the pilot study of my PhD, a few converts objected to the use of the word 'converts', a concept that I had utilised in the initial questionnaire. In doing so, they considered themselves born monotheists and, therefore, are 'reverts' to the belief of the One only God after they have lost it through the social environment in which they developed their concepts about life. This understanding is based on the Islamic notion of 'fitrah' (natural instinct). Similarly, some show their objection to other terms, such as 'new Muslim', thinking it gives the impression of being less Muslim. However, for the scope of this report, the word 'convert' will be used because it is the term mostly used to convey the meaning of changing one's belief system and, therefore, widely understood.

The Muslim population in Britain

Ethnic Diversity

There is a strong association between the immigrants' origins in the different European countries and the ex-colonial territories (Nasr, 1999). Muslim immigrants to Britain hail predominantly from South Asia, mainly India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Nevertheless, there is evidence

that the early presence of Islam in Britain goes back to the Tudors and Stuarts when merchants and slaves formed the two main groups of this presence (Ansari, 2004; MacLean and Matar, 2011). In the 2011 Census for England and Wales, Muslims form the second largest religious group. They make up 4.8 per cent of the population, having made the largest increase out of all of the religious groups, of 1.8 per cent, since the 2001 Census (Office for National Statistics, 2012). Although they were ethnically diverse, two-thirds of Muslims (68 per cent) were from an Asian background, including Pakistani (38 per cent) and Bangladeshi (15 per cent). The proportion of Muslims reporting as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British was (10 per cent) and white (8 per cent) (Office for National Statistics, 2013).

Muslim converts

With regards to conversion, there is a lack of quantitative analysis of the phenomena of conversion to Islam and, therefore, the estimation of converts' numbers is varied. Brice (2015) used data from Scotland's Census 2001 as a source for a quantitative analysis of conversion to, and away from, Islam in England and Wales. In 2011, it was estimated that there were 77,715 converts to Islam compared to 51,299 in 2001 (Brice, 2015). Yet, these estimations raise many questions with regards to the assumptions of similarities between Scotland and England and Wales concerning individual ethno-religious groups. Also, the appropriateness of applying trends that emerged from data collected in 2001 in Scotland to data collected in 2011 in England and Wales (Brice, 2015) is possibly problematic. Brice (2010, 2015) argues against the perception that conversion to Islam has made any contribution to the rise in total Muslim numbers in the United Kingdom. According to Brice's (2015) estimations, the overall conversion to Islam fills in the gap of conversion away from it. He further suggests that estimates for England and Wales show that 'Muslim' has become a net loser in 2011 compared to being a net gainer in 2001. Hence, the increase in size is due to birth and immigration (Brice, 2015). According to Pew Research Center's (Lipka and Hackett, 2017) most recent report, Muslims are also the world's fastest-growing religious group due to age and fertility factors. This young profile is similar to that of Muslims in Britain, which also results in the estimation of a faster demographic growth of the Muslim population in Britain compared to other religious groups (Pew Research Center, 2017).

A University of Cambridge report (Suleiman, 2013, p. 20) states that converts from an African-Caribbean heritage may "form one of (if not) the largest group(s) of converts to Islam in Britain". However, there is an absence of any reliable data from which to estimate the number of

converts to Islam from this background (Suleiman, 2013) or their rate of conversion. There is no evidence to support any claim of a mass conversion of the population to Islam and converts remain a small minority group within the minority of heritage Muslims (Brice, 2010). There are more female converts than male converts (Brice, 2010). However, the research data does not support the perception that marriage is a primary factor, Brice (2010) regards this belief as a myth.

Religious diversity

Muslim communities in Britain are not only diverse in terms of ethnicity, but they are also affiliated with various groups within Islam (Walford, 2003). This includes diversity along religious jurisprudence lines, creed lines or religious activism lines. In 2001 over 87 per cent of British Muslims were affiliated with the Sunni group which is reflected in it having the largest number of Islamic organisations in the UK (Peach, 2006). The main groups involved in establishing religious institutions in Britain are Barelwi, Deobandi, Ahl-e-Hadith, Salafis and Jamaat-e-Islami Sunni affiliations (Bhatt, 1997; Gilliat-Ray, 2010). The elements of difference over the approach to jurisprudence or Islamic creed are areas of potential difference in the type of religious knowledge that a Muslim organisation might provide. To work out legal religious issues, Muslim religious scholars refer to the two main Muslim sacred sources, namely, the Quran and Prophetic traditions (Hadith). However, interpreting these sources involves reasoning power within the guidelines of Islamic jurisprudence. This exercise has resulted in the development of various jurisprudence schools of thought, including the four main Sunni legal schools, the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali, and the Shiite legal schools, including Jafari. Muslims generally

follow the interpretations of the school of jurisprudence prevalent in the region from which they derive (Hallaq, 2005; Philips, 2007).

The current debate

More recently, there has been a noticeable research interest in the conversion to Islam in Europe, generally, and of female conversion, in particular (Alyedreessy, 2016; Brice, 2010; Gudrun Jensen, 2008; Köse and Loewenthal, 2000; Moosavi, 2015; Younis and Hassan, 2017; Zebiri, 2008). In addition to the history of conversion, Zebiri (2008) explored the theoretical Islamic basis of conversion, linking past to present narratives in Britain and different facets of Muslim converts' experiences. Moreover, understandings of conversion to Islam from diverse experiences across aspects of ethnicity and gender have begun to expand. For instance, The University of Cambridge reports (Suleiman, 2013, 2016) provide insights into a diverse sample of female and male indigenous British converts' experiences as a form of challenging the perception of Islam as foreign, and as attached to certain immigrant cultures. Yet, "Islam is perceived to be foreign and is increasingly stereotyped in the media as intolerant, misogynistic, violent or cruel, strange or different" (Brice, 2010, p. 13). Indigenous converts' voices are challenging the narrative that attaches Islam to immigration only. Hence, it is a move towards an understanding of Islam as a religion of an indigenous minority and, therefore, forms an integral part of the British religious and social reality (Suleiman, 2013).

The 'journey' and 'love' emerge as two main themes in the religious conversion research literature (Gudrun Jensen,

studies specifically on understanding the experiences of non-white ethnic minorities, who are a minority group within the Muslim converts' community (Suleiman, 2013, 2016). The focus on understanding the experiences of converts within their wider non-Muslim community, as well as within Muslim communities, would provide valuable data for exploring the complexities of the social integration of different communities in Britain. This report follows themes that have emerged from research literature with regards to Muslim converts in Western Europe, particularly within Britain, and how these emerging issues could enrich debates on the integration of Muslim communities within their Western societies. In doing so, I attempt to focus on the potential contribution that interdisciplinary research could provide to this area of study.

The conversion journeys

From the "Religious outsider" to the "Religious insider"

The mechanism of conversion to Islam is simple: it is founded on the verbal proclamation of the testimony of faith, the 'shahadah'. This is because the 'shahadah' is the declaration of faith and the beginning of the transitional journey to Islam. Hence, the conversion to Islam does not need formal ceremonial arrangements, unless the person who is converting wishes to make a formal declaration of faith in the presence of an Imam and witnesses. The formal declaration, however, helps with issuing official documents that would facilitate marriage, pilgrimage, visa arrangements or Islamic burial, for instance. Uttering these words for the sake of marriage or any worldly gain without a personal conviction would be religiously meaningless. Many converts change their names as a way to symbolise a new birth and a new heart; others do not change their names to keep their continuation with their cultural past (Roald, 2012; Suleiman, 2013, 2016; Wykes, 2013).

2008). Roald (2012) presents different stages through which many converts move on a journey of reflection and evaluation. Jensen's (2008) study of female converts in Denmark examines conversions in relation to a Danish national identity, arguing that these converts engage in an ideological struggle in negotiating their identities as both Danes and Muslims. They open space for re-making identities based on negotiating meanings of sameness and difference and questioning constructions of 'self' and 'other' (Gudrun Jensen, 2008). In so doing, they elucidate connecting relations between Danish and Muslim identities, which otherwise appear to have nothing in common (Gudrun Jensen, 2008). This process presented a formation of new and hybrid identities (Gudrun Jensen, 2008, p. 401).

The Faith Matters report on Muslim converts draws attention to the increased negative media coverage of Muslim converts in comparison to heritage Muslims (Brice, 2010). Brice (2010) states that in British news reports converts are portrayed as being linked to terrorism or extremism and regarded as presenting a greater risk to security than heritage Muslims.

So, although it could be said that European conversions to Islam are no longer absent from the sociological examination of conversion, there is still a need for further

In recent decades, Muslims in Europe are becoming more populous, and their religious identity is becoming more visible in public arenas within different European contexts (Bowen, 2006; Laborde, 2008; Werbner, 2009). Yet, with this growth and visibility come many challenges to secular societies, and several questions are raised again on the nature of interaction between religion and the secular public space (Haddad and Smith, 2002; Kepel, 2004; Laurence and Vaïsse, 2006; Modood, 2007, 2010; Modood and Werbner, 1997; Thomas, 2012). In the light

of terrorist attacks in Europe, along with the complex political upheavals in the Middle-East and other hot spots in the Muslim World, questions around values that Europe should protect become more urgent. Muslims, as a religious group, are situated at the heart of such debates, with their religious values being challenged and their loyalty to their European societies doubted at times (Hickley, 2009).

Muslim converts from European indigenous backgrounds present a model of the fluidity of identity formation across boundaries and a challenge to the discourse of "us" and "them". Moreover, they form hybrid identities that challenge perceived definitions of 'equality', 'freedom', and 'oppression', especially for white Western European female converts (Gudrun Jensen, 2008; Suleiman, 2013). This leads to questions regarding how could they abandon their ancestors' achievements for women in associating themselves with a deprived community that is long attached to lower social classes, the oppression of women and immigrant backgrounds?

However, narratives of these women also present a challenging position of a continuous reflexive self that is navigating between similarities and differences of diverse cultural and religious worlds (Gudrun Jensen, 2008). Their forward and backward movements were not only at the level of appearances but also at an ontological and epistemological level (Roald, 2012; Suleiman, 2013, 2016). It is this journey of exploration of the self, with all its baggage, and the 'other', with all their perceived differences, which/who become part of the self as well. It is that movement, and/or the exchange, of positions and horizons of the self and 'other', which make the familiar strange (Bauman and May, 2001), and to experience the world from the Other's stance would help in finding that fusion of horizons and the space for a better understanding between communities (Gadamer, 1989). A crucial aspect throughout all this process is the religious and spiritual self-searching for authentic resolutions for tensions arising from the endeavour of being part of both, the old 'self' and the new Muslim one.

Regarding the attitude of 'self' and 'other' in relation to Western culture and society, research suggests that most converts do want to keep parts of their cultural heritage that do not contradict with Islamic requirements. Many of them, however, become visible Muslims, especially women preferring to wear a hijab, by which their Britishness is questioned (Suleiman, 2013). The visibility of being a Muslim also associates them with the dominant South-Asian ethnic minority heritage Muslims (Suleiman, 2013). For converts with non-Muslim South Asian backgrounds, their ethnicity was already visible as a minority. Yet, for White individuals, their conversion to Islam would also

mean risking some of their majority White privilege status and perhaps further, their middle-class position (Moosavi, 2015; Suleiman, 2013; Wykes, 2013).

Research shows that some new converts to Islam face rejection by their own families, especially when the new faith becomes visible in public spaces. Hence, even their close relatives may turn away from them (Moosavi, 2015; Suleiman, 2013; Younis and Hassan, 2017). The joy they feel in relation to their new faith is mixed with anxiety about their engagement with the new community, as well as their loss of a previous social life. The new convert is confronted with the dilemma of working out which of the elements of practice are Islamic and which ones are mere cultural heritage (Alyedreessy, 2016; Brice, 2010; Gudrun Jensen, 2008; Roald, 2012; Zebiri, 2008). The intertwined relationship between religious and cultural practices within heritage Muslim communities makes it difficult for some converts to Islam to navigate their ways through their new faith communities, as well as, keep those parts of their original cultural practices which are different from the heritage Muslim dominant culture (Roald, 2012).

The experience of being 'different' from the old 'self' by having one's own family from a different belief background arguably gives some converts to Islam the ability to communicate better with others (Gudrun Jensen, 2008). This is because these converts are continuously negotiating their space with the non-Muslim and heritage Muslim communities, and can see the similarity and difference in both, and yet they feel that they are misunderstood from both sides (Gudrun Jensen, 2008). This position demands one to be continuously reflexive to distinguish religious obligations from the mere cultural customs of heritage Muslims (Brice, 2010; Gudrun Jensen, 2008; Roald, 2012; Suleiman, 2013, 2016). The role that converts play is described in the research literature in
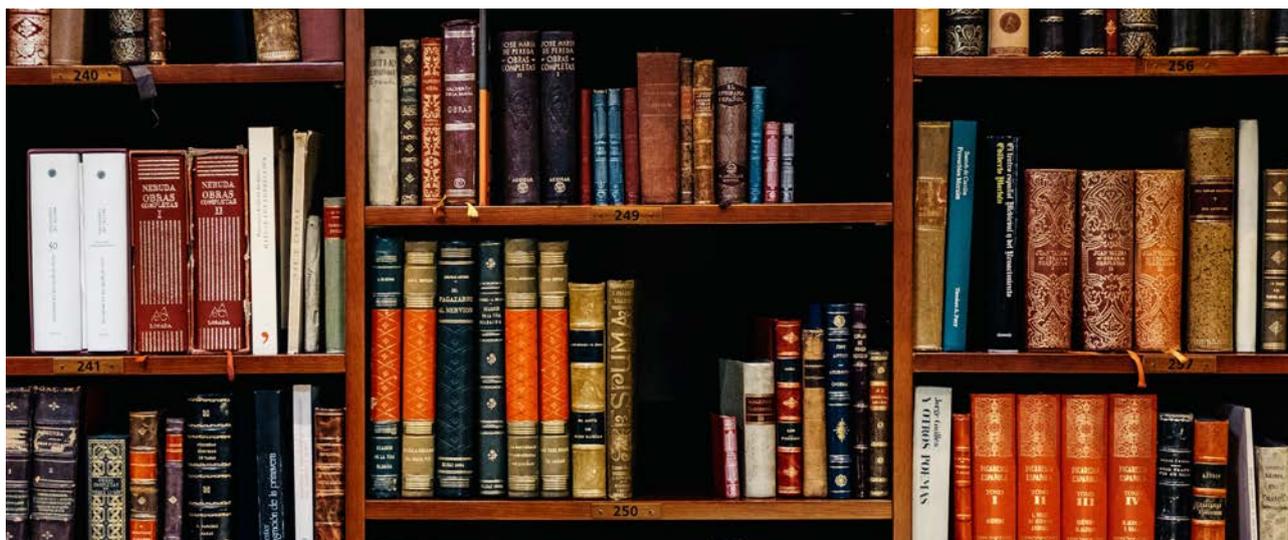
terms of 'mediation', 'bridging' and translating between the non-Muslim majority and the heritage Muslim minority (Brice, 2010; Gerholm and Lithman, 1990; Roald, 2004). Yet, the embodiment of this role has its own complexities as well in bearing the outcomes of conflict and arousing fear, hatred and sensation with their similarity and difference (Gudrun Jensen, 2008). Hence, converts face the implications of their classification as 'Muslims', especially when the general discourse suggests the incompatibility between the fundamentals of 'European values' and 'Islam' (Kepel, 1997, 2004; Ramadan and Amghar, 2001). This journey is not easy for many converts as expressed in one of my research participants' written account:

> I read about Islam for two years before I accepted it. I was so naive and thought that my life is going to be easy from there. But I was wrong. Alhamdulillah. Allah teaches me lessons which I'm happy about. (Ruqia, written journal)

During the journey of reflexivity upon 'self' and 'other', many converts need credible Islamic scholarship with regards to the emerging complexities related to different aspects of their living reality. The lack of local Muslim scholarship competencies that combine a depth of traditional religious scholarship with a depth of contextual awareness means that many converts seek help from the internet (Brice, 2010; Suleiman, 2013, 2016). However, this is not without its risks and inconveniences, which can cause confusion and place some converts in more stressful situations when answers are generic and not customised to their specific circumstances and needs. Nabila is a female participant from a South-Asian background; she summarised her personal experience as follows:

> Also, it's important for reverts to sometimes get individual rulings specific to our own circumstances, and applying generic rulings due to lack of knowledge available and people to ask can cause situations to become more difficult and stressful. (Nabila, written journal)

Hence, there is a need for comprehensive training, based upon religious scholarship that has both a traditional scholarship and a comprehensive understanding of the British socio-political context in which converts, as well as heritage Muslims, are practising their religious lives.

Converts and risk

The joining of a few Western European converts to the so-called Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) and their participation in acts of violence against their own local European communities in the name of Islam have brought them to public debates through the prism of risk and invisible threat. Attacks on London in 2001, 2004, 2005 and 2017 respectively, all involved European converts. This was also the case in the 2006 and the 2007 bomb plots in Germany (Karagiannis, 2012). These incidents represent converts as posing a threat to public security. Accordingly, the British revised official counterterrorism policy has given a specific mention of recent convert prisoners as prone to being influenced by extreme views, partly due to their confusion and lack of knowledge about the Islamic faith (HM Government, 2011). Prior research shows that Muslim converts were more likely to be attached to terrorism or extremism in media coverage than their heritage Muslim counterparts (Brice, 2010). The internet becomes a source of information: for instance, according to the Faith Matters report (Brice, 2010), 64 per cent of respondents reported having sought some help from the internet. The same report also highlights the lack of guidance provided by mosques and Islamic organisations to new converts to Islam. This makes this group vulnerable to extreme ideas conducted via the internet (Karagiannis, 2012). In this regard, Karagiannis (2012) argues that:

Those converts were radicalized because they became victims of abuse or discrimination; for some others, radicalization was the result of political grievances; the slippery slope effect was identified as another mechanism of radicalization; there were also cases of individuals being radicalized by partners or relatives. Finally, it was argued that inspirational preaching could function as an additional mechanism of individual radicalization. (Karagiannis, 2012, p. 112)

Challenges converts face within the heritage Muslim community

Muslim communities usually welcome new converts warmly, but leave them to their own loneliness and navigation after the ceremony phase fades away (Gudrun Jensen, 2008; Roald, 2012; Zebiri, 2008). The new convert may then feel burdened by their new belief's obligations, accompanied by a lack of support and isolation from previous non-Muslim social circles (Roald, 2012). The following written account from my research data shows this phase of disappointment:

As the journey started not everything was going to be all easy and cosy. Although there were many obstacles on the way: issues with own family, friends and people around us. Not everyone was understanding to our new way of life, and making it harder on us, I still believe that the real disappointment is when it comes within Muslim community from your brothers and sisters in faith. We have so much in common regardless of the background, race colour and nationality as most importantly we share the Shahadah. (Sarah, written journal)

The following account also illustrates that along with feelings of isolation and neglect, some converts may struggle for long periods of time in order to find a comfortable space as an integral part of their new Muslim community:

Integration into the Muslim community is difficult. […] Also, in the beginning, some reverts may have lots of attention, everyone wants to be there, as time goes by things get lonelier and harder. As years go by people forget you are a revert and the struggles you still face. (Nabila, written journal)

The prevailing cultural norms of heritage Muslims are often conflated with Islamic teachings, in which case Islam becomes attached to the majority ethnic group within the Muslim population. Although previous studies

discussed this racial categorization of religion by non-Muslim outsiders (Gudrun Jensen, 2008; Roald, 2012), it emerged in my PhD study data that this confusion also exists within the Muslim community (Lahmar, 2012). The multi-ethnic social context within Muslim schools gives some pupils, as well as Muslim teachers, a new experience of being a Muslim within a diverse Muslim community:

We've got quite a diverse school and it sort of changes. It's quite interesting. We have quite a lot of Somalis, Asians, we have a lot of French-Algerian, we have converts, and we have a lot of dual heritage children; so a big mix. […] When I came here I expected to see nothing but Pakistani children, and so that was quite an awakening for me. (Headteacher, Olive-Primary School)

The following teacher also reflects on her first impression from when she was a pupil of the Iqra secondary school (where she was subsequently working, at the time the PhD research was conducted):

Before I came to this school [as a pupil] I thought all Muslims are only Pakistanis, I didn't realise that if you aren't a Pakistani you could be a Muslim too! So, when I came here, I saw all the different nationalities here […] For me, from a Pakistani background, the other Muslims out there in the world from every country and every place, corner of the earth. Wow! what's this? and it's something different than you knew. (School alumnus and current teacher, Iqra-Secondary School)

The boundaries of culture versus religion remain one theme that not only converts to Islam are questioning, but also devout British Muslim youths of second and third generations of immigrant heritage (Gazzah, 2009). On the journey of conversion to Islam, Roald (2012) listed three main phases that a converter to Islam goes through, which also emerged in my PhD data. Firstly, the stage of fascination represents an excessive enthusiasm for the new religion in which many converts cut off their previous social relations and friendship circles, embrace fully and enthusiastically their new belief and pay attention to the detail of Islamic teachings and practice. Yet, the visual exposure of the Islamic faith in the public domain may lead their families to reject them. The cut-off from their old-self may cause an anxiety and become a psychological burden during the journey of conversion. However, for some, the process takes a reverse turn, where a new Muslim convert prefers continuity with the previous pattern of life and to change gradually (Roald, 2012). During this phase of integration, the new Muslim convert is faced with many challenges.

For some converts, this is followed by a stage of 'disappointment' through which many Muslim converts recognise the difference between the Islamic ideals and the Muslim reality of practice. They also begin to understand the existence of differences in religious jurisprudence and sectarian divisions. While some Muslim converts would accept their reality and prefer to be part of a change amongst heritage Muslim communities, others tend to withdraw and instead compose their own new Muslim converts' support groups.

> After trying to "fit in" one realises one doesn't and what tends to happen is reverts tend to come together. "Miss fits" coming to "fit" together understating the situation of not really being able to fit into the Muslim community and the struggles and obstacles that come with being a revert. Naturally they like hang together to try and support one another. (Fouzia, written journal)

Yet, others prefer to abandon the faith altogether (Roald, 2012). The following participant's narrative shows how some new converts to Islam may feel pressured by heritage Muslims, and this could be one of the influences of them turning away from Islam. This also reflects a lack of understanding from the side of some heritage Muslims of the complex experience that a new Muslim convert is going through:

> Once a sister took her Shahada. As we all embraced and welcomed her, one sister which I personally know approached the new sister saying: "we are doing this for the sake of Allah". You and I know what this means, but how on earth someone like her, like literally a few minutes old Muslimah, is supposed to understand what you just said. No doubt that the sister's intention was pure and kind but the effect was very sad. Didn't last longer than a day and the sister went back to her former life.

> Another similar incident, a new sister came back to Masjid for the second time, after a week she took the Shahada. She enjoyed the time with the sisters, may Allah reward them all, as they had prepared a little party for her. She later told me that she felt under the pressure because someone was surprised to see that she hasn't learnt the al-Fatiha yet. She then continued saying: "I'm not sure if I have done the right decision". She attended few other times and she is now nowhere to be seen. How sad is this? (Sarah, written journal)

The lack of support networks presents one of the most challenging problems facing converts to Islam (Brice, 2010). This has its implications on forming a new Muslim family for single individuals as they find it hard to get married, especially converts from black backgrounds (Brice, 2010; Roald, 2012). As many converts are trying to adhere to their new religious instructions, they had to abandon dealing with interest in their financial matters. Hence, they will be in need for alternative financial supportive means, as a female convert participant, who is single with no support from her original family due to her conversion, put it:

> Women are the vulnerable gender and it would be nice to have organisations that have accommodation for women, financial support and advice on how one can build their life Islamically, practically getting support in order to be able to support their own selves. For example, careers advice and avenues to study to get a firm foundation to be able to get a decent job to support oneself. **A lot of reverts lose everything and avoid riba (interest) and struggling to help themselves**. Islamic counselling would be good to have specifically for reverts who face traumas and difficulties due to coming to the deen (religion), women's sufferings in particular. Financial, social and knowledge support. (Nabila, written journal, emphasis added)

Some converts also feel pressurised to abide by the cultural norms of heritage Muslims, and it is here where they need further knowledge of religious matters and usually turn to the internet (Brice, 2010). Mosques are seen as not providing converts with sufficient support and guidance (Brice, 2010). The following participant's account illustrates the need for more knowledge provision support.

> Seeking knowledge was and has been difficult. Those with knowledge are understandably very busy. A lot of reference to finding things out is online which can be confusing and not always correct and also sometimes hard to find what one is looking for. (Nabila, written journal)

Moreover, the question of how much Muslimness they gained becomes important to some converts.

> Although there have been times when you feel being treated may be a bit differently. Why? Only because being revert? Does it make you less valued? or less important? or less Muslim? (Ruqia, written journal)

Their keenness to learn about Islam, accompanied by feelings of isolation and disappointment, along with a lack of credible religious scholarly provision leave some of these converts vulnerable to unsuitable online

resources. They could also be vulnerable to 'the slippery slope effect' process towards extremism (Karagiannis, 2012, p. 99). It is, therefore, essential to meet their needs with the provision of appropriate scholarly courses concerning religious knowledge and awareness of the heritage Muslim cultural context.

Although Islamic teachings explicitly reject racism on the basis of skin colour, various studies point to the racism that black converts face during the process of integration into heritage Muslim communities (Moosavi, 2015; Suleiman, 2013, 2016; Zebiri, 2008). The war on terror adds

another layer of challenge where Muslim communities become suspicious of spying and surveillance from some Muslim converts (Suleiman, 2016). Moreover, Moosavi (2015) argues that some white Muslim women converts experience sexual harassment based on stereotypical perceptions of them being sexually available.

During the third stage of 'acceptance', many converts to Islam accepts the difference between the literature ideals and the living reality of Muslims as humans (Roald, 2004). Hence, they tend to seek to differentiate between Islamic values and obligations, and cultural practices. This differentiation aims at integrating part of their original cultures into their new religious life (Roald, 2012). This stage forms the return to oneself without sacrificing the new belief as the following participant's account illustrates:

> One goes through the phase of trying to fit in, adapting different cultures in the process and losing one's own cultural background and sense of self which wasn't all haram in the first place. (Fouzia, written journal)

This stage needs to be thoroughly studied because it presents another facet to the debates of the integration of Muslims into their Western societies. It is about the same process of differentiation between the cultural and the obligatory religious boundaries, and about the integration of the new with the old 'self' to achieve a continuous thread of self-narrative and peaceful continuity of the self.

> There is a transition most reverts go through and in order for that to be healthy and fruitful, I believe a deeper, knowledge-based, wise support needs to be available in order to help build healthy personalities and strong ones that can then carry themselves forward inshaAllah in positive ways. (Fouzia, written journal)

Accordingly, Muslim converts are engaging with their contexts within a framework of underlying pre-understandings of both communities. The responses they get from such engagement form a new moment of understanding about similarities and differences, which itself loops back to modify that pre-knowledge for future action. However, Muslim converts are in need of support, engagement and trust during their journeys:

> I believe we need more organisations run by reverts and supported by the community. Reverts know what they need and the journey they go through, even though each may differ in circumstances there is a common ground, and so they know what is needed to give. (Nabila, written journal)

Discussion:

This report argues that it is essential to develop a more comprehensive theoretical framework of recent Muslims' presence in Western Europe, and states why is it necessary to expand our analysis beyond the circle of sociology to include religious theoretical perspectives of the higher objectives and intents of Islamic law.

Religious needs vs. cultural affiliations

The ways Muslim communities in each EU country are perceived and their identity is constructed have an extensive history. Perceiving Islam as a completely foreign religion in the Western European context, not only ignores the long history of interaction between the two worlds (Lahmar, 2011), but it fails to recognise the growing number of indigenous people choosing Islam as their religion (Brice, 2010; Moosavi, 2015; Neumueller, 2012; Nieuwkerk, 2006; Roald, 2004; Zebiri, 2008). The process of migration and the flow of different cultural traditions beyond their nation states' boundaries into Britain associated with late capitalism creates what Featherstone (1990, p. 1) coins 'third cultures'. Muslim transnational communities in Britain can be considered one of these third cultures. Their presence within the new Western context requires overcoming problems of intercultural communication at first hand. The process of moving backwards or forwards between their Islamic heritage, national experiences, British cultural context and global changes necessitates 'new types of flexible personal controls, dispositions and means of orientation, in effect a new type of habitus' (Featherstone, 1990, p. 8). Similarly, the journey of conversion to Islam necessitates such qualities because of the constant reflexivity and movement of converts in-between diverse cultural and religious value systems. This social movement generates new social arrangements, religious discourses, practices, and subjectivities that serve their needs and new identities.

The arising tensions question the boundaries of faith and culture and add to the general debate about integration that it is not all about faith differences after all. It is about negotiating the cultural space that does not contradict with faith requirements and, therefore, provides a breathing space for possible boundary changes. In this regard, Ramadan (2010b, p. 67) considers the traditional discourse of 'integration' as idealistic and calls for a 'post-integration approach'. He (Ramadan, 2010b, p. 67) suggests using new concepts such as 'integration of intimacies' to refer to the process of 'feeling comfortable' and 'at home'. Ramadan (2010b, p. 67) views the sense of belonging to Western or

European societies as involving 'very deep and sometimes complex psychological dimensions'. He (Ramadan, 2010b) also states that this sense feeds on various elements including 'the feeling of being recognised as an asset or at least of being "valuable" in the other's eyes' (Ramadan, 2010b, p. 67). To nurture this feeling of belonging in the Muslim community, Ramadan (2010a, 2010b) argues for a joint effort where all parties must take on their responsibilities. Similarly, Modood (1998) argues that the burden of change, or the costs of not changing, are not the responsibility of a single party.

Given the different studies about conversion that highlight the complex psychological dimensions that Muslim converts face on the way towards being part of their new faith communities, I argue that there is a need for all parties to join efforts in the process of integrating the minority heritage Muslim group with their wider non-Muslim British and European communities. Thereby, there is a lot that could be learnt from the process of integrating converts to Islam with their heritage Muslim communities. This process needs to be essentially regarded by policymakers, as well as by Muslim scholars when examining issues related to the place and role of Muslims within their wider non-Muslim contexts. It is here where the higher objectives and intents of Islamic law become a necessity because imported religious verdicts that were issued in the light of different historical and socio-political contexts may not serve the same higher objectives upon which they were initially based.

Considering the higher objectives and intents of Islamic law (al-Maqasid)

Although there is a large body of literature about complexities pertaining to the integration of Muslim groups into Western societies (Husband and Alam, 2011; Thomas, 2012; Werbner, 2009), there is still a lack of interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks that consider concepts such as 'integration', 'equality', 'rights' and 'freedom', from an Islamic perspective. The assumption that these concepts hold universal meanings not only disregards the Muslim group's understanding of them, but ignores the possibility that diverse communities within Britain and EU countries at large, may hold different understandings of them. Hence, there is a need to add another dimension to this socio-political perspective on 'integration' and 'social cohesion': how are they understood by different communities in Britain, and what contributes to these interpretations?

In this regard, Gadamer (1989) argues that to engage in an authentic dialogue that has the potential to produce understanding, one needs to be open to the Other. This

openness, however, 'does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open' (Gadamer, 1989, p. 361). Moreover, this openness 'does not mean that we do blindly what the other desires' (Gadamer, 1989, p. 361). Easy imitations or exclusions would only work as barriers to that fusion of horizons and, therefore, prevent seeing the wisdom presented in the other's views. This demands critical reflexive dialogical understanding, not only between Muslims and their non-Muslim Western communities but also between the diverse groups of Muslims. Such a process involves knowledge, critical reflection and a balance between preservation and change, but also a secure space for the reflexive self. From this perspective, being reflexive about oneself and the context becomes an essential part in coming to that 'right measure' (Gadamer, 2007, p. 115).

Perspectives of religious scholars on arising complex issues are particularly crucial in guiding the translation of the Islamic values into practice, especially for devout Muslims. Yet, during that process of navigation between different frameworks and cultural translation and interpretation into the practice of what is considered to be Islamic, converts are acting as thinkers, interpreters and inquirers in their own right. In this regard, the converts' experiences, needs and challenges present an authentic internal voice that urges the investigation of complexities of identity and ways of building links, clarifying blurred boundaries between priorities of religious requirements and Muslims' needs of cultural affiliations. The commitment to Islam has its implications for converts, especially in respect of the prevailing negative image of Muslims and supposed links to terrorism, women's oppression and the perceived disparity with Western values. Possible implications for converts include exclusion from family and previous social circles, tensions in building a new religious identity and social belonging, and lack of financial support. Hence, what they are seeking is not materialistic gains or social

privilege but rather a sense of meaning and tranquil selves from within (Gudrun Jensen, 2008; Suleiman, 2013). This involves questioning the boundaries between cultural norms and religious principles; it is about searching for the underpinnings and universal ethical guidelines of the new Islamic faith beyond the particular visible actions of religion or regulations that were issued in the light of specific certain cultural contexts. In the midst of such processes are the attempts of Muslim converts to navigate between their Islamic ideals, non-Muslim backgrounds and heritage, and Muslim cultural practices. Hence, this diverse Muslim convert community provides a useful internal sample and lens through which issues of integration amongst the different wider non-Muslim Western societies could be examined from within.

Although there are many strands of scholarship in the field of Islamic Studies, at the centre of them all is the expanding field of Maqasid al-Sharia (the higher objectives and intents of Islamic law) (Ibn Ashur, 2011). This forms the focus of interaction between the Islamic texts and Muslim contexts, or between religion and society. The Muslim convert community provides scholars with valuable insights for investigating the essentials (al-darurat), the exigencies (al-hajiyyat) and embellishments (al-tahsiniyyat) of the Muslim community in a Western context. The struggles that Muslim converts go through question the cultural norms that prevail within Islamic jurisprudence heritage: they make the familiar strange and question assumptions of the non-Islamic nature of cultural aspects that are perceived as different from the prevalent cultural norms in heritage Muslim communities. Moreover, they provide a critical lens that would enable the revision of heritage Muslim cultures and traditions in relation to the Prophet's practice in different contexts. On the other hand, it also has the potential to illustrate the cultural opportunities and obstacles from the side of non-Muslim communities on the way to a successful mutual integration.

In light of the challenges Muslim converts face, there is a need to consider their spiritual, intellectual, financial, social and psychological dimensions and needs during their journeys of belonging to Islam. The most important of which is to help them in their journey of learning about their new faith, nurturing their mental health, caring for their family and social life and providing the appropriate financial support. These aspects cut directly across the higher objectives and intents of Islamic law that include "the respect for religion, human integrity, intelligence, family relationships and worldly goods, alongside the promotion of the values of dignity, equality, justice and peace" (Ramadan, 2017, p. 157). Hence, it becomes necessary for religious scholarly research to consider the higher objectives and intents of Islamic law

when investigating the emerging religious complexities of Muslim converts. So, what can an interdisciplinary approach offer in this regard?

The desire to reach a deep understanding of patterns and trends within societies, and to search for causes and implications, are all part of a sociological inquiry. Rather than importing the readymade version of religious jurisprudence from abroad, such contextual data should be scrutinised and used to work out informed religious guidance that better serves the higher objectives and purposes of Islamic Sharia. In such a situation, data and evidence of the local context would always form the basis for religious jurisprudence developments. This approach to Islamic jurisprudence is not without its challenges, such as the traditional discussion about the boundaries between literal and rational readings of the text (Ramadan, 2009, 2010a).

Moreover, sociological research is not value-free, and many research findings are based on secular theoretical frameworks. However, to dismiss research in humanities and social sciences due to their ontological and epistemological underpinnings is to ignore the potential to understand the context of the Muslim socio-political reality sociologically. In this regard, ibn Khaldun made a groundbreaking contribution to the epistemologically interdisciplinary scientific research in understanding the social phenomenon of Muslim communities and priorities of their religious needs based on sociological research (Al-Jalidi, 2013). Yet, ibn Ashur's (2011) contribution to the field of research in the higher objectives of Sharia takes it to a new level by developing new objectives of Sharia using contemporary concepts instead of deploying the former traditional terminology. In doing so, he introduces 'the preservation of the family system', 'freedom of beliefs', 'orderliness', 'natural disposition', 'freedom', 'right', 'civility' and 'equality', as objectives of Sharia that Islamic law needs to be based upon. This will not only advance the theoretical debates in reframing religious values into rational discourse (Habermas, 2006), but it also has its practical outcomes that are directly related to the daily religious lives of Muslims. Taking this into regard, the interdisciplinary approach to analysing converts' journeys and navigations could be employed to forge a new reading of the Muslim presence in Western Europe.

At this point, another question needs to be asked: what is the role of Islamic centres and scholarly bodies in the development of such interaction and processes?

The role of imams in British mosques is expanding beyond leading the five daily prayers. Muslim youths from the heritage Muslim community are also sharing some challenges that Muslim converts face (Ahmed, 2009).

There are demands on imams to be involved in pastoral and youth work, chaplaincy, and involvement in local community activities (Gilliat-Ray, 2006, p. 67). Hence, there is a need to bridge their 'traditional' Islamic teaching and learning with the realities of life as an imam in Britain (Gilliat-Ray, 2006). To achieve this, imams and other teaching staff in mosques and Islamic centres in Britain not only need to be equipped with language skills and traditional Islamic knowledge but also with knowledge of the realities of the lives of Muslims in Britain and ways of bridging this contextual knowledge to knowledge of the religious text. This demands interdisciplinary research that involves discussing the Islamic theological underpinnings at the level of the higher objectives of Sharia informed by internal and external emerging complexities of integration. For this to be achieved there would be a need to support Muslim scholarly institutions within the British context as part of the solution (Cheruvallil-Contractor and Scott-Baumann, 2015). This would contribute to the transition of Muslim discourse from the standpoint of 'us' and 'them' to the dialogue of 'our society'.

The convert community forms a critical sample that illustrates the complexities of integration and religious identity, and thereby challenges the divide between 'us' and 'them' and asks all parties to be reflexive and ready to question pre-assumptions about the 'Other'.

Conclusion

The diversity of Muslims presents Europe with a variety of experiences of Muslim cultures and Islamic interpretations. Despite their ethnic diversity, Muslims in Britain are predominantly from a South Asian heritage background. This has resulted in a conflation between Islam, as a religion, and the South Asian race and cultural heritage (Moosavi, 2015). The community is not only holding a deprived social profile, but the various terrorist attacks in Britain and other EU countries have raised concerns about the community as a potential threat to the wider society. Therefore, the presence of heritage Muslims within non-Muslim majority societies presents opportunities and challenges to both parties. It brings the 'other' closer as an equal citizen; it provides experiences of diverse cultural backgrounds and builds personal bonds through friendships or marital relations at times. This close interaction exposes the 'other', but it also questions one's own prejudices and values and results, at times, in the changing of belief value systems.

It is within such a context that conversion to Islam in Britain is happening. Current research within different EU countries shows a trend of conversion by individuals of

different backgrounds to Islamic beliefs, which has resulted in the formation of a community of Muslim converts. Yet, these converts to Islam must find their place in Muslim communities within their localities and navigate their new religious sentiments via these different national, sectarian and cultural boundaries. Despite the warm welcome offered to these converts at the initial phase of declaring their testimony of faith, they are usually, subsequently left with minimal support from the heritage Muslim community. Accordingly, Muslim converts face various challenges during their journey into their new Muslim community. These challenges cut across social, psychological, intellectual and financial arenas, which hinder the spiritual journey of many, and, at times, may place some converts at the risk of various forms of exploitation.

In addition to discussing findings from previous research, this report shows how the lack of cultural awareness and understanding from the heritage Muslim communities towards new converts could lead some to reject their new faith. The report also highlights the need for contextual religious scholarship that takes into consideration converts' specific circumstances. Although this area of scholarly research would include some shared experiences with the heritage minority Muslim communities in Western societies, it could also highlight some specific facets that are intrinsically bound solely to the converts' journeys and transitions. These include, for example, specific psychological, social and financial challenges that may arise from devotion to Islam, without having extended family support, especially for young people. Further interdisciplinary research is needed to explore these areas in a greater depth, especially the ways in which conversion is impacting on the spiritual, intellectual, social, health, and financial aspects for converts in general, and young converts, in particular. These areas of research are at the heart of the field of study focused on elucidating the higher objectives and intents of Islamic law (Maqasid al-Sharia).

Hence, this report concludes the following:

Firstly, there is a need to consider the spiritual, intellectual, financial, social and psychological dimensions and needs of Muslim converts during their journey of belonging to Islam.

Secondly, the converts' journeys provide valuable insights to researchers in the field of Islamic jurisprudence: to investigate the essentials (al-darurat), the exigencies (al-hajiyyat) and embellishments (al-tahsiniyyat) of this Muslim community (Ibn Ashur, 2011). This will provide a theoretical underpinning to, and highlight, the priorities of provision, and raise awareness of the need for complex support to be provided to this community of converts beyond the ceremonial arrangements. Identifying these priorities will also contribute to the understanding of the heritage Muslim community and how it relates to the wider non-Muslim context.

Thirdly, there is a need to develop collaborative research between traditional Islamic scholarship, focusing on the higher objectives of Islamic teachings, and the sociological and psychological studies that are growing in the field of the Muslim presence in Western Europe. The higher objectives of the Sharia framework could enrich the debate about concepts such as 'freedom', 'equality', 'rights' and 'integration'. Opportunities and tensions that emerge during the journeys of Muslim converts who are attempting to find their space as true Muslims within a heritage Muslim reality without losing their cultural past would help as an authentic sample to highlight possibilities and obstacles to integration between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. This journey allows the reinvestigation of the 'self' and the 'other' in light of the higher objectives of Sharia away from the socio-political discourses and pressures. Hence, these experiences could be used as a reflexive reference to make the familiar heritage Muslim cultures unfamiliar, by questioning the boundaries of religious requirements versus cultural ones. Accordingly, this approach would empower mosques and Islamic centres at the level of epistemological dialogue within the Muslim community and with the wider non-Muslim socio-political context.

Moreover, mosques and Islamic centres need to improve their services and staff training to cater for the demands of their community. They have the potential to play a positive role towards meeting the needs of converts, as well as, those of heritage Muslim youths, by helping them to navigate between their spiritual needs, religious requirements, and the contextual realities.

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Appendix – Research Findings

The following is a summary of findings that have emerged from the literature review on conversion to Islam, and many of these points are supported by the author's research data.

- The 'journey' and 'love' emerge as two main themes in the religious conversion research literature.

- The journey of conversion is not easy for many converts.

- Different Muslim converts face various challenges, including social, intellectual and financial issues, after becoming Muslims.

- The lack of support networks presents one of the most challenging problems facing converts to Islam.

- The theme of boundaries of culture versus religion is not only questioned by Muslim converts but also by devoted heritage Muslims too.

- Research shows that many converts to Islam may go through different stages along their journey of reflection, experience and evaluation of the new faith.

- Converts are portrayed in the media as being linked to terrorism or extremism and regarded as presenting a higher risk to security than heritage Muslims.

- The visibility of being a Muslim also associates converts with the dominant South-Asian ethnicity of heritage Muslims.

- Some new converts to Islam face rejection by their own families, especially when the new faith becomes visible in public spaces.

- There is a lack of guidance provided by mosques and Islamic organisations to new converts to Islam.

- Converts open space for re-making identities based on negotiating the meanings of sameness and difference, and for questioning constructions of 'self' and 'other' and the discourse of "us" and "them".

In addition to reviewing findings from previous studies, this research highlights the following emerged themes that could be followed in more depth:

- The lack of understanding on the part of some heritage Muslims of the complexity of competing issues and identities that a new Muslim convert may be experiencing could lead some to turn away from their newly embraced faith.

- The lack of available local Muslim scholarship that combines a depth of traditional religious knowledge with a deep awareness of contextual realities illustrates that some converts may seek help instead from the internet.

- In addition to the loss of family support due to their conversion, some converts to Islam face financial difficulties due to a change in their financial practices when refusing to deal with interest based transactions due to their newly found religious devotion.

- The European Muslim convert community provides an internal sample that signifies the possibilities and challenges of integration via both Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

- There is a need for interdisciplinary research collaboration that involves both sociological and Islamic traditional scholarship when engaging with the complexities of identity and debates around the 'integration' of Muslim communities in a Western European context.

There is also a need for more empirical research exploring the following areas:

- The experiences of Muslim converts' changing relationships to their non-Muslim families and non-Muslim communities after their conversion to Islam.

- The perspectives and experiences of the non-Muslim families and social circles of Muslim converts, in respect to the conversion to Islam.

- The heritage Muslim community's perspectives and experiences of conversion to Islam.

- A re-examination of the experiences and needs of Muslim converts that emerge from empirical research data using the higher objectives and intents of Islamic law (Maqasid al-Sharia) framework.