



Between Isolation and Integration

A report on the Muslim Convert Community in Leicester

*Batool al-Toma
Raqaiyah Hibell*



The Islamic
Foundation

Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Executive Summary of Findings	3
Introduction	6
Chapter One: Conversion to Islam in Britain	19
Chapter Two: Conversion to Islam in Leicester	24
Chapter Three: Conversion to Islam – the theory	28
Chapter Four: The experiences of Leicester’s converts	37
Chapter Five: Mosques, Islamic Organisations, group and individual initiatives	77
Conclusions	89
Recommendations	91
Glossary	94
Bibliography	98

Acknowledgements

The New Muslims Project would like to thank those who have embraced Islam in Leicester for their contributions and insights that have enabled this report to be written. Our appreciation is also extended to all the representatives of mosques and Islamic organisations and those individuals who work tirelessly to support those new to Islam and who freely gave up their time to discuss the issues raised within the report. Finally, thanks are extended to members of the Islamic Foundation's Policy Research Centre, The Markfield Institute of Higher Education and Kube Publishing for comments and advice during the ongoing research.

Executive Summary of Findings

- Converts in Leicester represent a varied group of people heralding from a wide range of socio-economic and educational backgrounds and are reflective of the cultural and religious diversity characteristic of the city.
- The majority of converts (79%) enjoyed living in Leicester emphasising attractions such as large Muslim communities, access to mosques, and were appreciative of the diverse multicultural environment. Such outward attractions mask more fundamental and frequently hidden issues of how converts engage with existing Muslim communities, that are frequently composed along ethnic or sectarian lines and how they access facilities and services.
- Converts were grateful for the services provided to them by other Muslims, but acknowledged that there was a need for a wider range of facilities and services provided on a regular basis.
- Whilst appreciating the services available converts frequently found it difficult to know how to access information regarding what services are available where they are located and what they offer.
- Converts face narrow and constrained lives in Leicester due to a notable lack of a diversity of facilities. This is possibly due to the prevalence in the city of prescriptive interpretations of Islam that have failed to acknowledge the need for outlets to the creative Islamic arts, for example, music, poetry, theatre, art and design.
- The research noted a lack of awareness on the part of the Muslim community regarding the impact that religious conversion can have on a convert's life and a failure to appreciate the scale of the issues faced by converts and the amount of support required by them in order to counteract the negative problems arising from conversion.
- The extent to which the Leicester Muslim communities are in a position to nurture and support converts is debatable given the high levels of socio-economic deprivation that characterise large sections of the city's Muslim communities.
- The research indicated that a 34% of converts moved to Leicester to become more immersed in the Muslim communities and 16% had moved within the city to areas predominated by Muslims. The extent to which their expectations of their new areas of residence were realised is variable but most experience problems of integration within wider Muslim communities. Many finding that it takes years to integrate and others only partially integrating or completely failing to integrate.

- Issues surrounding the marginalisation of converts are amplified for converts of African Caribbean heritage who experience higher levels of racism compared to that experienced by white converts. Participation within the established mosques and organisations within the city is lower for African-Caribbean converts many of whom remain unknown to the established Muslim communities. There is a need for facilities and support for African-Caribbean communities that reflect the requirements of this section of the convert communities.
- 75% of the converts interviewed experienced high levels of confusion post conversion often due to the conflicting ways in which Islam is presented to them which highlights the need for an introductory course about Islam which could be developed specifically to address this concern. Converts also experience problems in disentangling Islam from the cultural norms of religious behaviour exhibited predominantly by the South Asian communities, which again could be explored with through an educational programme.
- 50% of converts experienced ruptured family relationships following conversion that in most but not all of cases improved over time. Seven converts reported estrangement from some family members with several experiencing a total loss of family contact. This can create problems not only for the convert but for subsequent generations of the convert's family. How the children of converts fare following the parent's conversion or following being born to convert parents is an area for further research.
- Friendship patterns indicated that 87% of converts felt most comfortable socialising with other Muslims. Only 13% of the questionnaire respondents mixed mainly with non-Muslims. Despite being raised, educated and socialised in the majority British culture many converts expressed to varying levels the need to protect themselves and their children from adverse elements and influences of British culture. Interviews indicated that a number of the converts were home schooling their children or sending their children to Islamic schools in attempts to provide an Islamic environment.
- There is a degree of commonality of challenges and issues faced by all converts to Islam. However, the ability to engage with life as a convert depends upon many variables which include the individual's personality, health, social and economic situation, resourcefulness, types of interpretations of Islamic doctrine that converts choose to engage with and most importantly their own expectations of how Islam should be manifest in their life and the extent to which they are able to fulfil those expectations.
- Female converts, while appreciative of the minority of mosques that provided facilities and services to women, expressed disappointment overall towards the general lack of mosque facilities available to them.

They felt this restricted access served to marginalise and curtail their participation and public involvement in religious life.

- Mosques and Islamic Organisations, while providing the usual range of religious services to the community and opportunities for self development, 80% have little knowledge of the numbers of converts in their congregations or who uses their facilities.
- While all the Mosques who responded to the research realise the importance of supporting the convert community in their midst only 7% appeared to show an informed understanding of their specific needs and are making serious efforts towards addressing them. Though all Mosques would aspire to such provisions in the future 93% of those interviewed did not have the most basic services in place such as recording conversions that take place in their facility.
- 13% of the Mosques were unsure while 44% were unaware of organisations who they could refer converts to Islam for further support and assistance both locally and nationally.
- All of the Mosques who took part in the research were eager to take advantage of any training, information or advice that would assist in equipping themselves with the skills and knowledge required to offer the appropriate services in the future.
- Demonstrable need for more support for converts required primarily from the Muslim communities in terms of counselling, advice, social, educational, employment and welfare programmes and marriage services.

Introduction and background

This research report is the culmination of years of working with individuals who are interested in or who have converted to Islam and the insights gained through this experience alongside an academic research project that has specifically focused on the issues and challenges presenting to converts in Leicester. Whereas the focus of this report are the experiences of converts to Islam who currently live in Leicester most of the issues that they will face stem from a generic set of challenges commonly faced by converts to Islam from across the whole of the UK, rather than being geographically specific to the part of the country in which they live. This is borne out through academic research and the issues converts most frequently have contacted the NMP about.¹

Conversion to Islam raises many issues and questions which have to be addressed and policies formulated to meet the needs which are presented. Difficulties arise over how conversion or potential conversion is presented to friends, family and work colleagues and how the convert deals with their reactions and responses. New lifestyles have to be accommodated often which will be incompatible to previous ways of life and to those of friends and family left behind. Conversions and the period leading up to conversion may be conducted in secrecy or relative secrecy where a convert has little opportunity to discuss their newly discovered beliefs with friends and family and may be ill equipped to cope with and discuss the types of questions that their family or friends will inevitably ask.

A convert who has yet to disclose their new faith has to cope with the pressures, issues and areas of conflict raised by possibly leading a dual lifestyle or how to adapt their existing lifestyle into an Islamic one. Issues over how, and when, and to whom, the convert is to divulge their new faith and what support is available from established Muslims in order to facilitate these processes and ease the converts into existing Muslim communities have to be resolved. In turn, how and to what extent the convert feels comfortable about interacting with established Muslims and their communities and the types of Islamic thought and practice that they will be exposed to are other issues to be confronted.

The convert has to decide what type of Islam they are entering into without necessarily possessing the knowledge and information to make that distinction. Who determines the converts initial introductions to Islam and at what stage, if at all, does a convert develop the ability to develop the knowledge and skills that will enable them to transcend the traditional and

¹ See Zebiri, K , (2008) British Muslim Converts, Choosing Alternative Lives, Oneworld Publication, Oxford, see also Brice, M.A.K., (2006) Assimilation and Alienation in a Multicultural Society: Non-visible minorities; Lessons learnt from indigenous converts to Islam in the United Kingdom, presented at Citizenship, Security and Democracy, International Conference, Istanbul, Turkey, September 2006

cultural interpretations of Islam that they are frequently presented with are also matters for consideration.

Issues over the direction that Islam will take in the convert's practice of their faith have to be considered along with how to accommodate an understanding of Islam that can coexist in British society without creating a permanent sense of anomie or alienation. Challenges arise over how to comprehend the often seemingly irreconcilable differences between Islamic theory and what is commonly practiced and how to deal with any resultant disillusionment that may be channelled towards Islam or existing Muslims.

Conversion to Islam is not a straightforward process and it is one in which much heart searching and attempts to resolve difficult and often ambiguous issues will have taken place. A constant process of evaluation and reassessment is ongoing as the convert develops as a Muslim and as their knowledge of the faith increases. There are also degrees of experimentation that may occur as the convert discovers implements and then questions, different expressions of Islam. There will always be a proportion of people who are attracted to the most extreme expressions of any given belief system and converts to Islam are not immune from being drawn towards ideas that offer them a complete rejection of their previously held ideas and acceptance of concepts that sit uncomfortably with contemporary society and many Muslims.

Terminology

Within this research report the term convert/revert is used to define a person who has decided to make a declaration of faith, called the *Shahadah*, and is attempting to live their life as a practising Muslim. This means that they believe in one God (Allah) and that the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) is Allah's messenger. According to the Oxford dictionary to 'convert' means '*to change one's religious faith or other belief*' and to 'revert' means '*to return to a previous state or condition*'.²

Convert is derived from the Latin word 'convertere' which means 'to revolve, turn around or head in a different direction'.³ Within the convert community there is an ongoing discussion regarding the suitability of terms which they consider appropriate to define themselves as Muslims who were not born into Muslim families. The term convert implies that a person has taken a conscious decision to embrace Islam which is in some way fundamentally different to their previous beliefs and practices. The term revert is often favoured by some people who have embraced Islam because they consider it more accurately reflects their status. Muslims believe that everyone is born in a state of '*fitra*' which is an Arabic concept denoting a pure and god given state of being reflecting the human's natural status as submissive to Allah

² Soanes, C and Stevenson, A, (2004) (eds) Concise Oxford Dictionary, p.312, Eleventh Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford

³ Roald, A.S, (2004) '*New Muslims in the European Context*', p13, Brill, Leiden

(God). Those who then embrace Islam are going back to the natural birth state and hence 'reverting.' However, some born Muslims who have become practising Muslims after previously neglecting their faith refer to themselves as 'reverts'.

For the purposes of clarity the term 'convert' is used throughout this report to convey the concept of changing from a faith or non-faith to Islam. Other terms such as 'New Muslim' have not been used because many of the subjects of this report have been Muslim for many years and would not therefore considered themselves as new to the Islamic faith. Although some converts consider the term 'New Muslim' as an accurate depiction of their status as it can be interpreted to confer freshness and vitality to the converts identity, for others 'New Muslim' can be perceived as a pejorative term as it may seem to imply that the convert is not fully accepted as a Muslim, being always new, lacking in knowledge and different to other Muslims.

The first Muslims in Islam were themselves converts and are highly revered and respected in Islam but attention is not drawn to anything other than their being Muslims of the highest calibre. Their status as 'converts' is not a defining issue of their Islamic identity. In this sense then to label a person who has embraced Islam as a 'convert', 'revert' or 'new Muslim' can be construed as creating false divisions between those who were born into the faith and those who have subsequently adopted it, creating distinct categories of Muslims where historically no distinctions existed. To further support this argument there is no concept in the Arabic language that conveys religious conversion. The Arabic verb '*aslama*' has several meanings. It can mean to embrace Islam⁴ and also conveys peaceful submission. The word Islam is derived from '*aslama*.' A person accepts 'Islam' and is therefore agreeing to peacefully submit to the will of God. Finally, there is no attempt to assess the validity of a convert's own assessment of themselves as a practising Muslim. The degree to which they fulfil or neglect the tenets of Islam is between themselves and God.

The New Muslims Project (NMP) has for the past seventeen years been concerned with the needs of those who have embraced Islam in Britain. The report attempts to offer an insight into the conversion experiences of a group of converts and reverts who are currently living or who have always resided in Leicester. The extent to which the sample of converts included in the study is representative of British Muslim converts generally will be considered. The study is not exhaustive and the parameters of the project have been precisely defined. The findings were determined by a systematic study of the research evidence derived from a range of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In terms of further research there is scope for more detailed and deeper analysis of this subject group. The research report provides a snapshot into the lives of converts to Islam in Leicester in order to find commonalities and differences which straddle the diverse range of ethnicities,

⁴ Wagdi, R.G (1996) Mini English/Arabic and Arabic/English Dictionary, Librairie du Liban Publishers, Beirut

previously held beliefs, variations in culture and socio-economic status that are characteristic of the convert communities in Leicester.

Leicester is one of the most diverse cities in the UK in terms of constitution of ethnic minorities. The disparate nature of Leicester's ethnic and cultural mix is reflected in its Muslims communities that are derived from Gujarati Indian descent and from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Somalia, Turkey and Kurdish regions of Iraq. Smaller pockets of Arab communities exist alongside Muslims from Eastern Europe and various parts of Africa. The expulsion by Idi Amin of Ugandan Indians led to many settling during the 1970's in Leicester.⁵ The last ten years has seen sizeable populations of Somalians and Kurds settling in the city. The 2001 Census cited 11% of Leicester's population of 279,921 were Muslims (30,000 people).⁶ Within this Muslim population contains often fractured and ethnically divided pockets of small communities. As mass migration continues around the world, Leicester is a microcosm of the increasing global trends for population centres to be characterised by religious plurality and diverse socio-ethnic groups. As such religious conversion rates have been found to be positively related to religious plurality.⁷

The report is at one level a basic mapping exercise. It details such information regarding estimates of the numbers of converts in Leicester and their geographical locations within the city. It seeks to elucidate information about the demographic composition of the convert populations of Leicester and to understand more about their educational backgrounds along with their current employment and socio-economic status. The research also aims to relate the experience of conversion to Islam to how it impacts on living in Leicester and considers the nature of the converts' experiences of life in the city. Personal experiences of the generic issues raised by conversion to Islam are highlighted particularly in terms of the challenges faced by converts and the resultant nature of their needs. How and to what extent such needs can and should be addressed will form part of the report's recommendations.

In terms of ethnicity and previous faith/non-faith background, the report defines the ethnic composition of the converts in the study and their previous faith or non-faith milieu. The purpose of such definition is to assess where there are any variances in the experiences of converts who hail from particular ethnicities, or faith/non-faith backgrounds. This may prove to be helpful in relation to assessing what additional services or support could be needed or provided. From the convert perspective if such information is of significance it could have consequences for the impact it has upon the subsequent quality of life that converts are able to achieve within an Islamic framework.

More broadly, the work attempts to understand why individuals living in Leicester have been attracted to Islam and how they have presented and

⁵ At Home in Europe – Muslims in Leicester, (2010) p21, Open Society Institute, Hungary

⁶ At Home in Europe – Muslims in Leicester, (2010) pp 17-21, Open Society Institute, Hungary

⁷ Barro, R.J, Hwang,J and McCleary, R.M, (2010) Harvard University, Cornerstone Research, Harvard University

managed their decision to embrace Islam and assesses the impact it has made on their lives. Such a representation has to incorporate from the converts' perspective and interpretation, the reactions and responses from the families, friends, neighbours and work colleagues of the convert, both to the initial conversion to Islam and to an assessment of how such a set of responses may have changed over time.

The research seeks to describe the Muslim communities resident in Leicester into which the converts may or may not have integrated or assimilated and the reasons why this has or has not occurred. Of importance is to account for the various interpretations of Islam that are available and accessible to the convert in Leicester and those that are less obvious. The research also discusses the types of services which are currently being provided by the Muslim communities, who uses such services and how they are accessed. The report seeks to acknowledge gaps in provision and examines the ways forward for addressing such omissions. It also examines perceptions of how the Muslim communities relate to converts and the extent to which they understand and accept their specific needs and the challenges which they commonly face. The responsibility of Muslim communities towards converts in terms of their Islamic obligations towards those new to the faith is also included. In turn, perceptions held by converts towards the Muslim communities are reflected upon.

In terms of the role of Leicester City Council who has jointly financed the research project, the Council is seeking to understand more about the small but expanding convert population of Leicester and their specific needs of which little has been previously known or understood. In terms of the Council's role in promoting community cohesion it has a responsibility to provide services and support where possible to converts to try to prevent their marginalisation both from the wider population of Leicester and from the city's established Muslim communities.

The New Muslims Project

This report has been compiled by The New Muslims Project which is part of the Islamic Foundation, currently located in Markfield, Leicestershire. It has been jointly funded by the Islamic Foundation and Leicester City Council as part of the council's Mainstreaming Moderation Programme. Advice has also been provided by the Islamic Foundation's Policy Research Centre along with academic assistance from the Markfield Institute of Higher Education and Kube Publishing, which are also departments of the Islamic Foundation.

The Islamic Foundation, established in Leicester in 1973, is a unique and pioneering institution specialising in the fields of research, education and publication. The NMP was established in 1993 in response to concerns of insufficient services and support being available to those individuals around the UK who had converted to Islam or were interested in finding out more about the faith. The NMP has grown to provide a range of services which aims to meet the social and educational needs of new Muslims. Through the

newsletter, *Meeting Point*, regular contact is maintained with over 3000 converts to Islam throughout the country. Other services currently offered include Qur'anic Arabic courses, pilgrimages to Hajj and Umrah along with visits to a variety of other Muslim states. Counselling and advice, a national network support system and social, educational and spiritual programmes are services much in demand. Online provision is available through the NMP e-Group discussion forum and the NMP Website, 'Caring for Converts,' which facilitates discussion, learning and instruction on Islam.

The services developed by the NMP are regularly updated and revised to take into account the diverse needs of converts. As the convert communities around Britain take on more of the responsibilities for administering the grass-root service provision there is less need for some of the services which have previously been undertaken by the NMP. As part of re-evaluating existing provision it was decided to undertake research into Muslim converts to Islam. Whilst there is a vast amount of literature available on religious conversion and a growing resource of material on conversion to Islam there is a paucity of information regarding the practicalities of living life as a Muslim convert in a British inner city context. It was considered by the NMP that a systematic examination of the needs and challenges faced by converts to Islam was a necessary next step. Leicester was considered a suitable city within which to conduct the research for the following reasons. The NMP had a database of around 150 converts and reverts to Islam resident within the city. Leicester was in close geographical proximity to the NMP which facilitated access to converts and reverts within the city. The project had a range of contacts established within the city's Muslim communities and had links with a diverse range of Islamic organisations and mosques in Leicester.

Developing the Research Project: the role of Leicester City Council

Following consultations with Leicester City Council the research project was approved under the Council's Mainstreaming Moderation Programme. The Mainstreaming Moderation Programme is Leicester City Council's interpretation of, or change of emphasis to, the government's Prevent Strategy designed to mitigate, challenge and prevent the effects of, or threats posed by violent extremism.⁸ The programme outlines priority areas and action and is overseen by the Mainstreaming Moderation Forum. This forum is a citywide multi-agency group made up of partners for the statutory services including the police, youth offending service, probation and youth service, and has representation from community, voluntary and faith organisations.

⁸see Leicester Partnership. Preventing Violent Extremism through Mainstreaming Moderation (October 2009) <http://www.oneleicester.com/leicester-partnership/about-us/stronger-communities/mainstreaming-moderation/> see also Leicester's Community Cohesion Strategy 2009-2014 (October 2009) Final Draft

The research project met the sixth strand of the Prevent Strategy's criteria in terms of 'developing Prevent related research and evaluation.'⁹ The aims of the research also met other key strands of the Prevent Strategy, firstly, 'increasing resilience of communities to violent extremism' and secondly, 'addressing the grievances that ideologies are exploiting.' The demands resulting from these two strands would be facilitated in the key recommendations emanating from the research work, namely, that networks of support would be developed through which the knowledge and confidence of converts/reverts would be enhanced and negative perceptions could be challenged thereby enhancing cohesion and cooperation. With regard to the Mainstream Moderation Programme the research project met the Programme's fourth priority by 'increasing our understanding of and engagement with, our diverse Muslim communities.'

Leicester City Council has long prided itself on being at the forefront of work developed to enhance community cohesion within the UK.¹⁰ Characterised by ethnic diversity the city has been seen as a model of effective and positive multicultural initiatives. Recognition of the needs of the convert and revert communities in Leicester fall within a number of the 'Learning to live together' themes of the City Council's Community Cohesion Strategy, where the emphasis is on strengthening relationships between communities, building a sense of belonging to Leicester and addressing tensions both within and between communities. The embryonic and frequently marginalised communities of converts and that are emerging in Leicester, albeit relatively small in numbers in terms of the overall population of the city, require acknowledgement of their presence and recognition of their needs and requirements. Such an awareness of converts as a religious minority within a larger Muslim minority faith group needs to be acknowledged both with the wider Muslim communities of Leicester and official public bodies such as the City Council.

The parameters of the research established by Leicester City Council in conjunction with the NMP can be summarised as follows:

1. The development and delivery of a community based research project aiming to collate baseline information about Leicester's diverse convert and revert communities.
2. To understand more detailed information about Leicester's convert and revert communities in terms of the number of converts and reverts residing in the city. Demographic and socio-economic information relating to the age, ethnic origins, educational and social backgrounds and where they reside in the city.

⁹ see Preventing Violent Extremism: Next Steps for Communities, Department for Communities and Local Government, (2008) London
<http://www.experiencecorps.co.uk/faithleaders.asp>

¹⁰ Leicester's Community Cohesion Strategy 2009-2014 (October 2009) Final Draft

3. To provide recommendations accompanied by a strong evidence base for future work to support these groups.
4. To identify the key challenges these groups face with regards to being Muslim in Britain today

The structure of the research report

The report commences with an Executive Summary of Findings. This is followed by the Introduction which outlines the main themes and purpose of the research. Included here is a discussion of the methodology adopted to provide a framework for the research and how ethical considerations were implemented.

Chapter One then provides an historical overview of conversion to Islam in Britain which takes into account prominent contemporary converts.

Chapter Two then offers a historical view of conversion to Islam in Leicester. It provides examples of the possible first conversion to Islam in the city.

Chapter Three discusses ideas and theories that surround conversion to Islam, which provides insight into why people consider revising their beliefs and behaviour in light of Islamic religious ideals.

Chapter Four examines the reports findings which are derived from questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. This chapter details the converts' personal experiences in terms of why they decided to embrace Islam and seeks to understand their personal experiences of living in Leicester and how Islam impacts upon their lives. It discusses living in Leicester both within the Muslims communities and the wider multi-cultural populations of the city and attempts to elucidate the type of attitudes converts express towards the extent to which life in the city meets their expectations and needs.

Chapter Five discusses the nature of existing Islamic facilities that are currently available in Leicester that may or may not be used by converts. These facilities are provided by the mosques or Islamic organisations operating within the city, by individuals or groups of individuals, not functioning as officially designated organisations, which have set up initiatives to assist, converts. The concern here is in determining what facilities are being used, by whom and to what extent they are utilised. This also leads into questions as to what amenities are not being provided, why such services are not available and the extent to which demand for further or alternative ranges of provision is required. An integral part of this chapter is determining the role of mosques. The Imams are often the first point of contact for converts when attending mosques. The extent to which Imams possess the requisite skills for addressing the often complex needs presented by converts seeking their assistance, advice, guidance and direction is also discussed.

Chapter Six discusses the conclusions that can be drawn from the research and the implications of these findings for future action and policy towards converts within Leicester. The extent to which these conclusions are applicable to other cities around Britain is also considered. Finally, the chapter focuses on how the existing research findings can be expanded and developed into more detailed analysis and looks at the possibilities for further research and discusses new questions that have arisen out of this study.

Following on from Chapter Six is a set of recommendations that provide the basis for discussion and the development of strategies to address the main points of the report.

Research Methodology

This report is based on field research conducted in Leicester between May and October 2010. The analysis for this study is based on both qualitative and quantitative data and on primary and secondary sources. The primary research was carried out by the New Muslims Project along with analysis of secondary sources. Two female staff from the NMP of Irish and English extraction, were contracted to conduct the research on a part-time basis over a seven month period and produce a written report on the findings. Both were converts to Islam from Roman Catholic backgrounds. One had converted 13 years ago the other 27 years ago. The researchers had extensive experience of working with converts to Islam and were familiar with the types of issues and concerns commonly raised by those new to and not so new to Islam.

Primary Research

The Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were designed. Both were predominantly structured questionnaires. The questionnaires' structured questions were supplemented by a number of semi-structured questions where respondents had the opportunity to describe their personal opinions and experiences in order to add further detail and information about their conversion to Islam.

The first questionnaire was designed in four sections to be completed by converts living in Leicester or those converts whose nearest Islamic facilities were to be found in Leicester and who currently used or wished to use those facilities. The first section of the questionnaire covered questions focusing on the availability and use of Islamic facilities and services in Leicester. The second section concentrated on living as a Muslim. This section focused on a wide ranging set of questions which included how converts viewed relationships with born Muslims, their previous beliefs, how they became interested in Islam, the age at which they embraced Islam and how their relationships with their families had fared in the first instance of conversion and subsequently with the passage of time. The third section of the questionnaire was narrowly defined to extract responses on the converts

experiences and expectations of living in Leicester. The final section determined personal information regarding education, occupation and ethnicity and marital status. A section was also included for personal comments regarding information that may be helpful to the research. The questionnaire was intended to give a broad overview of converts' lives in Leicester. The insights gained would be further enhanced through the material provided by a series of interviews with converts who would substantially extend the breadth and depth of the body of research evidence.

Sixty questionnaires were received, five of which were discarded in the compilation of the data as they were completed by born Muslims and not converts. Of the 55 remaining questionnaires 34 had been completed at a pre-Ramadan social event organised by the NMP. This event had been hosted by Leicester New Muslims and was held at a venue in Leicester. The other 21 completed questionnaires resulted from questionnaires being posted to 148 converts from the NMP database, and an additional 20 were sent to two individuals working with converts in the city. The postal distribution of the questionnaires yielded a low 8% response rate. Of the 55 questionnaires 19 were completed by males and 36 by females. This is in line with the widely acknowledged 2:1 ratio of female to male conversion rates to Islam.¹¹ An ethnic balance was also achieved.¹²

The second questionnaire was designed to be completed by those working for mosques or Islamic organisations. Two formats of this questionnaire were designed one for the mosques and the other for Islamic organisations. This was a short three page questionnaire intended to be concluded in less than ten minutes. The questionnaire was dispatched by post to the mosques and Islamic organisations in Leicester. The return rate was low and so was followed by phone calls and personal visits to the mosques to interview people working within them either as part of the mosque committee or employed as the Imam.

Interviews with converts to Islam

In order to gain further insight into the lives and experiences of converts to Islam in Leicester fourteen personal semi-structured interviews were conducted. These ranged in length from twenty minutes to over an hour in length depending on whether the respondents gave brief or discursive answers to the set questions. The interview questions were formulated to elicit information regarding the respondent's decision to convert to Islam and their subsequent religious journey. Respondents were asked to discuss how, if at all, they had been influenced and directed by Muslims they had encountered, the extent to which they were felt comfortable with their own understanding of Islam, their relationships with their families, their experiences of living in Leicester and their opinions on the range of Islamic services available and accessible to them.

¹¹ One source of these estimations is the New Muslims Project

¹² For further information on the ethnic composition of the study see Chapter 4

The breakdown of the respondents was seven female, of which three were of an Indian background, two of African Caribbean heritage plus one White Other (European) and one White British. All the respondents were within the age range of 20 -60 years. Seven males were interviewed. Of these, three were of African Caribbean Heritage, one of Indian descent, and three were White British males again within the age range of 20-60 years. The respondents were selected because they had completed a questionnaire and had indicated on a separate response sheet attached to the questionnaire that they would be prepared to take part in further research. Other interviews were arranged through converts details listed on the NMP's database or through personal contacts.

Interviews with individuals working with converts to Islam

Five interviews with individuals who are currently working with New Muslims and one with an individual who had previously organised a study circle and Qur'anic Arabic classes that were attended by female converts in Leicester. These interviews were on average thirty minutes in length and focused upon the provision of present and future services to converts in Leicester and addressed pertinent issues related to these.

Focus Groups

Focus Groups were held over two consecutive weeks during Ramadan on a weekday afternoon at the Highfield Centre, Leicester. The first focus group was an all female group consisting of three Indian, one African Caribbean and four white British converts of various ages. The second was a mixed male and female group consisting of one African Caribbean male, two African Caribbean females, one mixed white/Asian male, two white British males, two white British females of varying ages.

Both focus groups lasted for one hour and covered topics of conversion to Islam, family responses to conversions, facilities available in Leicester and perceptions of life in the city and relations with Muslim communities. Participants had agreed to attend the focus groups after completing a form attached to the back of the questionnaire signalling their interest in being involved with further aspects of the research project.

Questionnaires sent to Mosques and Islamic organisations in Leicester

A questionnaire was compiled in order to determine the type of services provided by mosques and Islamic organisations in Leicester. It sought to ascertain the nature of the type of contacts mosques and Islamic organisations were affording converts in the city and to understand responses and levels of provision that are available. The final section focused questions on the type of help and support mosques and Islamic organisations may wish to accept in order that they can respond appropriately to requests for assistance from

converts to Islam. As previously mentioned there was a minimal response rate to the postal questionnaire. However, a number of mosques were personally visited, fourteen questionnaires were completed and eight interviews were conducted. In order to account for the diversity of the type of mosques prevalent in Leicester and to achieve a representative sample of mosques, visits included a Shia mosque; Salafi orientated mosques alongside those of Deobandi and Barelvi persuasions.

Aside from the mosques, two Islamic organisations working with converts to Islam either completed a questionnaire or was interviewed by the NMP. A representative from a third Islamic organisation participated in an interview to discuss the nature of the work they were involved with after having first completed a questionnaire.

Secondary Sources

At the outset of the research project a literature review was undertaken. This included an examination of academic literature of religious conversion and conversion to Islam examining conversion from theological, psychological and sociological perspectives. Personal accounts of conversion to Islam were taken from newspapers, articles and internet websites either written by converts to Islam or were derived from journalistic accounts. Other accounts of religious conversion to Islam from journalistic sources were considered. Information and insight afforded from the literature has been woven in to the text of the research findings to support and develop the material obtained from primary sources.

Ethics

In order to ensure that the study complied with ethical standards a number of steps were taken. A covering letter was attached to the questionnaires. This letter outlined the aims of the research project and how it would be implemented and used as an assessment to determine the future needs of converts in Leicester and as a means of involving the wider Muslim communities in Leicester along with Leicester City Council in the development of projects and policies designed to secure a better future for converts. The participants were given contact details for the NMP so that they could discuss any issues or concerns regarding participating in the research project.

The interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded, participants signed consent forms and were made aware that there was no obligation to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable about. A balance of participants were sought to ensure a balanced representation across the spectrum of age, socio-economic and ethnic background. Most of the interviews took place at the participants' homes and others at locations they had suggested. The focus groups took place at a community centre owned and administered by the council. This was chosen as a neutral non-partisan location that was easily accessible.

All of the participants of the study were made aware that they were taking part on the basis of anonymity and that they would not be personally identified in the reports findings. They were informed that the research report would be a publicly accessible document which would also be available online and that they would be informed of when and how they could access it on the report's completion.

Acutely aware of the pressures that have been brought to bear on mosques and Islamic Organisations in recent years through the growing demands and assertiveness of the communities that access their facilities and as a direct result of the previous governments prevent agenda, its impact on mosques in particular and the community generally, the necessary sensitivities were duly adhered to.

The two researchers were impartial, objective and do not adhere to any sect or group within Islam. There was no attempt to project a particular view of Islam during the course of the research or to influence subjects. The authors remained detached from the research findings.

Limitations of the research

A possible limitation of the research was the extent to which the researchers were able to reach as widely as possible a cross section of the convert population of Leicester. This may be due to the fact the converts often visibly participate in events and services during the early years of their conversion which tapers off as they become more self-confident in their knowledge of Islam thereby losing contact with Muslim communities. This is exacerbated by the lack of ongoing services available to them through the mosques and Islamic organisations.

Wider participation may have been curtailed due to perceptions over the levels of intrusion into the Muslim communities by the police and security services in recent years.

Chapter One

Conversion to Islam in Britain

Historical accounts support the idea that a Muslim presence existed as far back as the early 700's in Britain, some of whom may have been converts. These early contacts with Islam or possible conversions to Islam may have been secured via contact with Muslims traders. Work and trade have been the predominant vehicles for the dissemination of Islam. Probable conversions were almost certainly assisted by the favourable impressions made by Muslim traders on non-Muslim people as they were admired for 'their nobility and integrity of conduct.'¹³

One of the first cases of Islamic influence or possible conversions to Islam can be seen in the early 700's through the case of Selback mac Fherchair Fota, High King of Dal Riada (which was an area of Northern Ireland and Western Scotland), was along with some of his subjects, who were Moors, a Muslim.¹⁴ A coin minted in 775 by King Offa of Mercia on which was written the Islamic declaration of faith had been requested by the Caliph Harun Ar-Rashid.¹⁵ Whether or not King Offa had converted to Islam has not been determined. One of the earliest references to an Islamic presence in Europe is to be found in the writing of Bede, an Anglo-Saxon monk, who described the Saracens unsuccessful attacks during the Battle of Poitiers in 732.¹⁶ Following the military destruction of Celtic Christianity by the Church of Rome, the prospect of Britain ever coming under Muslim control was forcefully repelled by the papacy and most of the documentary evidence from this historical period was erased.¹⁷

During 1213 there are conflicting reports of King John I sending emissaries to Morocco purporting that the King would convert to Islam in order to secure military support from the Caliph.¹⁸ Another account states that King John I made a proposal of marriage to the Sharif of Morocco's daughter, offering to convert to Islam. This offer of conversion was rejected by Morocco.¹⁹ Spanish Muslims were present in Britain and marriage between them and British subjects continued even during the Crusades.²⁰ To what extent this lead to conversion to Islam is not known. What is known is the profound

¹³ Murad, Abdul Hakim (1997), British and Muslim? www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/british.thm

¹⁴ Hellyer, H.A (2007) British Muslims: Past, Present and Future, The Muslim World Vol 97 No. 2 pp 225-258

¹⁵ Further information on the coin is provided by Abdullah Quilliam (1916) writing as Professor H.M. Leon see www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/bmh/BNH-AQ-offa.htm

¹⁶ See McClure, J and Collins, R (Eds) (2009) Bede The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, Oxford University Press, Oxford

¹⁷ Rosser-Owen, D., (1998) The History of Islam in the British Isles: An Overview, www.members.tripod.com/~british_muslims_assn/history_of_islam_inb_the_bi.html

¹⁸ Stewart, G. 'The King who wanted Shariah England, The Times, 16.02.08 www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/graham_stewart/article3378885.ece

¹⁹ Rosser-Owen, D., (1998) The History of Islam in the British Isles: An Overview, www.members.tripod.com/~british_muslims_assn/history_of_islam_inb_the_bi.html

²⁰ Hellyer, A.H., (2007) British Muslims: Past, Present and Future, The Muslim World, Vol. 97 No.2 p227

influence left by the Spanish Muslims. For example, the traditional English custom of Morris dancing (the name Morris deriving from Moorish (meaning Muslims from North Africa) derives from the *raqsor hadrah* (circular dance) of the Spanish Sufis.²¹

There are references to Islamic scholars in the prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1386). The first recorded Englishman to become a Muslim was John Nelson, son of a yeoman of the Queen's Guard who converted to Islam at some point in the 16th Century.²²

During the Elizabethan period relationships with the Ottomans and Moroccans remained cordial. Political and military alliances were developed which also included agreements with India and Persia.²³ Queen Elizabeth I, for example, asked the Ottoman Sultan Murad III for naval assistance against the Spanish Armada. It is clear that throughout this period alongside the established political, military and economic ties there were clear exchanges of academic ideas. During the 1630's the first chairs of Arabic were established at Oxford and Cambridge Universities where scholars were influenced by Arabic texts on mathematics, astronomy and medicine.²⁴

A 1641 document refers to "a sect of Mahomatens" being "discovered here in London."²⁵ There were also a few conversions to Islam during the period. In 1649, the Qur'an was translated into English by Alexander Ross. During the reign of Charles I intermarriage and conversions took place. Muslim prisoners, traders and ambassadors were all to be found in Britain. 'Muslims continued to be permitted to 'exercise their religion... in the Kingdome of the King of great Britaine.'²⁶ 'By 1725 English society was 'pretty well accustomed' to them.'²⁷

Abdal Hakim Murad sites numerous examples of British sailors who, 'turned Turke,' converting to Islam and fighting against the Spanish inquisitions and the expansionist powers of Europe. Many of whom settled in North Africa. The pirate Captain John Ward was perhaps the most famous of these sailors, who throughout his colourful life was known for his bravery and superb skills as a mariner.²⁸

²¹ Rosser-Owen, D., (1998) The History of Islam in the British Isles: An Overview, www.members.tripod.com/~british_muslims_assn/history_of_islam_inb_the_bi.html

²² BBC (2009) History of Islam in the UK www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/uk_1.shtml

²³ Hellyer, A.H., (2007) British Muslims: Past, Present and Future, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 97 No.2 p227

²⁴ Nabil Mattar 1999 cited in Hellyer, A.H., (2007) British Muslims: Past, Present and Future, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 97 No.2 p227

²⁵ Nabil Mattar 1994 cited in Hellyer, A.H., (2007) British Muslims: Past, Present and Future, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 97 No.2 p227

²⁶ Nabil Mattar 1994 cited in Hellyer, A.H., (2007) British Muslims: Past, Present and Future, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 97 No.2 p228

²⁷ Ansari H., *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain since 1800*, Hurst & Company, London 2004

²⁸ Murad, A.H, (2003) Ward the Pirate, www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/ward.htm

A sizeable Muslim presence in Britain stems back over 300 years when the East India Company recruited sailors from the Indian subcontinent known as Lascars. Settlements of sailors were to be found around British ports. In the 18th and 19th Centuries there were a number of converts to Islam amongst the English upper classes, including Edward Montague, son of the ambassador to Turkey. Other notable conversions included Peter Lyle, the Admiral of the Tripolitanian Corsair Fleet during Nelson's nineteenth century Battle of the Nile, and Hedley Churchward, the first recorded British Muslim to perform Hajj.²⁹

During 1860 Britain's first recorded mosque was established at 2 Glyn Rhondda Street, Cardiff. By 1862 communities of Yemeni sailors who had been recruited into the merchant navy and Somali labourers were established in London, Cardiff, Liverpool, Pollockshields, South Shields and Hull. The Yemenis numbered around 15,000 representing the oldest permanent Muslim settlers (Lewis p11).³⁰ Other accounts state that there were now in the region of 70/80,000 Yemenis in Britain.³¹

Many of the Yemeni settlers married British women many of whom converted to Islam. These wives experienced loss of social status and estrangement from their families as a result of marriage. What is interesting about the women is the role they played as intermediaries between the indigenous society and the Muslim community often securing better housing, employment for their husbands and education for their children. During the early 20th Century Yemenis established Alawi tariqas in Cardiff and Tyneside, led by Yemeni Sheikhs. The establishment of Zawiyas (which would function like a community centre and mosque) provided a means of establishing thriving Islamic communities. The wives were instructed in Islam and in turn transmitted knowledge of the faith to their children. Educational classes were also established for the children to teach them about their faith. The Zawiyas also provided a social-welfare function providing financial assistance to the unemployed and needy.³² These communities are still in existence today representing the oldest continuous Muslim community in Britain.

Perhaps the most interesting conversion recorded is that of William Henry Quilliam, an industrious, resourceful Liverpool solicitor, a Freemason and Zionist, who embraced Islam in 1887, followed by his mother and his sons. Quilliam graduated as an Alim (religious scholar) from the Qarawiyyin University at Fez and inaugurated the Liverpool Muslim Institute. Despite often hostile opposition to his work and ridicule in the British media, the number of converts attracted to the Institute continued to grow. From there the weekly publication of *The Crescent* was produced. Adjacent houses to

²⁹ Hellyer, A.H., (2007) *British Muslims: Past, Present and Future*, The Muslim World, Vol. 97 No.2 p229

³⁰ Lewis, P, (2002) *Islamic Britain, Religion, Politics and Identity among British Muslims*, p11, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., London & New York

³¹ The Guardian, 'From scholarship, sailors and sects to the mills and mosques, 18th June 2002 www.guardian.co.uk/2002/jun/18september11.religion/print

³² Ally, M.M. 'History of Muslims in Britain 1850-1980, MA Thesis, University of Birmingham 1981

the mosque were purchased for use as schools. A boarding school for boys alongside a day school for girls was established alongside classes available to the whole community. Quilliam was known as a deeply compassionate man with a strong sense of social justice, who provided help and assistance to Liverpool's poor and needy. The Madina Children's Home where illegitimate and abandoned children were cared for until they fostered by Muslim families is illustrative of this.³³

The Liverpool Muslim Institute was unique because it was the first mosque 'which brought together a community of converts working alongside Muslim migrants and multi-national visitors from Muslim states.'³⁴ 'It set a precedent for a Muslim community united by religious conviction rather than ethnic identity'³⁵ which has still to be realised in contemporary Britain, it also transcended social class with Muslims of all classes praying together.

Part of Quilliam's legacy for British Muslims is his success in the propagation of Islam helping to secure over 250 conversions and his active involvement in opposing British foreign policy, which was considered 'un-British.' He was regarded as a controversial figure who 'wrote subversive pan-Islamist tracts,' in support of defensive jihad, ummatic solidarity and support for the caliphate.³⁶ He 'cements Islam in Britain as a faith conviction, not simply as a migrant presence'.³⁷ Quilliam's success lay in his ability to adapt Islam to a British environment without compromising its core beliefs.³⁸ He was, however, unable to effectively create alternative structures of leadership. His abrupt departure from Liverpool in 1908 led to the demise of the Institute which fell into disuse and his community dispersed. At this time prior to 1914 the notable centres of organised Islam were Liverpool, London and Woking which attracted transient communities of businessmen and students mainly from India alongside notable indigenous converts.³⁹

Abdullah Quilliam's devotion to his faith earned him the title of Sheikh Ul-Islam which was conferred upon him by the Sultan of Turkey, Abdul Hamid II and which was endorsed by the Shah of Persia, the King of Afghanistan and the Emir of Morocco with the wholehearted approval of Queen Victoria (Rosser-Owen 1998).⁴⁰ He remains the only British person ever appointed to this office. After a period abroad following impropriety in his legal practice,

³³ Meeting Point, The Newsletter of the New Muslims Project 1998 No.14 p2.

³⁴ Geaves,R (2010) Islam in Victorian Britain, The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam, p285 Kube Publishing, Markfield, UK

³⁵ Geaves,R (2010) Islam in Victorian Britain, The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam, p285 Kube Publishing, Markfield, UK

³⁶ Birt, J (2008) Abdullah Quilliam: Britain's First Islamist? www.yahyabirt.com/?p=136

³⁷ Geaves,R (2010) Islam in Victorian Britain, The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam, p287 Kube Publishing, Markfield, UK

³⁸ Geaves,R (2010) Islam in Victorian Britain, The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam, p288 Kube Publishing, Markfield, UK

³⁹ Lewis, P, (2002) Islamic Britain, Religion, Politics and Identity among British Muslims, p11, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., London & New York

⁴⁰ Rosser-Owen, D., (1998) The History of Islam in the British Isles: An Overview, p10, members.tripod.com/~british_muslims_assn/history_of_islam_inb_the_bi.html

Quilliam returned to England and was involved with the Woking Mosque until his death in London in 1932.

Among the high profile converts of this period were Lord Headley, known as Al-Farooq, on whose land in Woking the beautifully designed Shah Jehan Mosque was built in Moghul style and Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall who translated the Qur'an into English. The Shah Jehan Mosque and its association with the Ahmadiyya movement alongside its mainly upper middle-class/ aristocratic bearing meant that as a place of worship to the wider Muslim/convert community had a limited appeal. Amongst other notable conversions/reversions came the first British female convert/revert, a Scottish aristocrat, Lady Evelyn Cobbold, to perform the Hajj in 1933 ⁴¹

During the twentieth century Britain which had controlled large parts of the Muslim world saw large influxes of migrants from the Commonwealth. Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis immigrated to the UK which led to the establishment of mosques, schools and Islamic organizations. Smaller groups of Muslim migrants settled in Britain from parts of Africa, Turkey and the Middle East. During the 1960s and 1970s rapid social change and wider access to globalisation led to an increase in interest and exposure to a variety of religious philosophies and alternative ways of thinking and lifestyles. Former pop star Cat Stevens now known as Yusuf Islam is perhaps one of the most high profile converts to Islam from this period. He established the Britain's first state-funded Islamic primary school and supports charitable and humanitarian work around the world. Other well known converts to Islam include Hassan Gai Eaton and Martin Lings who made immense academic contributions to the development of Islam in Britain. Converts were integral to the establishment of the Islamic Party of Britain and the Association of British Muslims neither of which led to representative and active involvement within British society.

Although some converts are publicly active in matters relating to Islam they have not had the same impact as the 'pre-War period converts.' This may be due to the large influx of Muslims into the UK in the post-war period which included political and religious leaders and meant that the immigrant Muslims needed to have less contact with the converts over community matters.⁴²

As the Muslim communities around Britain became established and grew there were more possibilities than ever before for people to personally engage with others from different cultural and religious backgrounds and to consider the viability of different religions for themselves. The late 20th Century and early parts of the 21st Century have seen new patterns of Muslims migration from the Balkans, Africa and the Middle East.

⁴¹ See Henderson, L, (2009) From Suffolk to Saudi, www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/content/articles/2009/05/05/evelyn_cobbold_feature.shtml

⁴² Köse, A., 'Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts p25, London and New York: Kegan Paul International, Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1996

Chapter 2

Conversion to Islam in Leicester

There is evidence to suggest a presence of Muslims of African origin in Britain from the Tudor and Stuart periods⁴³. However, it is not possible to state definitively who the first converts to Islam in Leicester were, whether they were of African, Arab, indigenous English origin or whether they stemmed from other ethnicities. Neither is it known during what period of history these first conversions occurred. This is principally because historical records of religious conversion to Islam are not kept, so knowledge is only based on the personal accounts of converts currently alive. The following account is possibly the first convert to Islam who lived in Leicester.

During the early 1950's a group of West African stowaways (who converted to Islam) jumped ship in Liverpool after sailing to England from West Africa. Half of the group were immediately arrested and returned to Africa. The remaining six following release after briefly being incarcerated, lived in the North West and the Midlands and the majority of the group then settled in Leicester. Some of them have since passed away and others moved to other areas of the country. The sole remaining man from this group still living in Leicester came to the city in 1953. He met and married a local woman and brought up his family on a housing estate on the outskirts of the city. The practice of his faith was primarily a private affair with prayers being performed at home. Eid celebrations were held courtesy of a local Muslim restaurant owner who provided a meal at the restaurant for the converts on Eid day. Later on the men would travel to Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking where they would perform the Eid prayers and take part in the celebrations organised at the Mosque. As Leicester's Muslim population established itself in the city the men were able to attend the local mosques. They socialised with members of the African Caribbean communities some of whom had converted to Islam.

The earliest converts to Islam from African Caribbean heritage embraced Islam in Leicester in the late 1970's. Some members of a family who originated from the Caribbean began to practice the Islamic faith. The first woman to convert did so after receiving a copy of the Qur'an from her sister. At this time other members of the family were involved in the black civil rights movement which brought them in to contact with Islam. They were also influenced by an awareness of their African heritage and the role that Islam played in West African societies. Some of the ideas emanating from Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam enhanced further exploration of mainstream Sunni Islam. The Nation of Islam did not become established in Leicester primarily because its separatist ideology was largely rejected. These early converts to Islam who despite experiencing endemic racism and prejudice both from the indigenous British population and after their conversion from elements within Leicester's Muslim communities remained committed to Islamic ideals of equality and justice. These values are embodied in the *Qur'anic ayat (verse)*,

⁴³ Mattar, N. (1998) *Islam in Britain:1558-1682*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge pp45-9

'People, We have created you all male and female and have made you nations and tribes so that you would recognize each other. The most honourable among you in the sight of God is the most pious of you. God is All-knowing and All-aware.' (49:13)

Such conversions to Islam were again mainly a private affair because the converts did not regularly participate in the Mosques and religious organizations in Leicester and were not integrated into the established Muslim communities within the city. The mosques had been established by the wider communities Muslims migrants of South Asian origin whose descendents came from India (mainly Gujrat), Pakistan and Bangladesh, alongside the principle centres of migration for South Asians formerly resident in the African states of Uganda, Kenya, Malawi and Mozambique. There are small pockets of Turkish communities resident in the city. During the last fifteen years over 10,000 people of Somali origin, predominantly Muslims, have settled in the city along with a sizeable Kurdish community. These categories are not exclusive and Muslims from other areas of the world also comprise smaller communities, for example, Muslim communities from Nigeria, Zanzibar and Algeria. This has not effectively challenged the hegemony of the South Asian diaspora on the ethnic composition of the Muslim population of Leicester although it has led to the establishment of mosques and Islamic centres reflective of other ethnicities.

The first mosque to be established by converts in Leicester, mainly of African-Caribbean heritage was set up in a house in Highfields, in the late 1990s. The mosque was replaced following the renovation of a disused public house which was purchased by a benefactor from the Muslim community and the new mosque was opened in 2000. The development of the mosque was a response to requests from members of the African-Caribbean convert communities for a place of worship where they could participate in its day to day running and management. The mosque was to enable converts and their families to be welcomed and involved. However, issues regarding the management and daily administration of the mosque became divisive and many of the original members of the mosques left and either attended other mosques within the city or practised their faith through other means. Today, this mosque has become one of the most multi-cultural of all of the cities mosques welcoming both male and female Muslims from a diversity of backgrounds, cultures and nationalities.

The organisation of convert communities

The lack of organised forms of leadership amongst the converts to Islam in Leicester has meant that an identifiable convert community has not developed. Converts have interacted with Leicester's mainstream Muslim communities on an individuated, not collective basis. Although pockets of converts exist from particular ethnic backgrounds, such as African-Caribbean or white indigenous English they have not banded together to assume a community identity, that cuts across ethnic boundaries or that is contained within them. This is in contrast to parts of London, for example, Brixton where

converts predominantly of African/Caribbean heritage, established Brixton mosque in Gresham Road (also known as Masjid Ibnu Taymiyyah) in 1990 along with a wide ranging programme of services designed to cater to the needs of the converts.⁴⁴ Here, a commonality of interests can be addressed through mosque based community initiatives and collective endeavour. Such services include education and social programmes, youth activities, mentoring, matrimonial services and health and fitness activities. The mosque which itself has in the past been subject to leadership challenges from other Muslim sects, such as the *Murabitun*, remains at present, under *Salafi* influence.

The Brixton mosque was established by converts of African-Caribbean heritage in part due to the levels of racism they experienced from Muslims of South Asian origin.⁴⁵ Having no place of worship that welcomed Muslims of African Caribbean backgrounds or recognised the specific set of needs that this community faced was the catalyst for the mosque's inception. Brixton is London's foremost community of African-Caribbean people. Leicester by way of contrast comprises a relatively small number of people of African-Caribbean origin which may partially account for why attempts to establish mosques that cater to the needs of African-Caribbean Muslims have proved less successful.

In Norwich and Burton Upon Trent, members of a *Shadhili Darqawi Sufi tariqa* known as 'the *Murabitun*,' receive spiritual guidance from Sheikh Abdal-Qadir As-Sufi, himself a Scottish convert to Islam and currently resident in South Africa.⁴⁶ The *Murabitun* are expositors of an alternative Islamic economic and political system that includes a re-imposition of the gold dinar and silver dirham (wealth based units of currency) which negates usury and interest-based financial schemes and proposes alternative structures of government.

The *Murabitun* in England consist mainly, but not exclusively of, white middle-class British converts to Islam, who generally reside in close geographical proximity to each other and aspire to create communities based on models of life in Madinah at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). During the 1970's the Ihsan mosque was established in Chaplefield East, Norwich, which has provided the basis for the first continuous and indigenous Muslim community in the UK and the first mosque established since that of Abdullah Quilliam in Liverpool by British, converts to Islam. The *Murabitun* has arguably been the most successful group in attracting converts to Islam in this country.⁴⁷

Other *Sufi* movements which attract significant populations of converts are the *Naqshbandi* order led by the Turkish Cypriot Sheikh Nazim who emphasises the spiritual state of the heart and a Canadian convert, Sheikh Nuh Ha Mim Keller who leads an ascetic *Shadhili tariqa*. These groups share the common

⁴⁴ See Brixton Mosque's website for further information www.brixtonmasjid.co.uk/

⁴⁵ Baker, Dr. Abdul Haq. Chair of Brixton Mosque broadcast on Radio 4 'Young, Black and Muslim' 19th December 2010).

⁴⁶ See www.muslimsofnorwich.org.uk/ for further information

⁴⁷ See Köse A (1996) Conversion to Islam, Kegan Paul International, London and New York

features of offering the converts who join them a close, self-contained and often supportive framework within which to practice distinct interpretations of Islam with minimal encroachment on outside mainstream Muslim communities.

What distinguishes the groups mentioned above from the converts in Leicester is that they have collectively organised themselves on the basis of their specific interpretation of Islam. In Brixton converts have come together on the basis of a *Salafi* interpretation of Islam whilst in Norwich through the *Murabitun* interpretation of *Sufism*. The converts in Leicester comprise a more disparate group of converts who adhere to a differing range of interpretations of Islam that may prove less conducive to collective organisation.

Having made the above observations, the situation of loosely banded networks of converts to Islam in Leicester is typified throughout the country, which is characterised by a general lack of infrastructure and support amongst convert communities. Exceptions to this lack of unification amongst converts do exist and successful examples of networks of new Muslims are to be found for example, in Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield. The factors that make the northern communities of converts particularly successful in providing support and services to converts are that the converts have managed to have the backing and support of certain mosques within the cities. These mosques have in turn proven to be progressive and visionary in making provision for the wider community. Being multicultural in terms of the congregations which they serve they are more easily able to incorporate the difference that the addition of converts to their communities create.

The northern convert communities mentioned above have been characterised by able and motivated converts who are able to facilitate strategic plans and structure for themselves. Mature converts running these programmes have through their experience and longevity as converts been able to assume degrees of gravitas within the Muslim community. The communities were also assisted by being part of a consultative body of the NMP with a national support network through which the NMP helped enable them to appreciate the necessity of making provisions and one to one support at a local level.

Chapter Three

Conversion to Islam – the theory

It appears paradoxical that conversion/reversion to Islam continues to grow in Britain amidst an increasing climate of fear and hostility to the faith that is expressed as Islamophobia and expounded particularly through the media. This has led to stereotypes being propounded when referring to Islam that lack thought, reflection and analysis, and which serve to offer a false dichotomy between Islam and the West. Conversion to Islam is frequently viewed as strange and odd particularly in view of trying to comprehend why someone would embrace a religion that is often perceived as regressive and running counter to the prevailing norms and values postulated by Western societies.

Conversion to Islam can be seen as a challenge to a binary view of the world. In a British context, converts have the potential to adopt the role of 'bridge builders' straddling Western and Islamic cultures thereby aiding non-Muslims to understand more about Islam and born Muslims to have a greater comprehension of non-Muslims and non-Muslim society.⁴⁸ Converts may also be able to assist the British to stop seeing Islam as a threat.⁴⁹ This assumes that converts have the ability and the authority to represent Islam and to be accepted by born Muslims as authentic voices in inter-faith and cross-cultural dialogue. It also presumes that converts will not be rejected by non-Muslims as eccentrics or traitors to British society.

Concentration on the more obvious differences between practitioners of Islam (dress codes and social etiquette) and the wider society mask many of the intrinsic and shared core values that are held and highly regarded by both Muslims and Judeo-Christian British culture, for example, peace, truth, justice, compassion and love. Whilst the majority of converts to Islam are arriving at the faith after experiencing a nominal or practicing Judeo-Christian British upbringing this is not exclusively the case as a minority of people living in Britain are attracted to Islam from a multitude of other faith or non-faith backgrounds and may themselves have emigrated to Britain or be direct descendents of second or third generation settlers in the UK thereby adding other cultural dimensions to their experiences of life in this country, for example, converts from Hindu or Sikh backgrounds. The extent to which they have been exposed to the culture of Britain and the degree to which this culture has impacted upon them is variable.

Given that the core values of both Islam and Judeo-Christian British culture are not at variance this raises questions as to why people living in Britain are

⁴⁸ Zebiri, K, '*British Muslim Converts, Choosing Alternative Lives*', p.4, Oneworld Publications 2008, Oxford

⁴⁹ Zebiri, K, '*British Muslim Converts, Choosing Alternative Lives*', p.84, Oneworld Publications 2008, Oxford

choosing to convert to Islam and what is it that they gain from their conversion that they have not found within their indigenous culture and previous religious faith or non-faith. There are a set of core values common to all of the major world faiths so the attraction to faiths other than the one in which a person was born into must stem from the particular path to God or enlightenment or culture offered by that faith. In essence then is a need to understand what, if anything, sets Islam apart from other faiths and what features of the religion make it uniquely attractive to converts. Islam appeals to converts who see the adoption of Islam as a means of extending continuity to the development of their previously held beliefs. Here, for example, a convert from Christianity to Islam may perceive Islam as a means of extenuating and deepening their previous beliefs rather than adopting a new set of beliefs and rejecting a former faith.

Muslims agree on the need to uphold a basic set of beliefs which are a commonality shared between all Muslims. The five prerequisites constituting Islamic beliefs are to make a declaration of faith, establish prayer, observe *Ramadan*, make where possible the pilgrimage to *Hajj* and pay *Zakat* (a compulsory sum of money to be given annually which is due on an assets and savings above a certain level of value). A Muslim believes in the oneness of Allah (God), Allah's angels and their obedient service to Him, the divine revelations and sacred books, all the prophets and messengers of Allah, which include the Prophets of Judaism and Christianity, the day of resurrection and accountability and that there is no power or action except that which originates with Allah. Muslims agree on a central core of beliefs, nonetheless, there are a variety of interpretations of Islam which can be adopted and are frequently seen amongst converts which range from a 'sacralization of political engagement in a spiritual community' to an individual spiritual and mystical quest (Allievi 2006 p143).⁵⁰

The act of conversion is known as the *Shahadah* which is stated in Arabic. This involves repeating the profession of faith, which in English states, 'I witness that there is no God but Allah and I witness that Muhammad is his servant and Messenger.' This declaration of faith can be made with or without witnesses but most commonly converts wish to have their conversions witnessed. After this a person is considered a Muslim. The act of conversion is simple as are the main directives of the faith. However, the simplicity of the fundamental tenets of Islam belies the often more complex and difficult practice of implementing beliefs and making them have a meaningful impact on one's life.

The ease at which conversion can take place contrasts with conversion to other faiths, for example, Judaism, where intense periods of study of the faith are demanded, along with socialisation into the Jewish community and the ability to defend the desire to convert in front of a Rabbinical court before the conversion is formally accepted and the convert welcomed into the Jewish faith. For those wishing to convert to Roman Catholicism there is the

⁵⁰ Allievi, S., (2006), *The Shifting Significance of the Halal/Haram Frontier: Narratives on the Hijab and other issues*, p143 in van Nieuwkerk (ed) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas

requirement of attending a structured programme of learning before being accepted into the faith. However, what is offered by synagogues and churches which are not often found by converts to Islam is the ability to attend a given religious institution and find there an organised programme of events, prayer groups, outlets for socialisation and mixed religious communities of both males and females that provide a ready made structure for those new to the faith.

Conversion is taking place in large numbers between faiths and within faiths because there is now the opportunity to do so. People have greater access through a variety of mediums to exposure to other belief systems and are able to exercise choice in their decision making regarding the most appropriate system of beliefs to fit their own requirements. This becomes like a supermarket of belief systems. Conversion can be understood in this sense in terms of 'rational choice' explanations.⁵¹

How does conversion occur?

Ali Köse maintains that religious conversion is composed of three experiences; firstly, an awareness of increased devotion within the same religion, secondly, a person can move from the irreligious to religious, or thirdly, a change from one religion to another.⁵² It is important to acknowledge that there are not single causes but complex intertwining of spiritual, psychological, sociological and environmental factors. The term 'converting' can encapsulate the development of conversion which implies an ongoing process rather than a static event.⁵³

A succinct and frequently cited definition of religious conversion is offered by Lewis Rambo:

Conversion is a process of religious change in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations and orientations(a) conversion is a process over time, not a single event; (b) conversion is contextual and thereby influences and is influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations and situations; and (c) factors in the conversion process are multiple, interactive and cumulative. There is no one cause of conversion, no one process, and one simple consequence of that process.⁵⁴

Rambo's definition is comprehensive as it captures the dynamics of conversion and complex processes involved that contribute to religious

⁵¹ Wohlrab-Sahr, M., *Symbolising Distance: Conversion to Islam in Germany and the United States*, pp.71-92, in van Nieuwkerk (ed) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas

⁵² Köse, A., *'Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* p.1, London and New York: Kegan Paul International, Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1996

⁵³ Rambo, L.R. & Farhadian, C.E., (1999), *Converting: stages of religious change*, p.23, in Lamb, C and Darrol Bryant, M (eds) *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, Cassell, London & New York

⁵⁴ Rambo, L.R., (1993) *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Yale University Press, New Haven

conversion. It does not seek to locate reasons for conversion in single dimensions. Psychological theories often seek to attribute conversion to abnormalities, personal inadequacy or to major stressful events occurring in a person's life that lead them to seek support from a religious framework. For example, psychoanalytic theories such as those proffered by Freud locate causes for adopting a belief system within neuroses exhibited by the individual stemming from disappointing relationships with a father figure. Belief is then represented in an omnipotent God which allows the individual to transcend their own personal inadequacies. Although Freud had different perspectives on religion, 'conversion processes are generally seen as fragile compromises in the ongoing conflict of the life and death instinct.'⁵⁵ Following this limiting line of thought does not advance a holistic understanding of conversion it merely locates religious belief within categories of vulnerable or inadequate people, which most people could fit into if they sought to interpret the inevitability of some unhappy event occurring in their life in such light.

Nonetheless, Abraham Maslow's (1954) 'hierarchy of needs', first formulated in 1943, when applied to conversion offers insight into why conversions are increasingly possible.⁵⁶ His theory is interesting because it is not dependent on psychological abnormality for its understanding of human motivation. Maslow presents a pyramid of needs. At the bottom of the pyramid are the basic needs of food, water, sleep and warmth. These are succeeded by the needs for safety and security. At the pinnacle of the pyramid is the need for self actualisation. This is a process through which a person is able to achieve their individual potential, to be what they are capable of becoming. In terms of conversion when a person has fulfilled their basic human needs they seek to fulfil more reified needs which can be understood in terms of needs for spiritual and self-development. Of use here may also be Kohlberg's 'theory of moral development' which at the highest stage sees concern for universal moral values and ethical development as paramount in an individual's life.⁵⁷

A common theme that is reflected in all studies of Western converts to Islam is the emphasis on conversion as a 'gradual, reflection based conversion rather than the sudden snapping of 'self-surrender.'⁵⁸ Very few of the converts in this report relate spiritual experiences leading up to their conversions for most it is the intellectual aspects or personal experiences with Muslims that are reflected in their conversions narratives. Conversion to Islam appears largely to be the result of rational and logical choices rather than emotional responses. Lofland and Skonovd (1981 cited in Lakhdar et al 2007 p2) compartmentalise the experience of conversion into six distinct

⁵⁵ Rambo, L.R., 'Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change', *Social Compass* 46 (3) pp 259-271, 1999

⁵⁶ Maslow, A.H., (1954) *Towards a Psychology of Being*, Third Edition, John Wiley & Sons, New York

⁵⁷ Crain, W.C., (1985) *Theories of Development*, pp118-136, Prentice Hall

⁵⁸ Poston, L (1992) cited in Hermansen, M., (2006) *Keeping the Faith: Convert Muslim Mothers and the Transmission of Female Muslim Identity in the West* in van Nieuwkerk (ed) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas

categories or motifs.⁵⁹ Of relevance here are four of the motifs that related directly to the type of conversion experiences described by the converts in this report. Intellectual conversion that occurs through reading and other forms of investigation, affectional conversion which occurs through strong personal attachment, experimental conversion where the person actively participates in the religion which leads to their adoption of the beliefs and mystical conversion which happens through a spiritual experience.

Types of conversion

There is what is commonly termed 'conversions of convenience where an individual converts to Islam in order to appear more attractive as a marriage partner or potential spouse to a Muslim. Such conversions can help to create more 'common ground' within a marriage. This may be a way of accruing 'symbolic and cultural capital,' affecting the 'power balance' within a relationship.⁶⁰

Conversions of convenience are thought to occur more frequently when a man who is not a Muslim wishes to marry a Muslim woman because an orthodox Islamic view is that a marriage between a non-Muslim male and a Muslim female is impermissible unless he first converts to Islam. This is considered necessary to protect the woman's religious faith and identity and those of children subsequently born from the marriage. Muslim men may according to the *Qur'an* marry *Ahl Al-Kitab* (people of the book) which is Jewish or Christian women and it is not considered obligatory for a conversion to take place before the marriage can be contracted. Nonetheless, as mothers are regarded in Islam as the primary transmitters of religious guidance and instruction for their children most Muslim males would signal a preference to marry someone who has demonstrated a level of commitment to their faith, usually through conversion. Research findings have indicated that the mother's religious preference is usually stronger than the father's in determining a child's religious upbringing.⁶¹ 'When neither spouse converts, the children tend to be raised in the more exclusivist or stricter religion.' This provides a form of indirect conversion that crosses generations if the children retain the religion in which they grew up.⁶²

Conversions related to marriage can not be dismissed as disingenuous as the convert may regard their conversion as sincere. Instances of a commitment to the practice of the newly adopted faith can occur against the wishes of the

⁵⁹ Lofland and Skonovd (1981) cited in Lakhdar, M., Vinsonneaus, G., Apter, M.J., Mullet, E., (2007) Conversion to Islam Among French Adolescents and Adults: A Systematic Inventory of Motives in *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 17 (1) p. 1-15

⁶⁰ Wohlrab-Sahr, M., *Symbolising Distance: Conversion to Islam in Germany and the United States*, pp.71-92, in van Nieuwkerk (ed) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas

⁶¹ Nelsen (1990) cited in Barro, J.R., Hwang, J., McCleary, R.M., (2010) *Religious Conversion in 40 Countries*, Harvard University, Cornerstone Research, Harvard University

⁶² Barro, J.R., Hwang, J., McCleary, R.M., (2010) *Religious Conversion in 40 Countries*, Harvard University, Cornerstone Research, Harvard University

born Muslim marriage partner who may adopt a secular approach to life. For example, one convert viewed the adoption of a headscarf as an essential expression of her new faith much to the chagrin of her nominally Muslim husband.

Other converts partially adopt aspects of what are viewed as Islamic concepts and behaviour into their life whilst rejecting or choosing not to implement others. Conversion may be regarded as 'cool,' and may stem from a political rather than spiritual basis which can involve a rejection or questioning of conventional norms and standards prevailing within British society. Köse argues that conversion can be a form of adolescent rebellion which may involve rebelling against forms of society or accepted modes of thought.⁶³ Conversion can result as a means of conformity and attempts to fit in with a particular peer group or may accrue certain benefits. This can be seen for example, within gang culture and prison settings or in less extreme environments such as a college with a significant proportion of Muslim students. The media has made much of this phenomena occurring within the prison system. The extent to which it actually occurs is not known and subject to speculation and sensationalism. There was no evidence for this type of conversion occurring within this report. Conversions within such settings may, nonetheless, develop into sincere commitments to Islam. Many prisoners for example, who have converted to Islam whilst in prison find a sense of peace, spirituality, discipline and meaning to their lives which help them cope with the difficulties of prison life and beyond.⁶⁴

Lofland and Stark make the distinction between 'verbal converts' who exhibit limited involvement in a new religion and 'total converts' who display an active commitment to their faith.⁶⁵ Brice categorises two broad classifications of converts, 'converts of convenience' and 'converts of conviction.'⁶⁶ Converts of convenience refer to those who adopt Islam for marriage purposes with little intention of practising the faith and converts of conviction who convert for intellectual or emotional reasons and strictly adhere to Islamic teachings. Brice argues that most converts position themselves between these two extremes and over time 'may move closer from one classification to the other.'⁶⁷

⁶³ Köse, A., 'Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts p.54, London and New York: Kegan Paul International, Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1996

⁶⁴ see HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Dame Anne Owers report on Muslim Prisoners' Experiences, June 2010 www.justice.gov.uk/inspectorates/hmi-prisons/doc/Muslim_prisoners_2010_rps.pdf

⁶⁵ Lofland and Stark (1965) Köse, A., 'Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts p.124, London and New York: Kegan Paul International, Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1996

⁶⁶ Brice, M.A.K., (2010) A minority within a minority: identity problems for White English converts to Islam in the United Kingdom, paper presented at Studying Islam in the UK, Study day organised in conjunction with the BSA Sociology of Religion Study group and the Muslims in Britain Research Network, London

⁶⁷ Brice, M.A.K., (2010) A minority within a minority: identity problems for White English converts to Islam in the United Kingdom, paper presented at Studying Islam in the UK, Study day organised in conjunction with the BSA Sociology of Religion Study group and the Muslims in Britain Research Network, London

Analogies have been drawn between converts to Islam and evangelical Christian ideologues that support perceptions that Western societies promote as norms of behaviour the consumption of alcohol, pre-marital sex and a permissive lifestyle that does not appear to value institutions of family and marriage and may promote taboos such as homosexuality. The extents to which such views are an accurate depiction of the current state of society in the West are in turn contentious. Disquiet regarding the pace of change in society has led to suggestions that some converts are seeking an interpretation of Islamic values that in certain aspects reflect 1950's Britain where gender demarcation was more clearly defined and women in particular found themselves valued as mothers and homemakers and life generally appeared less confusing and complicated. Islam in this sense then 'returns to Europe not what is 'Other' in its history, but what is familiar to it. Islam is not different: it is not the contrary of what we are, it is 'us' – one generation or more ago.'⁶⁸ Here what the convert takes from Islam is the creation of 'plausibility structures' which sustain an 'alternative position' to those sustained by the wider society. For example, converts who may wish to adopt traditional gender roles are enabled to do so through the adoption of the Islamic faith because they consider it allows them to follow traditional gender roles in a way that they may feel unable to adhere to through Western culture.⁶⁹

The convert as a practising Muslim may feel increasingly alienated by contemporary society that posits norms of behaviour and modes of thinking that are increasingly removed from attitudes and behaviour propounded by practising Muslims. Brice surmises, 'current trends seem to indicate that the majority group is moving to a position culturally that is ever further divorced from anything close to what a practising Muslim could tolerate.'⁷⁰

Roald offers a three stage model of conversion.⁷¹ The initial stage following conversion sees the convert often emotionally obsessed with Islam to the exclusion of all other areas of their lives. This first phase is called the 'falling in love stage.' After the primary stages of intoxication have worn off the convert enters the second stage which is characterised by disillusionment with the reality of the behaviour of born Muslims who fail to conform to the ideals that the converts expect of them. Here becomes apparent the disparities

⁶⁸ Allievi, S., (2006), *The Shifting Significance of the Halal/Haram Frontier: Narratives on the Hijab and other issues*, p146 in van Nieuwkerk (ed) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas

⁶⁹ Allievi, S., (2006), *The Shifting Significance of the Halal/Haram Frontier: Narratives on the Hijab and other issues*, p146 in van Nieuwkerk (ed) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Te

⁷⁰ Brice, M.A.K., (2006) *Assimilation and alienation in a multicultural society – non-visible minorities: lessons learnt from indigenous converts to Islam in the United Kingdom*, p.9, based on a paper presented at *Citizenship, Security and Democracy*, International Conference, Istanbul, Turkey September 2006

⁷¹ Roald, A.S., (2006) *The Shaping of a Scandinavian Islam: Converts and Gender Equal Opportunity*, pp. 49-51, in van Nieuwkerk, K., (ed) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas

between theory and practice. At this stage the convert can also be overwhelmed with the rules and regulations of their new faith.

The third stage which Roald terms 'maturity' arises when the convert actively accepts the 'discrepancy between the ideal and reality' of Islamic theory and the ways in which theory or ideals may translate into practice. Converts at the third stage may seek to understand Islam in terms of their own cultural frames of reference whereby the convert considers that 'they have come back to themselves.' This involves integrating their original cultural identity into an Islamic framework and rejecting a false or imposed persona. Roald's stages of conversion may not be an appropriate model in all cases and lacks understanding of why some converts are drawn to forms of Islam that offer a radical departure from their previous lifestyle and it is these differences that maintain a compelling attraction for the convert. Brice argues,

'The case of 'White British' converts helps highlight the need to revisit the thinking behind demands that Muslims should assimilate into the majority culture. Having assimilated a non-indigenous religion, what sense can be made of suggestions that they should assimilate the culture of the majority once more?'⁷²

A convert may also experience being both an insider and outsider in their own society which can lead to a sense of alienation from their own culture and from Islam. This is the stage at which many converts turn away from Islam unable to deal with the resulting cognitive dissonance. It is also at this point that many converts become cultural converts 'where they remain within the Muslim cultural paradigm' or develop 'integrated plural identities,' 'where there is a harmonious transcultural oscillation among various patterns of identity.'⁷³

However, for the majority of converts part of their journey into Islam is in reaching an accommodation between their indigenous culture and their understanding of Islam so that they are not constantly in a state of turmoil. Part of the problem for converts is often the speed at which they adopt a new identity. As Murad posits that born Muslims take on a British identity slowly possibly over several generations which is gentle in comparison to the 'abrupt jolt' experienced by the convert whose redefinition of his/her identity occurs all at once.⁷⁴

Nonetheless, understanding the conversion narrative is more complex than simply accepting the account offered by the convert. It is a commonly held view that converts modify and adjust their conversion narratives according to

⁷² Brice, M.A.K., (2006) Assimilation and alienation in a multicultural society – non-visible minorities: lessons learnt from indigenous converts to Islam in the United Kingdom p1, based on a paper presented at Citizenship, Security and Democracy, International Conference, Istanbul, Turkey September 2006

⁷³ Østberg (2000) cited in Roald, A.S., (2006) The Shaping of a Scandinavian Islam: Converts and Gender Equal Opportunity, p. 51, in van Nieuwkerk, K., (ed) Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas

⁷⁴ Murad (1997) cited in Brice, M.A.K., (2008) An English Muslim in search of an identity in Hart, C, (ed) Approaches to Englishness: Differences, Diversity and Identities, Midrash Publishing, Kingswinford

their existing views of Islam and changeable self-perception, which are not to negate the truthful essence of their narrations but acknowledge that a degree of adjustment may have occurred that reflects a current understanding of their faith.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ see van Nieuwkerk, K., (2006) Gender, Conversion and Islam: A Comparison of Online and Offline Conversion Narratives pp97-98, in van Nieuwkerk, K., (ed) Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas also see Roald, A.S., New Muslims in the European Context; The Experience of Scandinavian Converts, p99, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden

Chapter Four

The experiences of Leicester's converts

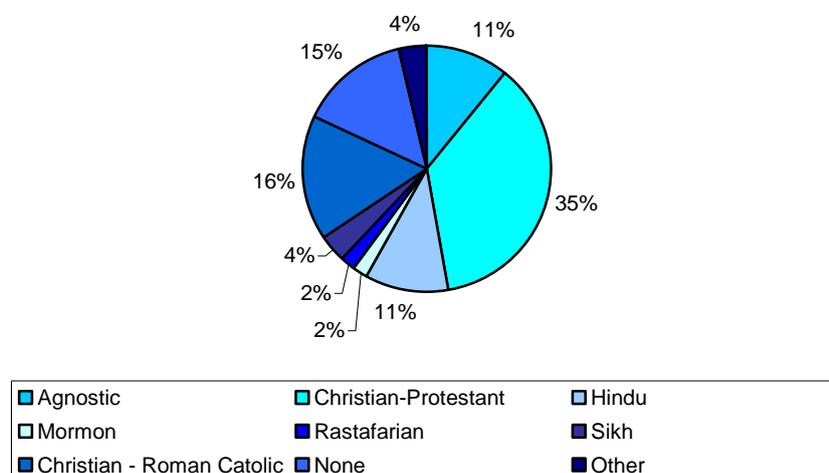
This section of the report examines the personal views and experiences of Leicester's converts. Fifty-five converts provided responses to a detailed questionnaire on their perspectives of life in Leicester. The findings are supported by insights gleaned through in depth interviews with fourteen converts and through the thoughts and ideas provided by sixteen focus group participants. The findings are supported where appropriate by existing academic research.

The questionnaire sample

Previous belief systems/religious faith

Of the 19 male questionnaire respondents 31% came from Christian-Protestant backgrounds, 11% from Roman Catholic backgrounds, 16% were former Hindus, 16% were agnostics, 21% professed to having no faith beliefs and 5% held other beliefs that were not specified. The thirty six female questionnaire respondents comprised 39% former Christian-Protestants, 19% from Roman Catholic backgrounds, 8% were former Hindus, 6% were previously Sikh, 3% was Rastafarian, 3% Mormon, 3% Salvation Army, 8% were agnostics and 11% professed to no previous belief system. These figures illustrate that the majority of the questionnaire sample stemmed from a relatively limited range of previous beliefs. Almost half of the male sample and over three-quarters of the female converts had previously been aligned with forms of Christianity. Again 42% of the male sample came from a background of agnosticism or non-belief. The rate for females was lower at 19%.

Converts previous religions or belief systems (male and female)



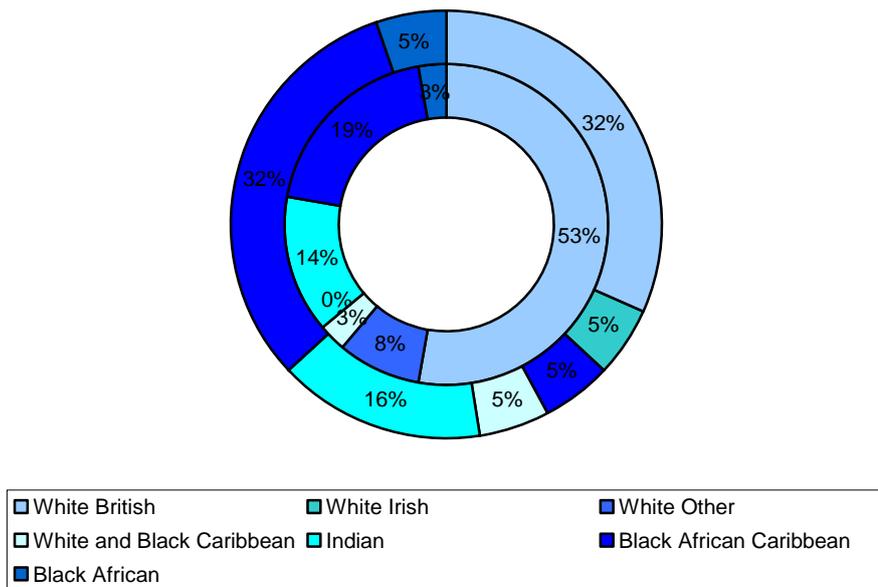
(Figure 1: Converts previous religions or beliefs systems)

A sizeable proportion of the converts cited above make a journey from non-belief in God to active involvement in Islam. This is interesting in terms of how converts or potential converts develop from a secular understanding of the world to internalising concepts of God and spirituality. It also highlights the undiminished human need for spirituality that secular society fails to extinguish and which leads people to seek a framework to provide a moral basis from which to lead their lives and to find a sense of purpose. As there were no converts listed as previously atheist in the questionnaire sample (although two interviewees stated they were previously atheist), Bah'ai, Jain, Jewish, New Age or Jehovah's Witness this may be indicative of lower conversion rates from these faiths into Islam. Alternatively, these figures may be specific to this sample and may not prove representative of future research.

Ethnic composition of the questionnaire sample

In terms of ethnicity of the female questionnaire respondents, 53% were white British, 8% were other white, 3% was mixed white and black African Caribbean, 14% were Indian, 19% were of African-Caribbean heritage and 3% was African. For the males 32% were white British, 5% white/Asian, 5% white other, 5% white and black Caribbean, 16% Indians, 5% African and 32% African-Caribbeans. The ethnic composition of the study reflects the ethnic make up of Leicester though does not include converts of Chinese extraction because none were identified to be included in the study.

**Ethnic composition of the questionnaire sample
(male outer circle: female inner circle)**

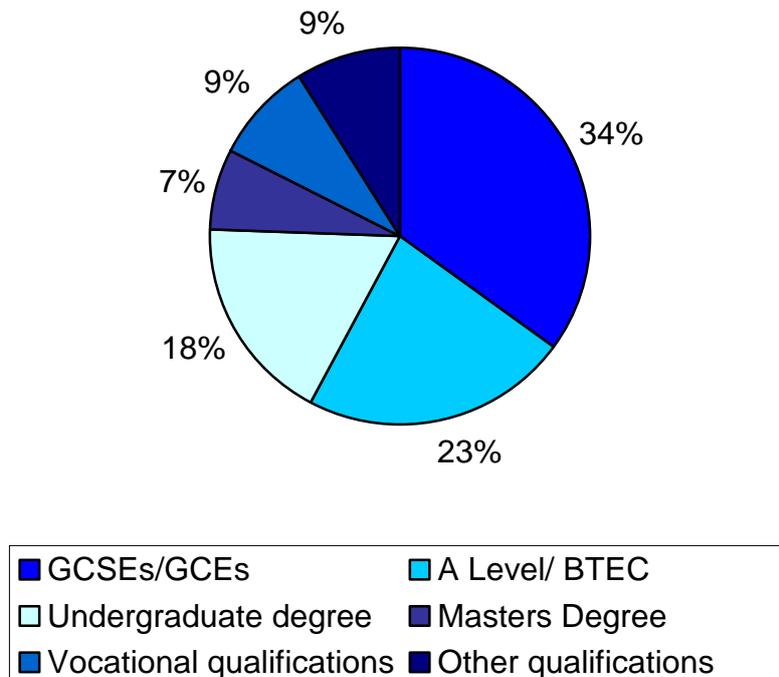


(Figure 2: Ethnic composition of the questionnaire sample)

Education and Employment

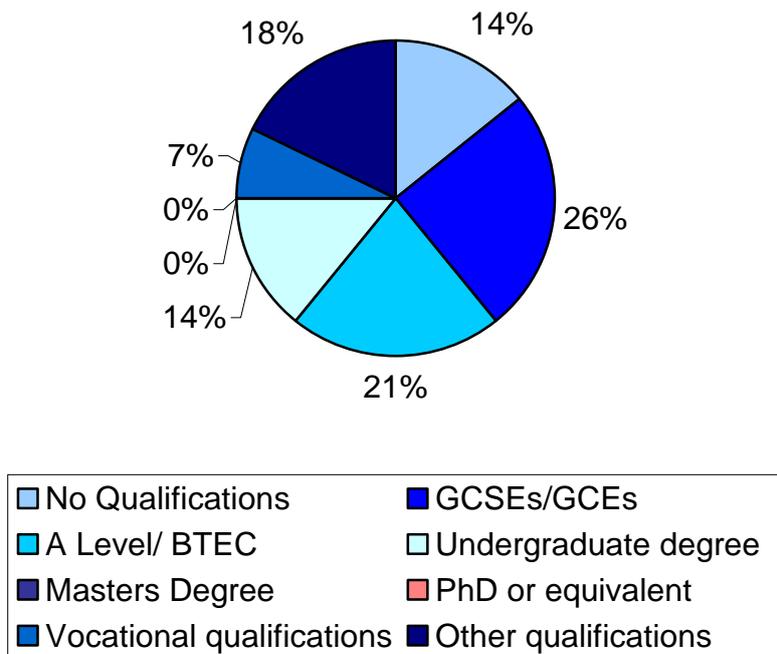
The two charts below describe the educational attainment of the questionnaire respondents. The figures demonstrate a wide distribution of educational attainment. Higher levels of academic qualifications were held by the female respondents than the male with 18% as opposed to 14% of male respondents holding undergraduate degrees while 7% of female respondents held masters degrees. The figures illustrate that 25% of the female respondents were university educated compared to 14% of the male. This is reflective of general observations on female converts that they are frequently well educated. None of the female sample held 'no qualifications' as opposed to 14% of the male sample. The category 'other qualifications' shed light on a wide range of qualifications that demonstrated that conversion is occurring across social class categorisations. Included in the range of qualifications held by the questionnaire respondents were the following - 11% of the female sample held teaching qualifications with an additional 3% holding an Initial Teaching Certificate. 3% held a secretarial qualification, 3% a childcare qualification, 3% had a secretarial qualification and 6% possessed hairdressing qualifications. For the male converts 5% held a post-graduate diploma, 5% an NVQ, 11% had completed access courses, 5% held a Certificate in Urban Community Studies and 5% held a City and Guilds in Engineering.

Educational Qualifications of female converts



(Figure 3: Educational qualifications of female converts)

Educational qualifications of male converts



(Figure 4: Educational qualifications of male converts)

Employment

In terms of employment 31% of the female questionnaire sample did not answer the question on the type of employment they were engaged with when employed. For the male sample the figure was 21%. The male range of occupations were as follows, cleaner, handy man, carpenter, call centre agent, chef, security personnel, supervisor, public sector in a variety of roles, educational support engineer, administration, office, sports trainer, a chiropractor, advice work, and sales.

For the female occupations ranged from teaching, administration and secretarial work, hairdressers, company director, civil servant, self-employed, sports instructor, assistant manager, care workers, sales coordinator, sales assistant, case worker research technician and medical therapist.

The diversity of occupations and levels of education demonstrate that converts to Islam reflect the general composition of society ranging from unskilled to well educated people, reflecting a socio-economic mix from the elite sectors of society to the less privileged.

With regard to current employment status 31% of female converts were employed and 8% self-employed. The two figures together illustrated that 39% were currently working, 19% were unemployed, 25% were not seeking work and the remaining 17% were students. 63% of male converts were employed and 11% self-employed making the total currently working 74%, 16% were not seeking work 5% were students and 5% retired and none were unemployed. The relatively high levels of employment for male converts are indicative of the emphasis that Islam places on the ability to provide for themselves and their families. The 25% of female converts currently not seeking work may reflect the importance many Muslim women attach to their roles as mothers and homemakers. A number of women in the sample were teaching their children at home rather than sending them to school, possibly as part of their decision not to work.

Age of conversion to Islam

The age at which the questionnaire respondents had decided to embrace Islam did not include any respondents in the fifty years and over categories. The ages of both male and female conversions are illustrated in the chart below. The percentage figures show that for females the most popular age categories for conversion are 18-25 years (33%) followed by 26-35 years (31%). A still sizeable proportion of females (25%) had converted under the age of 18 in comparison to 11% of the male sample. For males the largest category was the 18-25 year age group (37%) followed by two equal categories in the 26-35 and 36-50 (both 26%) age ranges. When both male and female categories are taken together the largest age cohort for conversion is 18-25 years (35%) followed by the 26-35 years category (29%). Here 'Under 18's' constituted 20% and the 36-50 year category (16%). If the two largest cohorts are taken together this means that 64% of the questionnaire respondents converted between the ages of 18-35. These figures do not contradict the research findings described below from other sources.

A cross-cultural, multi-faith study entitled, 'Religious Conversion in 40 Countries,' discusses the point in the lifecycle when religious conversion is most likely to occur. The largest percentage of change of religion or lapse in religious faith is found to occur before the age of 30. For example, the General Social Survey religious module for 1998 among converts with at least one change of religious faith, the age at which the first change took place was 76% before the age of 30, 15% between 30 and 39, and 9% at 40 or over.⁷⁶ Conversion occurring before the age of thirty is thought to be significant in terms of conversions that are related to marriage.⁷⁷

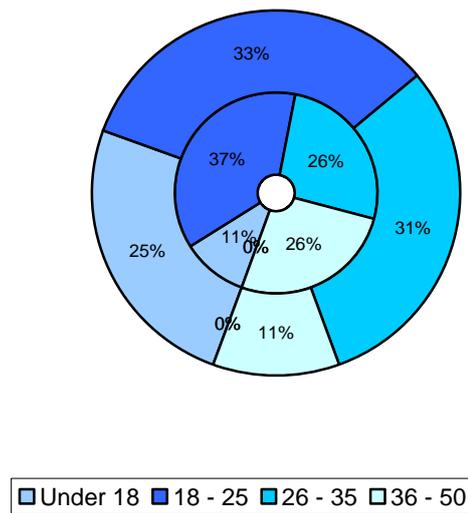
⁷⁶ Barro, R.J., Hwang, J, McCleary, R.M., (2010) Religious Conversion in 40 Countries, pp.6-7, Harvard University, Cornerstone Research, Harvard University

⁷⁷ Lehrer (1998) and Sherkat (2004) cited in Barro, R.J., Hwang, J, McCleary, R.M., (2010) Religious Conversion in 40 Countries, pp.6-7, Harvard University, Cornerstone Research, Harvard University

Kate Zebiri notes that research conducted prior to and including the 1990s by Köse, Poston and Adnan found the average age to be about thirty.⁷⁸ Zebiri states that subsequent research indicates the age at which conversion occurs is decreasing. To support this she cites Roald's findings that amongst Norwegian converts 80% embraced Islam before the age of thirty and Al-Qwidi's work pointing to a lower average age of twenty five years amongst British converts.⁷⁹

Possible reasons for conversion at various ages could be a subject for further research. Although reasons for conversion at specific ages were not addressed in this research the possible explanations listed below may highlight the range of influences on decisions to convert to Islam of the convert population in Leicester. Explanations for teenage conversions may include travel, peer group influence, adolescent rebellion, and the questioning of previously accepted family and societal values. Conversions before the age of thirty may relate to travel, marriage, friendships, experimentation with different life styles and values along with searching for deeper meanings to life that are not addressed within currently held value systems. The stagnation of conversion in older over fifty age groups may point to people having resolved the major questions of life and being comfortable with their moral and religious frames of reference. Other explanations could include less flexibility of thought and a lack of willingness to adapt or consider different belief systems as people advance through the ageing process.

Age at which questionnaire respondents embraced Islam male inner ring female outer ring



(Figure 5: Age at which questionnaire respondents embraced Islam)

⁷⁸ Zebiri, K., (2008) British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives, pp. 42-43, Oneworld Publications, Oxford

⁷⁹ Zebiri, K., (2008) British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives, pp. 42, Oneworld Publications, Oxford

The number of people converting to Islam

Estimates for the numbers of converts to Islam in Britain vary widely. Kevin Brice, an academic at Swansea University who has conducted extensive research on converts in the UK estimates the figures to be up to 100,000 based primarily on the 2001 Census supported by other extrapolations.⁸⁰ Cambridge University theologian Tim Winter proposed a figure of 50,000.⁸¹ Other academics such as Yahya Birt estimate a much lower level of conversion at around 14,000 based on the 2001 census (which equates to 0.9% of the Muslim population of Britain.⁸² A question on the Scottish 2001 Census regarding the religion of upbringing as well as current religion led Birt to conclude that 'Islam is the religion people are least likely to leave or convert to'.⁸³

With regard to Leicester, according to the 2001 Census findings there were 30,885 Muslims resident in Leicester.⁸⁴ As the 2001 Census question regarding the declaration of belonging to a religious faith was optional it can be assumed that this was an underestimation of the number of Muslims residing in the city as some respondents may not have wished to officially acknowledge their religious allegiance. This figure is likely to be considerably upwardly readjusted in the forthcoming 2011 census, following significant migration into the city during the past decade.

For Leicester, using the 2001 census figures the number of converts to Islam can only be estimated rather than firmly concluded. These numbers are collated by adding several categories of ethnicity together. White British Muslims and White Irish Muslims plus White and Black Caribbean Muslims and Black Caribbean Muslims for Leicester give a possible convert population of 614.⁸⁵ As these are the ethnic categories most likely to be derived from converts. Nonetheless, such an assumption may negate the existence of converts to Islam who have identified themselves as such in the 2001 Census and whose existence may be obscured by belonging, for example, to a specific category such as Indian Muslim, and may for example have converted from Hinduism to Islam. There is no way of knowing how many of the 'Other Whites Muslims category' are not included in the figure of 614 could be converts. Other categories are equally ambiguous, for example the Mixed category of White and Black Africans Muslims may contain converts to Islam but these people could not be determined from the collation of the

⁸⁰ Brice, K.,(2011) A Minority Within A Minority: A Report on Converts to Islam in the United Kingdom, on behalf of Faith Matters

⁸¹ Tim Winter cited in Zebiri,K., (2008) British Muslim Converts; Choosing Alternative Lives, p42, Oneworld Publications, Oxford

⁸² Birt,Y.(2002) 'Lies, Damn Lies, Statistics and Conversion!' Q-News no. 350 October 2002 www.yahyabirt.com

⁸³ Birt,Y.(2002) 'Lies, Damn Lies, Statistics and Conversion!' Q-News no. 350 October 2002 www.yahyabirt.com

⁸⁴ Census 2001, Office for National Statistics www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/census2001.asp

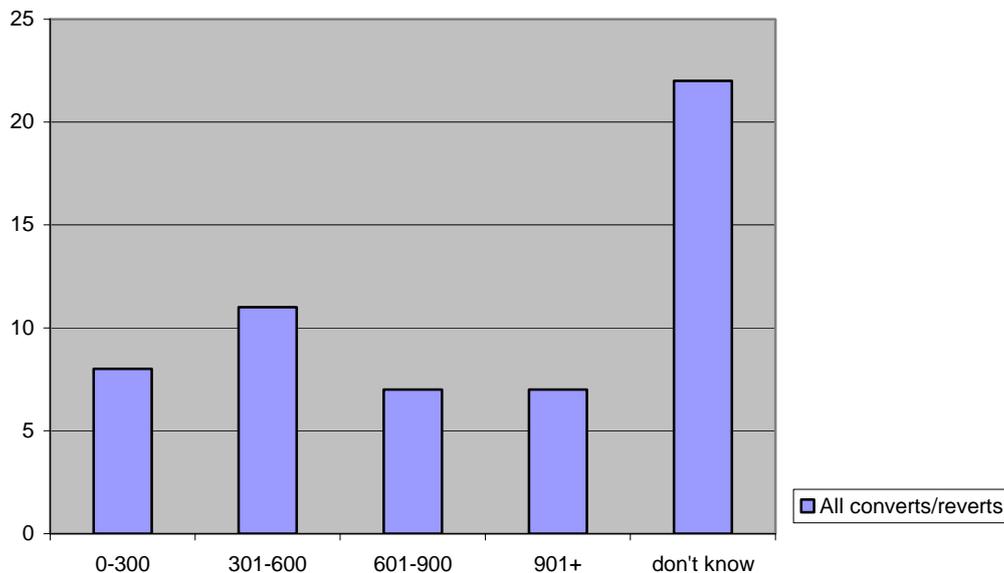
⁸⁵ Census 2001, Office for National Statistics www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/census2001.asp

statistics. There may also be an inaccurate assumption that the White British Muslims category would consist solely of converts and not second or third generation Muslims from convert families.

Taking into account figures from the 2001 Census and accounting for approximations derived from the research findings it is likely that the number of converts in Leicester exceeds 1000. One interview with an established member of the African Caribbean community, estimated the number of African-Caribbean converts to Islam living in Leicester to be around 500.

Although lacking in scientific validity in terms of answers given, questionnaire respondents were asked to estimate how many converts they thought lived in Leicester. The chart below illustrates the range of opinions regarding estimates of the amount of converts in Leicester. 13% of respondents considered it likely that over 900 converts resided in the city.

Converts own estimations of the number of converts living in Leicester

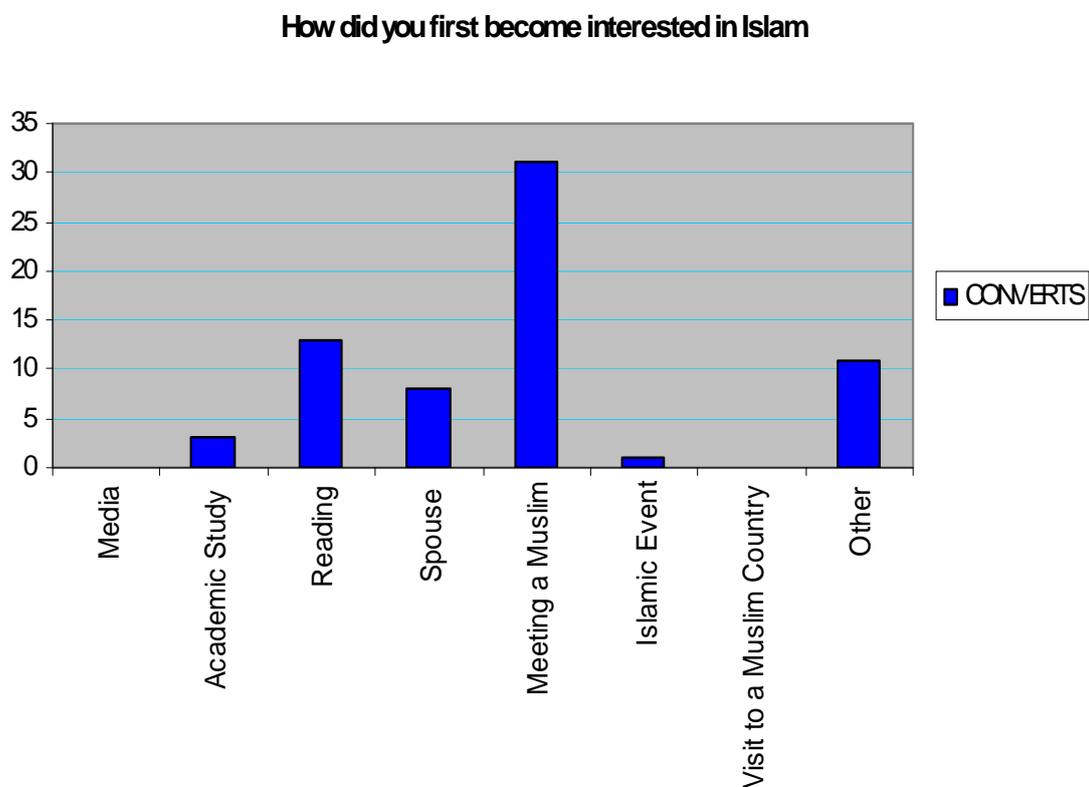


(Figure 6: converts own estimations of the number of converts living in Leicester)

The three established organisations that work with converts to Islam in Leicester, the NMP, Leicester New Muslims and the Islamic Information Centre all hold databases containing details of converts to Islam. Together these databases house information on approximately six hundred converts. However, this does not provide a reliable approximation of the number of the converts to Islam residing in Leicester as many of these names may be held on several databases and therefore may be subject to duplication. Many converts remain outside the parameters of these organisations and so they are also not accounted for.

How did you first become interested in Islam?

The question, 'what initially attracted you to Islam and which aspects of Islam particularly influenced your conversion' was offered to the questionnaire respondents, and to the individual interviewees. Although the singular most important reasons for converting were cited in the questionnaire with very few respondents citing more than one reason for conversion, an examination of the interviewees responses clearly indicates that a combination of factors were ongoing simultaneously which serve to develop the connections to the faith. For example, a potential convert may be searching for a belief system and then meet a Muslim friend who served to point them in the direction of Islam. Of interest here is how a convert gains access to people, services and information that facilitate their conversion.



(Figure 7: How did you first become interested in Islam)

The questionnaire revealed that the most common reason for converts initial interest in Islam for both male (55%) and female (43%) respondents was meeting a Muslim. These meetings occur through education and employment and social interaction, where friendships develop and people come into contact with a wider network. Such personal contacts appear of great importance in terms of potential converts being introduced to different faith system, codes of behaviour and manners. Interestingly, none of the converts mentioned active proselytising as a factor in their conversion. This is suggestive of a soft, friendly approach when introducing non-Muslims to Islam. Adlin Adnan's study of one hundred British converts revealed that the largest single factor in conversion was the encouragement or impetus

provided by friends.⁸⁶ Friends and acquaintances that have taken the time and possessed the patience to explain, mentor and guide are an important factor in conversion as is their ability to embody the values they espouse, such as inner peace and tranquillity.⁸⁷ These figures contrast with studies from the US where According to the General Social Survey 1998 statistics found that the reasons offered by people who had a first change of religion were 37% for family or marriage, 25% for friends or location, 18% related to theological issues and 19% cited other reasons not stated.⁸⁸

Friendship and conversion

In terms of the impact of friendship as a facilitator of conversion, hospitality is as a facet of friendship, for example, a highly valued concept in Islam and many people have been attracted to Islam through experiencing a variety of expressions of it. Such an attraction to overtures of hospitality and warmth may also highlight perceptions of how these qualities are often considered lacking in British society. One convert mentioned that she was drawn to Islam after being so impressed with the warmth and hospitality of her fellow Muslim students at university who welcomed her to share their food. Such views may suggest a desire to belong and a search for companionship and community, or it may be that spiritual elements of Islamic culture were transmitted to the convert through such social experiences serving to encourage her conversion. Here can be seen the concept of *Ummah* (a community of believers) which acculturates solidarity and friendship between Muslims.

One respondent mentioned his initial contacts with Muslims which he actively pursued following previous feelings of being spiritually bereft.

'I was going through a period in my life where I was feeling very lost and I didn't know what the meaning of my existence was. I felt like I was just going to work and, just working and making money and spending it and paying bills etcetera. I wasn't brought up with any religion but Christianity...but I never took it up myself and I started to thinking about faith and God and started to feel inadequate with my lack of knowledge. So I started to ask people that I work with ...we've got Hindus and Christians and Muslims and Sikhs.'

A Muslim colleague, who later became his wife, gave him a copy of the Qur'an to read. After struggling through several versions of the Qur'an he finally managed a complete reading. Through his interest in Islam his relationship with his wife-to-be developed. She made it clear to him that he needed to convert to Islam if they wished to marry. The interviewee wanted to

⁸⁶ Adnan, A., (1999) *New Muslims in Britain*, p.13, Ta Ha: London

⁸⁷ Haddad, Y.Z., (2006) *The Quest for Peace in Submission: Reflections on the Journey of American Women Converts to Islam*, p. 27, in van Nieuwkerk (ed) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas Press, Austin

⁸⁸ Barro, R.J., Hwang, J, McCleary, R.M., (2010) *Religious Conversion in 40 Countries*, p.7, Harvard University, Cornerstone Research, Harvard University

ensure that his conversion was performed from a point of sincerity and not merely to secure the right to marriage. Eventually, after reaching the point of almost making his declaration of faith several times he made the serious decision to accept Islam.

Another respondent who was introduced to Islam through a friend who had earlier embraced the faith stated,

'She just came around one day and she was all about Islam and I knew a bit about Islam because of Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement. So coming to Islam I started Qur'an and gave it a go... I'm glad because honestly it saved me because it gave a pattern to my life, a rhythm – it helped me to break out of relationships I didn't want to be in and gave me strength to be myself and be able to speak upI was able to go to work and feel alright and I didn't worry about my colour anymore, I felt like I was really competent in what I was doing...'

Another respondent contributed,

'Well I guess I was looking for something. I wasn't happy with I guess lots of things, life, it's just, you know superficial. No real satisfaction, nothing that touches the heart really. Everything's just so commercial. So I think I was quite frustrated with a lot of things. I was looking for the truth, for something real, you know. And then I had Muslim friends...they weren't really practicing that much but they still considered themselves Muslim. They told me about Islam so I got more into it but for a long time I thought it's a nice thing, it sounds good but it's not for me....My friends couldn't answer all of my questions so I turned towards the local Imam who started teaching me properly, and he really guided me so to speak, alhamdulillah...and then I kind of knew that I was going to convert but I was a bit afraid of it.'

What is interesting about this particular conversion story and often appears in other conversion narrations is that despite the initial contacts with only nominally practising Muslims the spark of interest in Islam was ignited. These converts have also actively sought people who can assist them and have spent considerable time and effort in pursuing an interest in Islam.

Other categories that were mentioned by the questionnaire respondents included reading about Islam (male respondents 20%, female 19%). This could involve reading the Qur'an or other literature. This is a large category of converts, as 'seekers', who pursue an intellectual search for religious information and spirituality. Here may be found 'serial converters,' who may have dabbled with a range of religious beliefs as part of their spiritual journey before converting to Islam (Haddad 1996 p27).⁸⁹ These types of spurs to conversion may be reflected in 'rational choice theories' which relate to a 'pick 'n' mix approach to the ability to choose a belief system (see previous section). Reading as a path to conversion is reiterated in one respondent's

⁸⁹ Haddad, Y.Z., (2006) *The Quest for Peace in Submission: Reflections on the Journey of American Women Converts to Islam*, p. 27, in van Nieuwkerk (ed) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas Press, Austin

emotional response to why she was initially attracted to Islam after being given a copy of the Qur'an,

'I remember being really interested and I opened the Qur'an and it just hit me. I don't know and straight away I started reading it and it just seemed that a lot of the pieces that were missing for me in the Bible and Christianity were being actually fulfilled with the reading of this Qur'an and I recognised so much that made sense to me that did not make sense to me from before. So I think at that time it was like an awakening going on.'

Another respondent reacted to reading the Qur'an by saying,

'...you find scientific evidence that is completely astounding very quickly and that was a shock and I started to find things one after the other...so I admitted the truth and took my Shahadah

Several respondents mentioned that their conversion to Islam had started with an initial disinterest in the faith, that they had investigated it merely to be able to refute and discard it as nonsense. One interviewee who converted to Islam was initially determined to show the flaws within the Islamic faith to his non-practising Muslim girlfriend,

'I was an extremely hardcore atheist ...I went scientifically through the Qur'an ...but virtually immediately you find scientific evidence that is completely astounding...I thought that it must have been inserted at a later date...(after discovering that it was from original text dating back over 1400 years)I didn't want to lie to myself and give up all my vices and my atheist life but at the same time I couldn't lie to myself ..so I admitted the truth and took my shahadah.'

15% of female questionnaire respondents' interest in Islam developed through a spouse; this was only 1% for male respondents. Conversion to Islam also results from less formal relationships which have not led to marriage. The prospect of marrying a Muslim man can be an important influence on the decision to convert. A US study cited the important role of intermarriage in the conversion process.⁹⁰

The following is two excerpts from interviews with converts who both became involved with Muslim men,

'I think when I started learning about Islam because firstly I was involved with somebody who was Muslim and then just through his personality and his character I thought, it was just four years down the line, and I said to him one day, 'what is it that makes you so beautiful, what is so lovely about the way you are?' So then he said to me about Islam and I had all these very, very negative stereotypes of Islam through the media and women I've seen covered up and thinking they were miserable and oppressed and all that. So I

⁹⁰ Barro, R.J., Hwang, J, McCleary, R.M., (2010) Religious Conversion in 40 Countries, p.7, Harvard University, Cornerstone Research, Harvard University

started reading about the status of women in Islam and that that really blew my mind....so it was basically the role of women in Islam that's what attracted me to Islam..'

'I was at university, met my husband there. He wasn't practising and obviously I wasn't Muslim so I think the honest answer is that he introduced me to Islam.'

Academic study of Islam had attracted 6% of female respondents. Attending an Islamic event has attracted 1% of female respondents. 15% of female respondents cited 'other' reasons for the initial interest in Islam along with 20% of males. The 'other' reasons mentioned included a general interest in religion and God and an exploration of other faiths that had led to Islam. Several respondents had become interested in Islam after family members had converted. A number had come into contact with Muslims at school and work, one respondent mentioned that their interest was sparked through an argument at school and one cited through God.

Only one respondent mentioned an overtly spiritual experience that had led her to consider and then embrace Islam.

'I had always had a lot of friends that are Muslims and I grew up with them. But mainly I was having dreams about Islam and that was what affected me. It was mainly dreams that attracted me.'

Carole Anway (1995 p34) notes similar spiritual parallels in her study of American women who had converted to Islam she describes the experience of a convert

'...I had strange and vivid dreams about religious topics, and when I got up all I wanted to do was read the Qur'an. I didn't even study for my final exams which were happening at the same time.'

Respondents were also asked which aspects of Islam were the most important in attracting them to Islam. For 25% of the women who responded to this question the status of women in Islam and the concept of sisterhood was particularly important. Factors of resonance here are the rejection of the overt sexual presentation of women in British society, the co-modification of sexuality, the competition between women that this engenders and the lack of respect accorded to women. One of the interviewees commented that, *'there is no oppression of women in Islam so the more and more I read about that the more attractive it became to me...'*

A wide range of other responses were mentioned which focused mainly on issues of theology citing the qualities and attributes of Islamic faith and how these are manifest within the practice of Islam on a daily basis. These included a realisation that Islam is the true religion which is shown through its clarity and logic. Truth, equality and justice and Islam's universality where everyone is equal before God were factors cited by 16% of respondents. The

concept of tawhid (a unified, indivisible God) was mentioned in 9% of instances. Other respondents had been impressed by the characteristics of Muslims that they had met, by Islam as a way of life, noticing a sense of community and belonging, understanding Jesus as a prophet not a son of God, the discipline, praying five times a day which led to the realisation that God is with you at all times.

The relevance of Islam to the modern world was cited and that it doesn't change to meet the prevailing norms of society. This is a frequently mentioned criticism of contemporary Christianity that it adapts to meet the current trends of society rather than adhering to timeless values. Other reasons offered included belief in life, respect and love for others, the kind and loving nature of Islam, simple straightforward beliefs, the inclusiveness and acceptance of religious diversity. A respondent mentioned finding Allah and peace had helped to manage alcohol and anger problems. Another respondent mentioned Sufism and developing a personal relationship with God. Understanding that Islam and Muslims believe in all the Prophets from Adam to Muhammad was noted along with the science of Islam which does not rely on blind faith but is based on fact.

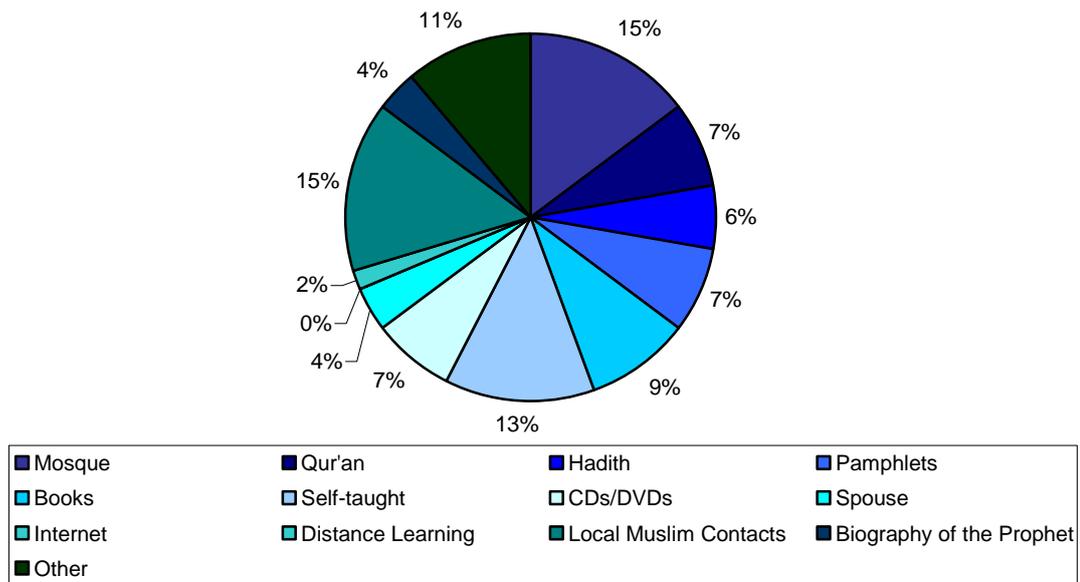
How did converts then educate themselves about Islam. For women there was a greater reliance on written material either through books, pamphlets, the internet reading the Qur'an and hadith and biography of the Prophet (pbuh), CDs and DVDs and distance learning which together accounted for 59% of female responses (given that respondents could cite more than one source of their initial sources of Islamic education). 11% of female converts cited local Muslim contacts and 12% stated that they were self-taught. These figures appear to indicate that women for a number of possible reasons are reliant on self-motivation or more solitary activities rather than social contact when educating themselves about Islam. This may be indicative of the difficulties women experience in approaching mosques and the perceived or real lack of accessibility to them. It may also illustrate that when women do go as far as approaching mosques they are less likely to find the supportive services they require.

For men there is a slightly different emphasis on more direct social contact through the mosques, but still a heavy reliance on written or published materials and percentage levels of other social contacts were almost the same. It should be noted that although mosques are perceived as being more accessible to convert men than convert women, many experience apprehension when considering entering a mosque on their own and some lack the confidence to do so. Again where men are able to attend mosques they are unlikely to find services tailored specifically to the needs of converts. 15% of men cited the mosque and 15% local Muslim contacts as a source of Islamic education. Only 2% of women had indicated the mosque. 13% of men stated that they were self-taught. 42% of male questionnaire respondents reported using self-study methods of books, pamphlets, the internet, CDs/DVDs, Qur'an and *hadith* and distance learning to educate themselves about Islam. 11% of male respondents had cited other sources which included several contacting the New Muslims Project attending lectures, receiving

information through a New Muslim Project *Shahadah* Gift Pack and other sources mentioned were friends and family. Women cited other sources in 5% of responses which included friends, convert and non-practising Muslims, a study circle and contact with a female Muslim who teaches those new to Islam.

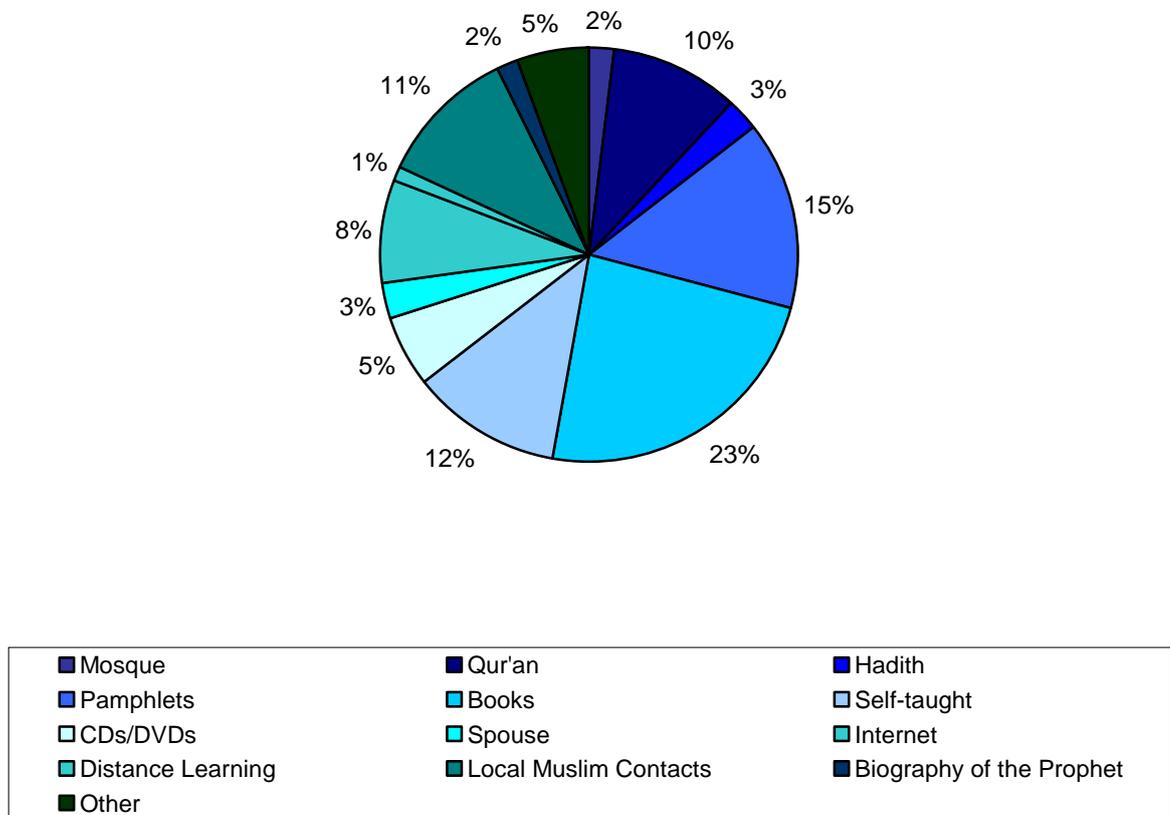
The growth of internet facilities on conversion opens up the convert to huge amounts of information on Islam and the attendant issues of how to understand and make sense of the plethora of material presented. Along with e-group forums this poses the possibility that converts could engage primarily with virtual communities of Muslims or individual internet contacts rather than developing relationships with local Muslims.

Male converts initial sources of Islamic education



(Figure 8: Male converts initial sources of Islamic education)

Female converts initial sources of Islamic education



(Figure 9: Female converts initial sources of Islamic education)

Family and Conversion

The area that convert find most difficult to tackle is how to present Islam to their families. The sort of problems and issues that converts commonly face when dealing with their families are complex. Families' reactions and responses reflect the attitudes that are prevalent in society towards Islam and Muslims.⁹¹ Zebiri describes three categories of typical responses that families display to converts.⁹² Firstly, where the family reacts negatively to the conversion and then subsequent relationships go through a period of difficulty but eventually reconciliation occurs and varying degrees of acceptance of the conversion prevail. Secondly, where relationships are ruptured and never repaired. Thirdly, converts who experience a supportive response from their parents. Different family members will possibly display a range of responses that straddle one or several of these categories.

⁹¹ Zebiri, K., (2008) British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives, p.75, Oneworld Publications, Oxford

⁹² Zebiri, K., (2008) British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives, p 71, Oneworld Publications, Oxford

The way that converts present their conversion to their families may in some cases be responsible for the adverse or favourable reactions that they receive. While some new converts manage to skilfully renegotiate their relationships in light of their new faith and are fortunate to have understanding friends or family, others are less successful. New converts are often noted for their zeal, piety and desire to conform and practice what they perceive as an authentic interpretation of Islam. This zealous non-compromising approach may serve to alienate friends and family members, who feel that their belief system and lifestyle is under attack. Several respondents felt new converts required help in learning how to handle the transition from the old lifestyle to an Islamic way of life,

'...I think having something that could perhaps help you handle your situation better and not be too extreme because I accepted Islam and everything became like I can't do that, that's haram (forbidden), you shouldn't be doing that we don't do that and so on. Everyone backs off.'

Lifestyle changes can present barriers to interaction between converts and their families. In British culture refusal to consume alcohol is viewed as strange, almost deviant behaviour and people are often uncomfortable or feel threatened by someone who abstains from intoxicants as though it is a personal attack on their integrity. Social events where alcohol is served and the free mixing of males and females is seen as the norm can become barriers to interaction. One respondent described how his refusal to drink alcohol had driven a wedge between him and his father,

'I became quite estranged from my dad, the pub culture was very important to him, he got quite upset when I said I would not take my family and my children to pubs...'

Christmas and birthdays are other areas of probable contention from which the convert may choose to withdraw their participation or impose conditions regarding how they will be involved. Roberts describes the dilemmas over attending social events by saying, 'Even a seemingly innocuous place like a restaurant poses almost insurmountable challenges. Will men and women be there together? Will they be serving alcohol? Will the meat be halal? Will the music be blasting and will they want to dance? Will I feel strange in my hijab? Will I be compromising my deen?'⁹³

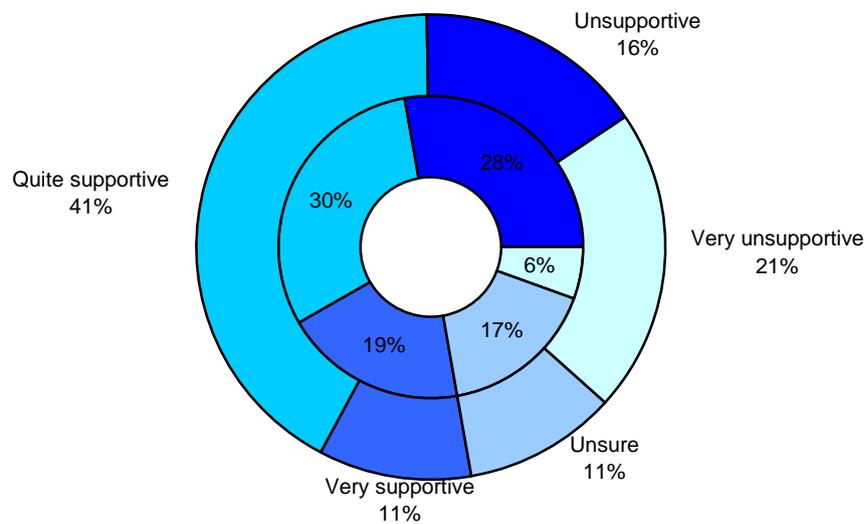
Conversion to Islam can remain socially costly in terms of relationships and the converts place within wider society. Parents may be concerned that the convert is being brainwashed, especially when their whole lifestyle and dress has drastically altered and names have been changed. They may consider that the convert has joined some type of cult or is merely going through a phase from which they will eventually emerge. Family members experience forms of rejection as they perceive the convert to be abandoning the values and beliefs that they adhere to and may perceive a change in belief on the part of the convert as a personal rejection of their family and what it

⁹³ Roberts.N.B., (2005) *From My Sisters' Lips*, p88, Bantam Press, London

represents. Some may express deep levels of prejudice and ignorance about Islamic practices often fuelled by distorted perceptions of Islam offered by the media and may actively attempt to dissuade the convert from practising Islam. Concern may also stem from an awareness of the hostility and prejudice that the convert is likely to face from wider society which may include negative perceptions of *hijab* (headscarfs) and types of clothing. Beliefs are held that European civilisation is superior to Islam and preconceived ideas that Islam is intrinsically entangled with terrorism create distaste for what is perceived as a foreign and barbaric culture.⁹⁴

Questionnaire respondents, focus group participants and the converts taking part in individual interviews were all questioned on the nature of their relationships with their families. The questionnaire respondents were first asked with regard to the question, how have your family reacted to your decision to embrace Islam? The responses for male and female converts are reflected in the chart below. A bar chart gives a further breakdown of the figures under three broad ethnic categories.

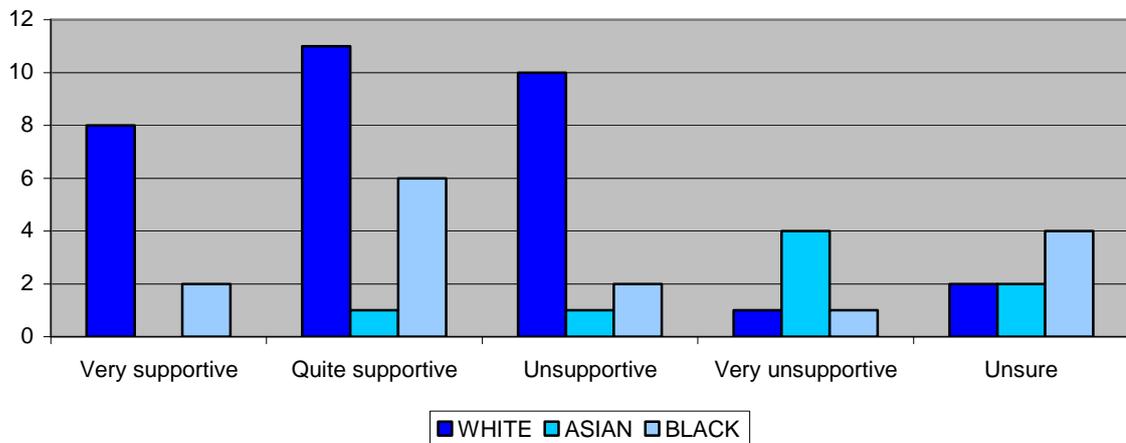
Family reaction to conversion to Islam (by gender)
Male Outer circle Female Inner circle



(Figure 10: Family reaction to conversion to Islam)

⁹⁴ Zebiri, K., (2008) British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives, p.75, Oneworld Publications, Oxford

How have your family reacted to your decision to embrace Islam?



(Figure 11: How have your family reacted to your decision to embrace Islam?)

From these figures it can be seen that around 50% of converts to Islam experience problems with their families following their conversion to Islam. On the breakdown by ethnic category the lack of support from families of Asian origin is immediately apparent with only one of the 8 questionnaire respondents of Asian background receiving a supportive response from their family. For the Black and White categories of converts the reactions of their families are split roughly equally on a supportive/non-supportive basis.

Where the religious basis of the family is strong and is directly related to communal identity reactions are more likely to be extreme.⁹⁵ For converts from Hindu or Sikh backgrounds issues surrounding why family support is not forthcoming can be compounded by the historical and contemporary religious, political and socio-economic antagonisms between the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims that are apparent in the Indo-Pak region. The difficulties faced by converts from such backgrounds are compounded by the fact that their ethnicity often renders them physically indistinguishable amongst born Muslims and therefore they lack the care and attention that maybe accrued, for example, to ethnically white converts and which would help to compensate from the estrangement frequently experienced from their families. Here, problems arise of converts forced to lead a double life, where the conversion remains hidden from immediate family and relatives. This may also involve excessive secrecy on the part of the convert and an inability to know how best to resolve the situation. Seven of the questionnaire respondents mentioned that they were completely estranged from a parent or both parents or other key members of their families.

⁹⁵ Zebiri, K., (2008) British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives, p.72, Oneworld Publications, Oxford

Respondents from non-Muslim Asian backgrounds stated,

'I have been Muslim .. about twenty years now and I haven't got any contact with my family.'

'Mine basically didn't want to know me and they said it's your life do what you want; it's not what we do. But my mum and dad were very upset because religiously we had been taught that Muslims were the enemy.'

'My parents don't know that I'm Muslim. If my parents found out ...it would mean that I would have to leave..'

'In therapy now they're saying oh, you embraced Islam because I wanted a sense of belonging and family that I never had when I was growing up'

Although the converts from Hindu and Sikh backgrounds seemed to experience high levels of problems with their families several had managed to maintain some relationships.

'...Because of me embracing Islam and marrying my husband there have been personal emotions involved where they have been hurt personally as parents. They have suffered a lot there have been lots of tearsthere have been lots of differences, I don't go to any of the gatherings or functions and I have lost contact with all of my relatives, totally lost contacts with them I only have contact with my mum and my sisters now...'

'At first not too happy, now they are fine with it.'

However, although the problems may be more pronounced amongst converts of Asian origin similar problems cut across ethnicity as is illustrated below.

'I'm from a big family of eleven. I have five brothers and five sisters... they occasionally ring me like maybe once a year a couple of them might ring me but the rest of them I wouldn't even know them if I passed them in the street.'

'I remember my mother saying ...that our family has ostracised us and I find it very difficult that Islam says that we have to keep ties with our family despite the fact that we are forcing ourselves on people who hate our guts now.'

'...you very much want to get rid of your old life and start anew. With that a lot of people fall by the wayside and are left behind and ignored, they don't know what is going on, they are sad and it's kind of like a mourning process for them. I was very close with my sister and she just felt like it was the end of our relationship.'

'They need to find a reason for why you have converted- Oh it's because this or that. They need to put you in a box and then they can cope with it. They can't cope with the fact that you have taken on this thing that is very alien to them, something they don't like.'

In contrast, other converts experienced relatively few issues with their families. These families have found ways of working through differences and arrive at an accommodation of their needs.

'My mother and grandmother are very proud because they see, regardless of what the community say, they see that I am a better person. My father he cannot deny that is has made me a better person although he might have ignorant opinions about Muslims. Over all most of them are comfortable with it and fortunately they have not been swayed by the media so there is nothing negative. I have been blessed to have it easy.'

'My family have been very supportive and they can see it has done a lot of good for me.'

'It's not too bad for me because half of my family had already embraced Islam even though they are from the Nation of Islam but it was easy for them to accept that I was a Muslim. And then the ones that are Christian accepted it because the others were Muslims.'

For some converts the arrival of children into their families can be a time when relationships are renewed and a period of healing within the family takes place.

'Mine are fine. At first they were a bit shocked but it's been a long time now, it's been thirty years so. And I think having children also helps because obviously they want to bond with their grandchildren.'

Some converts have actively disengaged themselves from family relationships fearing that their children's Islamic beliefs and behaviour may be affected by engagement with their extended family.

'I wouldn't mind if these people were non Muslims but were trying to make some kind of effort, you may develop something and hope it works but we tried that and it doesn't work like that and all they will do and all they will see is their way rubbing off on my children and I don't want that.'

'...so it came to a stage when I knew it was just best to back off and that's what has happened really but I have still got contact with my mum and sisters but everybody else I don't have much to do with them. It's sad but that's the way it goes sometimes.'

The far reaching implications of decisions to sever family ties can affect the convert's abilities to cope with life and can have far reaching implications for future generations of the convert's family.

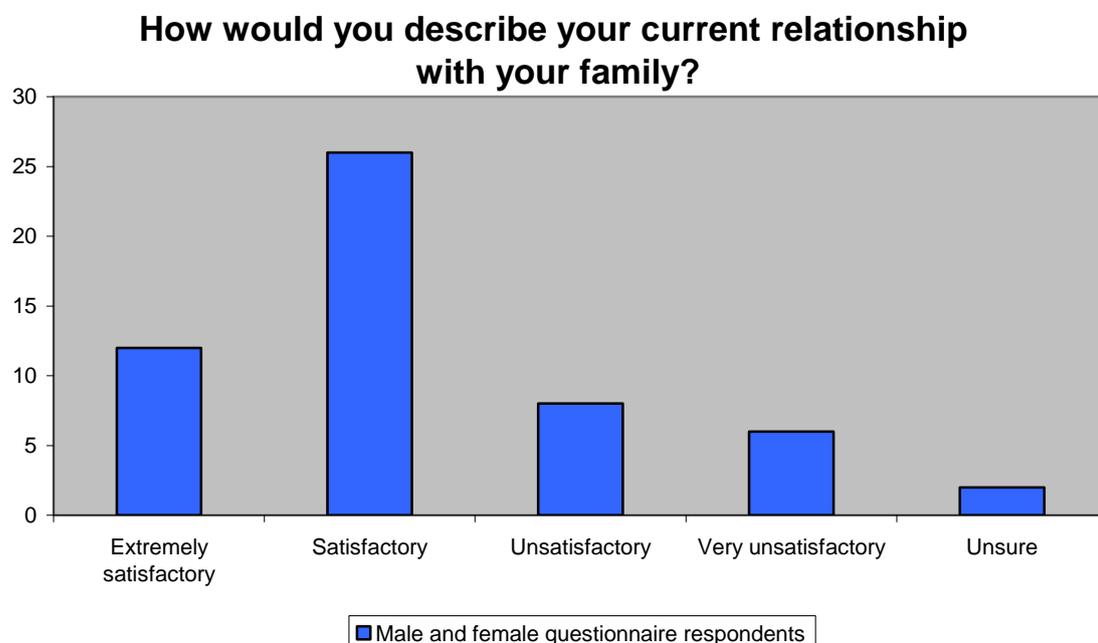
'...the split between the new Muslim and the family can happen and what that actually means is that when the person goes through difficulties that one normally goes through in normal life, in family life, you haven't got your family there to fall back on like you normally would. So you can often find yourself

very much on your own and in fact there was a brother who I was talking to and he was saying that we are becoming community-less and I think that's a very good description of what happens, not only do we become community-less, we can become family-less.'

One convert who hadn't seen her mother for eleven years said:

'all I want is my mum's love, I just want my mum. And I think that really messed me up when I had my babies because I missed my mum, I just wanted my mum.'

'We don't have a family and born Muslims do, mostly do and aunties and uncles and sisters and all of that and so if the woman gets ill for instance she's got them. If you in the house and the boiler goes you have family to help, we don't have that.'



(Figure 12: How would you describe your current relationship with your family?)

The chart above details the questionnaire respondents' current views on the nature of their family relationship. In comparison to the early question outlined above regarding reactions of family to the decision to embrace Islam there are marked levels of improvement in those who considered their relationships extremely satisfactory or satisfactory. This suggests that with time many families are able to accommodate religious conversion. Zebiri also found that some converts reported that relationships with their families had improved since their conversion.⁹⁶ However, the levels of converts reporting very unsatisfactory relationship with their family had not altered between the

⁹⁶ Zebiri, K., (2008) British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives, p.71, Oneworld Publications, Oxford

two sets of questions indicating a degree of intransigence that sets in when relationships breakdown. The possible causes of such obduracy may be due to the convert, the family or may stem from the inter-personal dynamics exhibited by both the convert and the family.

Islam emphasises the importance of family relationships and the breaking of kinship ties is strongly discouraged. Some converts stated that relationships with their parents had improved as a result of their conversion. One respondent when asked about her relationship with her family said,

'I think I appreciate them a lot more than I used to. I love them a lot more than I used to, I really took them for granted. I didn't see who they were when I wasn't Muslim and since having embraced Islam yeah, I think its brought us, well it's brought me closer to them but I don't know if it's brought them closer to me....I do feel a lot closer to my family but there is a distance there as well.'

Another respondent added,

'My parents weren't very pleased in the beginning but they are ok with it now. It's improved, I think it's improved my relationship with my parents.'

'I think I'm actually close to my parents, especially my mother now than I was before. I think we have a better relationship now even though she's not a Muslim; she's not religious at all.'

Relationships with friends also change. Some converts deliberately disassociate themselves from friends in order to consolidate their Islamic identity. As an Islamic lifestyle is adopted this 'may be accompanied by a comparable drift away from non-Muslims friends'.⁹⁷ Roberts states that as she was drawn towards her new faith she was propelled further away from her existing friends and described being increasingly wrapped up in her new way of life to the exclusion of old friends.⁹⁸ Other converts maintain the importance of mixing with non-Muslims in order to avoid retreating into isolationism and developing a narrow and constrained outlook.

The chart below details questionnaire respondents' friendship networks. With only 13% of converts mixing mostly with non-Muslims it shows that the majority of converts establish friendships with other converts or born Muslims that largely exclude non-Muslims. This may mean that the retention of existing friendships is hard to sustain or the development of new friendships with non-Muslims are difficult to develop. This implies that there are significant barriers to interaction. Integration can become more complicated if there is not regular interaction between the converts and non-Muslim friends. Given that it has become widely acceptable to denigrate Islam particularly through the media this then creates social barriers between Muslims and non-Muslims. It leads to problems as to how to integrate into a society that shows

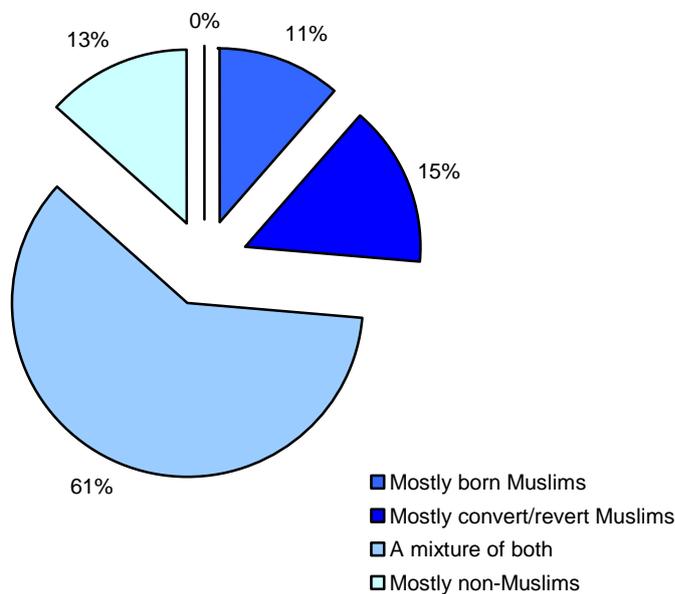
⁹⁷ Zebiri, K., (2008) British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives, pp. 79-80, Oneworld Publications, Oxford

⁹⁸ Roberts, N.B., (2005) From My Sisters' Lips, pp.88-96, Bantam Press, London

disdain for Islam and why Muslims would want to attempt to cross such divides given that their beliefs are not treated with respect.

A number of the respondents mentioned the importance of networks such as the New Muslims Project and Leicester New Muslims in facilitating networks and enabling converts to mix with other converts on a national or local level through the provision of social or educational programmes. This was also noted as important for their children to be able to socialise with other children from similar backgrounds.

Friendship networks of converts



(Figure 13: Friendship networks of converts)

Marriage

The questionnaire sample revealed that 48% of the male converts were married, 31% were single, 21% were divorced and none were separated or widowed. For the female converts 53% were married, 31% were single, 11% were divorced, none were widowed and 5% were separated. For the male converts who were married 44% were married to converts and 56% to born Muslims and none were married to a non-Muslim. For the female converts who were married 42% were married to converts and 58% were married to born Muslims and none were married to a non-Muslim. 31% of the questionnaire respondents gave a response to the question regarding whether they required help in finding a marriage partner 59% replied that they did, 35% said they did not and 6% was unsure. During the research converts

repeatedly requested services to assist with marriage either for themselves, their children or other converts they knew.

Arranging marriages in Islam is not meant to be complicated and for every Muslim who wishes to marry this should be facilitated through help and assistance from the wider community. While many converts find compatible partners from converts or born Muslim communities, marriage for converts is undoubtedly more complicated than for born Muslims due to the specific issues which they face. For converts marriage can present a number of potential pitfalls. Marriages between Muslims are most frequently arranged by members of the Muslim communities who try to facilitate the search for a suitable spouse. Converts do not have Muslim families to conduct such searches for them to ascertain the quality of a particular person's character and so are dependent on the good faith of non-family members to facilitate introductions to potentially compatible marriage partners. Failing knowing Muslims who can assist with marriage searches converts may rely on internet introduction sites or marriage services, which may provide additional hazards.

Converts may be exploited by people seeking access to visas, benefits and nationality and others who seek to disguise that they are already married with existing families. The New Muslims Project is replete with examples of converts who have been married in order to accrue money or access to British nationality. Where overt exploitation is not the motivation behind marriage converts who marry born Muslims of other cultures frequently experience cultural expectations from their partners that they may not have anticipated prior to the marriage, especially when the marriage partner has little or no prior knowledge of Western culture or vice versa. This may raise issues to do with behaviour, dress, and work, relationships with family and friends and expressions of Islam, especially in cases where the born Muslim marriage partner assumes that the Islamic culture he/she derives from is superior to the culture from that of the convert spouse.

An Imam who has worked extensively amongst converts in Leicester for the past thirteen years and is now assisted by his wife, both commented on issues surrounding marriage.

'Most of the converts that we come across approach us looking for partners. I think marriage is not the same before you're a Muslim and after. Marriage in Islam is a very different perspective and a lot of them don't know that, a lot of the marriages have happened, a lot have failed. I think that there needs to be some education that comes with marriage, some Islamic education just before or straight after and then ongoing support.'

The Imam and his wife were then asked why marriages were failing.

'Different expectations and lack of knowledge. Lack of knowledge of expectations and high expectations, maybe something they have perceived... sometimes in choosing the partner they need to have more support. If the sister or brother had a group of Muslims with them who can say look we need

someone who is decent, so let's find it, they need some help in choosing the partner in the first place.'

We've seen so many of them come to an end and there's only so much one person can do to support them, there needs to be more support and people willing to give them ongoing support after the marriage even five years into the marriage and even marriage counselling for them. There are a lot of things, sometimes the family don't even accept the marriage or ...sometimes they (the family) don't like the choice of colour, and they (the convert) begin to feel more lonely because they have left their whole family and having to do everything on their own and on top of that it turns out that the marriage isn't even working out. We just really need to think about them to preserve their deen (faith) and if this is going to cause more problems they need to be addressed.

The Imam was asked about converts who marry converts.

'Most of the time this happens because they have something in common....I think they can relate to each other and when it comes to expressions they can understand each other. But for certain cultures and certain people especially eastern cultures there are so many things that don't go together....in western society to get to a certain level people need to be able to practice Islam and it's not easy to read from the books and to see ..somebody's culture from a book and that's why when people learn about Islam it has different cultures and so people can't bring their eastern culture and enforce it onto western society because although it may be allowed in Islam to have certain cultures but you can't enforce it onto other people and say this is the only way of practising Islam. ...it causes a lot of problems and most marriages only last two to three weeks.

..sometimes those born Muslims don't want to marry from their own nationality or culture because although they are Muslim that have cultural issues, things like having to pay a lot of money and they think if they marry a new Muslim then they don't have to pay that much so they go for thathe thinks she has no family members who care about her so he can do what ever he wants. So you have people like that as well and that's why in Islam a lot of parents and especially people who come from Eastern cultures they prefer, parents prefer to find somebody for a sister or brother so that any family problems can be taken care of before and the help and support is there.

Issues around race can create additional problems for converts seeking marriage especially to born Muslims from a South Asian background who may marry closely within their extended families or areas of origin in the sub-continent. For converts of African Caribbean heritage seeking suitable partners such problems are amplified by attitudes of ethnic exclusivity displayed toward them and negative stereotyping.

Living in Leicester

Questionnaire respondents were asked if they enjoyed living in Leicester. 80% of the males affirmed that they enjoyed living in the city. 10% stated that they did not like Leicester and 10% were unsure. 78% of the female respondents enjoyed living in Leicester, 8% did not and 11% were unsure, 3% did not complete the relevant question. When questioned regarding the length of time the converts had lived in Leicester 58% of the male sample had resided in the city for over twenty one years, 21% had lived in Leicester for between six to ten years and 16% had lived in the city for between nought to five years, 5% of respondents did not answer the question. Of the thirty six women sampled 45% had resided in Leicester for over twenty one years, 6% had lived in Leicester between sixteen to twenty years, 8% had live there between eleven to fifteen years, 19% had lived in Leicester between six to ten years and 22% had lived in the city between nought to five years.

Questionnaire respondents were asked if they had moved from one part of Leicester to another area to live within a Muslim community, 16% stated that they had, 80% stated that they hadn't and 4% did not respond to the question.

The respondents were asked if they had moved from other parts of the UK or abroad to be closer to the Muslim communities in Leicester. 26% of male respondents said they had moved specifically to Leicester for those reasons, 68% said no and 6% did not respond to the question. The males who had moved to Leicester had come from Reading, Bradford, Coventry, Birmingham and Nottingham. Of the female sample, 39% had move to Leicester to be closer to Muslim communities as opposed to 58% who had not, 3% did not respond to the question. The female respondents had moved to Leicester from London, Coventry, Cambridge, Warwick, Oxford, a village in Leicestershire, Grimsby, Wellingborough and the United States.

The reasons cited of expectations of the benefits of moving to or within Leicester were as follows. 55% expected to find an Islamic environment, 18% of converts specified they wished to be closer to Muslim friends, 12% to have access to Islamic schools, 9% to access education, 3% to be closer to family and 3% for business or employment reasons. The key features of an Islamic environment included easy access to communities of believers and Muslim friends, mosques, *halal* food, Muslim shops and a general Islamic atmosphere.

The questionnaire respondents were asked which aspects of life in Leicester they most enjoyed. People overwhelming cited the multi-cultural ambiance of the city and its cultural diversity. The city's cultural and religious diversity helped the converts to feel accepted by non-Muslims because people were used to seeing and interacting with Muslims although the friendship patterns described earlier indicate that interaction with non-Muslims did not on the whole extend to integration.

84% of respondents stated reasons which indicated that they enjoyed being able to mix with born Muslims and the multitude of aspects that related to that

interaction cited below. Converts appreciated the considerable presence of converts with whom to socialise. Several specifically cited the warm welcome that they had received from born Muslim communities. They considered the environment in Leicester conducive to the practise of Islam due to the mosques and Islamic facilities and services that were available. Such services cited were centred on talks, study circles, educational facilities and social gatherings. Converts were able to dress according to Islamic dictates without feeling conspicuous and there was a general experience of not being odd or strange. There was a sense of familiarity and being comfortable being visible as a Muslim amongst other Muslims and non-Muslims. Respondents felt able to express their faith in a city where people were used to a considerable Muslim presence. Converts also considered there was a great deal of potential for life as a convert Muslim in Leicester to improve. One convert mentioned that life as a Muslim had changed for the better since their conversion. Optimism was expressed that as time went on more services would develop and more provision would emerge.

A range of reasons were also cited that were indicative of aspects of life in Leicester that converts least enjoyed. Converts were searching for a sense of belonging and to be part of a community, many have failed so far to realise these longings. Converts disliked the disunity that characterised Muslim communities in Leicester and the display of cultural traits, attitudes and behaviour which infused their understandings and practice of Islam which converts believed detracted from what they considered more authentic interpretations of the faith. The divisiveness of Muslim communities along ethnic and sectarian lines also proved problematic. This led to insularity as ethno-cultural groups existed in relative isolation from other Muslim communities. For converts there were difficulties in finding entry points into a tight-knit Muslim community where they may be regarded with suspicion. Perceptions of converts as unwanted intrusive elements may be compounded by uncertainty surrounding the actual nature of the intentions of the convert. For example, they may be regarded with suspicion in case they have been implanted by the security services. One convert remarked that when he first started attending a mosque people suspected he was there as a member of the police.

A convert who lived in a predominantly Gujarati neighbourhood of the city held the self perception of being an outcast and felt disparaged by the community. Certain communities were at times considered to be unfriendly, judgemental and possessed narrow interpretations of Islam. While some converts had stated previously that they enjoyed the Islamic atmosphere that spatially concentrated communities of Muslims provided, others considered that this created a ghettoised environment. Attention was drawn to the physical environment of the ghetto that was considered to be dirty, strewn with rubbish and generally untidy. These were not the environmental conditions thought to be characteristic of a Muslim community. There was noticeable dismay at Muslims who were not living lifestyles that were conducive to Islam and who were involved in disreputable activities such as crime and drugs.

In terms of perceptions of being a Muslims in a city that is predominantly non-Muslim, converts cited the negative experiences of receiving abuse in the city centre. Of not feeling comfortable walking in areas of the city where there was little Muslim presence, and receiving hostile stares from people. One was disturbed by levels of drunkenness apparent in the city centre. Others felt pervaded by pejorative attitudes towards Islam that were considered indicative of British attitudes to Muslims. One respondent considered a need for the provision of services by Muslims as an alternative to having to depend on such provision by non-Muslims.

Spatially, Leicester's Muslim communities appear concentrated in the LE1, LE2 and LE5 postcodes. Of the fifty-five questionnaire respondents 32 lived within these postal code areas. 16 resided in LE3 and LE4 with the rest more widely dispersed. This mirrors Brice's findings that converts' settlement patterns are very similar to those of born Muslims because they tend to choose to reside in similar residential districts where they can access the range of services outlined above.⁹⁹ Across England Brice found no correlation between the 'distribution of white English Muslims and the distribution of the white English population generally.'¹⁰⁰

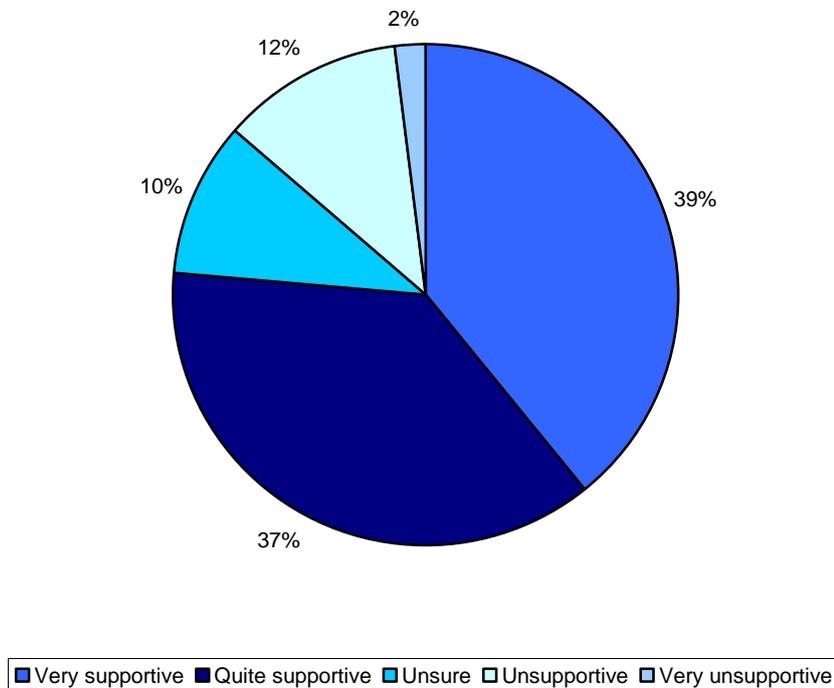
Relating to the Muslim Community in Leicester

It is an Islamic obligation for Muslims to assist one another. A *hadith* instructs that 'a Muslim is not a believer until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.' The Qur'an (49:10) states that 'all believers are but brothers.' The Quran (9:71) teaches that Muslims are *awliyyah*, which means they are caring and supportive friends to each other. The Qur'an (9:60) further outlines that the recipients of *Zakat* (an obligatory form of charity) are 'those to whom who's hearts' need to be reconciled' which is a category of recipients converts are widely considered to belong to. Muslims, therefore, have a spiritual obligation to offer financial, practical and emotional support to converts.

⁹⁹ Brice, M.A.K., (2006) Assimilation and alienation in a multicultural society – non-visible minorities: lessons learnt from indigenous converts to Islam in the United Kingdom, p.6, based on a paper presented at the Citizenship, Security and Democracy, International Conference, Istanbul, Turkey, September 2006

¹⁰⁰ Brice, M.A.K., (2006) Assimilation and alienation in a multicultural society – non-visible minorities: lessons learnt from indigenous converts to Islam in the United Kingdom, p.6, based on a paper presented at the Citizenship, Security and Democracy, International Conference, Istanbul, Turkey, September 2006

Have you found Muslims in Leicester to be helpful and supportive since you embraced Islam?



(Figure 14: Have you found Muslims in Leicester to be helpful and supportive since you embraced Islam?)

Over three quarters (76%) of questionnaire respondents offered a favourable view of the Muslim community in Leicester compared to 24% who were unsure or who experienced a lack of support from born Muslims. In describing their experiences several reflected on the welcome and support they had received. A convert remarked that Muslims in Leicester were *‘curious about why he converted but very helpful. Another convert stated ‘everyone I have met has been lovely.’*

Of the quarter of questionnaire respondents who had found their reception within Leicester’s Muslim communities less helpful, typical comments were,

‘I embraced fifteen years ago and did not receive the support I needed.’

‘No one would show me how to pray after my conversion the community began to ignore me.’

‘I became Muslim in London but have found the community in Leicester as unsupportive.’

Some of the questionnaire respondents considered one of the key issues is to how to find a way into established Muslim communities and establish networks of contact, friends and support. This is particularly pertinent for

converts who are unmarried or who have not married into a Muslim family. For those that have married into a Muslim family they are more likely to benefit from extended family support and wider social networks of Muslims. The responses from the focus groups and from the interviews firmly emphasised that whilst appreciative of the support that was available, converts need more support. The development of additional support services are needed in terms of counselling, advice, educational support and social activities. Social services such as housing and employment, marriage and financial assistance were considered as immediate needs.

Converts were perceived to be at their most vulnerable immediately following conversion when they need to learn the basics of Islam. Here an awareness of the various sects and groups within Islam and how to recognise and discriminate between specific modes of thought is needed.

What makes it particularly difficult for converts who are often presented with a variety of conflicting interpretations of Islam is how to distinguish between them and arrive at an understanding of Islam that they are comfortable with. A frequently cited *hadith* further complicates the situation,

The Prophet (pbuh) said, 'The Jews divided into 71 groups, the Christians into 72 groups and my Ummah will be divided into 73 groups. Of these 73 groups, 72 will be destined for hell and one will go to paradise. This group is the Jama'ah' (meaning the group that follows the Prophet's teachings, understanding and practice of the religion).¹⁰¹

Converts come into contact with born Muslims who follow different schools of thought and representations of Islam, each of these born Muslims presents themselves to the converts as those who are guided and following the true path to Islam. The convert having been made aware of the above *hadith* is thrown further into confusion, not wanting to be one of the misguided, but unsure of which of the myriad of guidance presented to follow.

'...I'm alright now but I did go through a really bad phase and I said to my wife that I didn't want to go to the mosque anymore with one group telling me to do this and then the other group telling me this and that and if you do it our way you will go to paradise but if you do it their way then you've got no chance because they are wrong and they are misguided and you will be wasting your time, you can spend your whole life doing it their way and you would be wasting your time. So I said well how do I know that this group is right or this group is right and how do I know that I'm not innovating, I don't want to be an innovator so that really concerned me and it was like if you do this, this and this then you are an innovator and then that, that and that and you are an innovator...I've got to feel in myself that I'm doing something right and then I have to be convinced of that.'

¹⁰¹ Sunan Abu Da'ud, kitab al –sunna no. 17718 cited in Roald, A.S., (2004) *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts*, p113, Brill, Leiden

'So I had no clue about different sects, groups or anything. I just went to this mosque...and so I ended up with these people and not only was I making a lot of mistakes in my own personal practising...but these people also encourage a lot of hatred in the community... this is a growing phenomenon across Western Europe and North America, it's a sect...they split up families and they split communities right up the middle... I went from that sect into complete confusion, I left that sect realising that it is not the way to go...I was very confused for a couple more years. Since that way I found another way that was much more comfortable traditional Islam which was following much more the middle path..'

'I got to the phase where I thought I didn't want to go to the mosque, I didn't want to give up being a Muslim, but I didn't want to go to the mosque because I felt like I was being pulled in two different directions. I felt it was a case of we will befriend you because we want you to become part of our group. And I thought how genuine is this, are they befriending me because I'm a new Muslim and they want to support me or are they just looking for a new recruit and I started to question that.'

'...it was only a year into it so I would listen to everybody and I got vexed because this brother said that you can't pray in this mosque and if you pray behind them then your prayer won't be accepted...so I walked passed the mosque and I walked into Highfields and I didn't know the area so I started to run but it was nearly sunrise and by the time I prayed Fajr that day it was sunrise because of these brothers going around say you can't pray there, don't salaam them. I can't even talk to my own mother because she's not a Muslim. So I think people need to get a bit of knowledge because after getting that knowledge then it is like a shield and these things bounce off you. They tell people who are new all kind of things and it was very confusing to me. It felt like this was my life and then I embraced Islam and it became more narrow and it felt like I was being crushed but at the end of it I knew that it was open but you have to go through that bit and I feel like those people who returned back, went back, because they were being crushed.'

'Until I moved to Leicester I was not aware that there were all these different things and it has done my head in. I now have a son who is following a madhab of Hanafi and the other follows what you would call Salafi and it's like well who am I? Where do I fit in? How do I know which way to go?'

'Maybe I just need to be more aware of things, maybe there needs to be more information.'

'...but this is something that could be put forward when you first become Muslim to be aware that there will be people telling you all these different things and it can become very confusing.'

Facilities that are currently provided by mosques and used by converts in Leicester

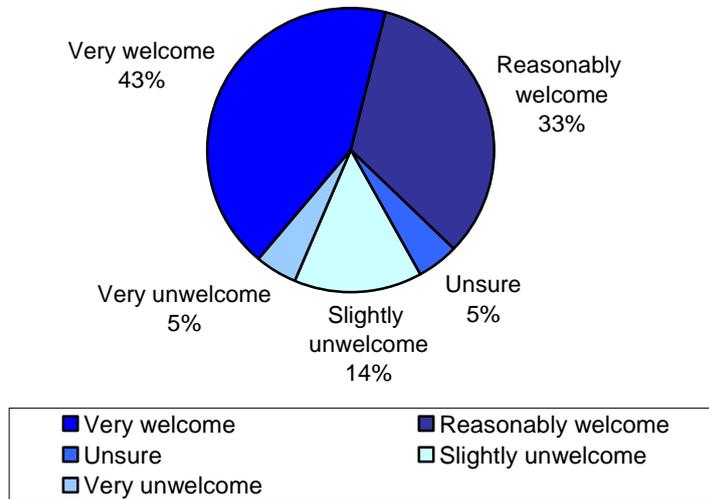
The table below is illustrative of the services that are currently used by converts which are not specific provision tailored to the needs of converts but are facilities that are generally available to all Muslims. Despite the reported problems of female converts accessing mosques 61% of the women have accessed prayer facilities provided by mosques although the frequency of attendance is not noted. The extent to which both male and females feel comfortable and welcome when attending Leicester’s mosques is represented in the two pie charts below the table. What is surprising here is despite the limited number of the city’s mosques that allow access to women that when the two categories of very welcome and reasonably welcome are taken together the percentage figures for women 84% exceeds than those expressed by male converts 76%. Services that appear underutilised such as counselling and support and education/study provisions may be so for several reasons. Firstly, that the services are not know about by the converts. Where they exist they may be patchy or do not appeal to the converts. The services that provide socialization opportunities appear to be well accessed by women less so by men. The rate of use of Eid celebration services were relatively similar at 26% male and 30% female. One respondent commented that there was very little to do on Eid day because he was not part of a community or linked to a community. The use of marriage services is low which again is indicative of lack of provision. Youth facilities are underutilised which indicates absence of provision or unsuitability of existing provision or lack of awareness of what is available.

The services provided by mosques that are currently used by converts in Leicester

	Prayer facilities	Childrens' madrassah	Supplementary Education	Youth Activities	Social Events	Counselling & support	Funeral Services	Eid Celebrations	Marriage Services	Haji, Umrah Pilgrimages	Male Study Groups	Female Study Groups	Mixed Study Groups	Individual tuition	Male Arabic Classes	Female Arabic Classes	Mixed Arabic Classes	Individual Arabic tuition
Male Converts	13	9	6	2	3	2	3	5	4	2	4	0	0	0	4	0	0	1
Female Converts	22	7	3	3	14	1	4	11	2	2	0	2	2	3	0	6	0	1
All Converts	35	16	9	5	17	3	7	16	6	4	4	2	2	3	4	6	0	2

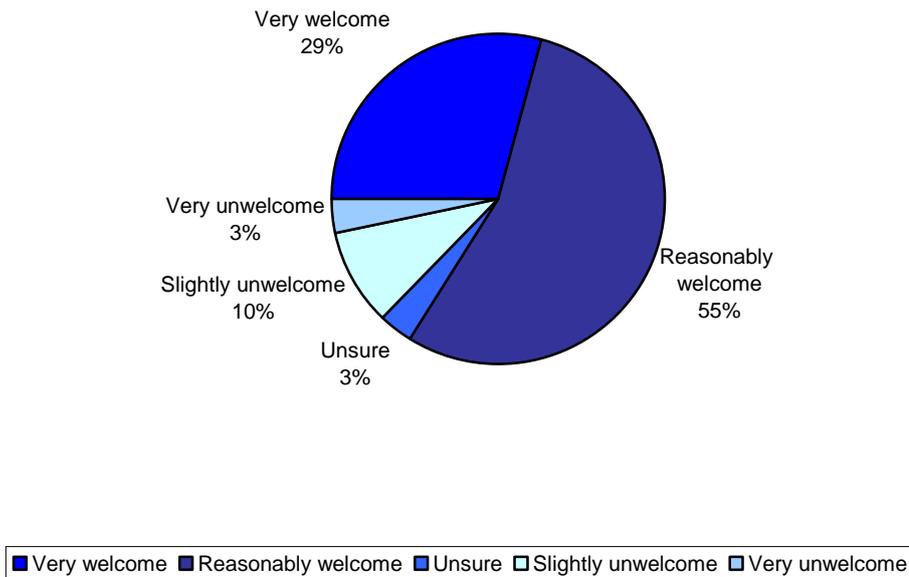
(Table 1: Services provided by mosques that are currently used by converts in Leicester)

The extent to which male converts feel comfortable and welcome when attending mosques in Leicester



(Figure 15: The extent to which male converts feel comfortable and welcome when attending mosques in Leicester)

The extent to which female converts feel comfortable and welcome when attending mosques in Leicester



(Figure 16: The extent to which female converts feel comfortable and welcome when attending mosques in Leicester)

The table below highlights a range of provision that converts would like to see developed and provided for their use. Here the services most sought after are social and educational programmes (69%), individual support (61%), guidance and advice (54%). In terms of material support 24% require assistance from both *Zakat* and welfare funds. This is particularly important for converts experiencing financial hardship who do not have access to assistance from family or friends due to their conversions.

Additional services that converts would like to see provided by mosques or Islamic organisations

	Individual Support	Shahadah Certificates	Prayer Workshops	Prayer taught individually	Guidance and Advice	Access to Zakat Fund	Access to Welfare Funds	Books and Pamphlets on Islam	Islamic Library	Social and Educational Programmes	Other
Male converts	11	3	7	3	6	1	1	4	5	10	1
Female converts	23	12	19	15	24	12	12	14	21	28	10
All converts	34	15	26	18	30	13	13	18	26	38	11

(Table:2 Additional services that converts would like to see provided by mosques or Islamic organisations)

Types of facilities required

The respondents were asked about the types of services they thought should be provided to enhance life in Leicester both for converts and born Muslims. Below is a representative selection of their ideas.

Islamic Arts

While examining the provision of services provided by the Muslim communities in Leicester it became apparent that there were a paucity of resources directed towards the arts. The Islamic arts have a rich cultural heritage very little of which was apparent in Leicester. This means that a whole cultural dimension is absent from the community. As the arts are an effective means of transcending cultural barriers and engendering cohesion both between communities and across ethnicities the development of the arts would have considerable benefit.

'I think there should be more cultural provision for Muslims to do with the arts and to do with women getting together because I attended something a couple of months ago and I really enjoyed it and it was beautiful there were so many women there and they were all dressed up and all made up and there was dance and there was entertainment and there was an auction and there was book selling and it was just so nice for women to come and have a really nice entertaining time.'

Employment assistance

Some of the converts mentioned a need for training and employment skills along with facilitating the establishment of businesses

'As a Muslim coming from a West Indian background and having gone through aspects of not having access to certain skills and training and being part of the economic development of Leicester I feel that more should be done for Muslims like me, we seem to be on the periphery all the time and even when we are trying to do something it's a struggle. Just more help for people like me. I don't know, I'm not an economic expert but I just feel that when it comes to other groups there is help out there that they can get financial advice and management advice, stuff like that and how to run your own business. We just seem to be on the periphery all the time there's no advice or anybody to help us from the Muslim community. That is what we would like to see more of. More participation within the economic elements of Leicester.'

Social events

'I think socially more could be done during Eid celebrations...I mean last Eid it wasn't too bad and I think we felt a little bit more involved... when Eid comes I think there should be more provided for our children...but maybe there is a lot more that can be done for teenagers.'

'I think sometimes it's nice to be with converts because you kind of share the same experience, ...you have similar stories and kind of bonds you but it's also important to be with born Muslims.. yes, I think we need to have more for sisters, I know there's sometimes things but they're always one time events...it's difficult to make friends through those one time events, maybe something more regular. But this is it, it may already be there I just don't know.'

'We do need some good support for children because if you don't have any family then the children need something to do and somewhere to go.'

Mosques

...'In Islam the mosque is supposed to be the central focus point of the community in bringing them together spiritually where we can freely go and

pray. I have only been in Leicester for nine years, I am originally from London ...I had support from the mosque because I became Muslim through (a major London mosque) and I had a lot of support there and that was from brothers as well as sisters. They did so much to try and get me the help that I needed sometimes without me even asking and I think something like that is needed here in Leicester because I find it really sickening that a woman can't just go to the mosque to pray. Masjid (name removed) which is very nice bit it's small and it's far away from me. We need something bigger where there is lively services as well and it just brings everyone together and it's not in your home because sometimes you feel like you want to socialise with people but sometimes you don't.'

'One of the things that really bug me is that we can't get into mosques. It says we can in the Qur'an and it says we can in the hadith. What really bugs me is that the (name removed) are asking for millions of pounds and I donated to them and my mother donated to them but I can't step foot in the mosque.'

'Yes, and everything is in Urdu, there is a language barrier.'

'...My wife is an English convert and there is plenty of things in the centre for her to do, there are lots of places where they have madrassah everyday. There are a few mosques that have quite a lot going for sisters. I think Leicester has a lot going.'

'Mosques and that don't really have that much for new Muslims...you have to go on the internet and find out yourself and go and get a book...'

'really need signs up in every mosque don't you. ...you need details of a website of a centre but then that means all the mosques working together and unfortunately no mosques want to work together.'

'That's what I mean it's so bit by bit. There is no masjid in the centre that you can go to and know that this is happening and that is happening. I can't understand why because that's what I thought anyway that the (name removed) mosque would be there for that, like just with information that you could go and get and you could drop in and people would advise you about what to do, but nothing happened.'

Islamic Education

I thought initially when you convert ...there should be a course available which goes through how to pray properly and basically (is) about the five pillars. I think there should be prayer workshops for converts as well because it's your main thing that you want to do when you become a Muslim – learn to pray properly. Any maybe a weeks course like a convert's course that you could hold in the big cities to help people rather than getting info from everybody and just getting it from one source, that would be good.'

Counselling and advice

'Yes! That's what I'd like, someone you can talk to one on one 'cause sometimes you've got problems and you need someone who is more learned that you are to tell you whether your thinking is right.'

Housing

Several of the focus group participants mentioned the need for a hostel or some form of accommodation for converts who had become homeless as a result of their conversion. Existing hostel provision was considered detrimental to the wellbeing of a convert because of the alien environment where there was a prevalence of drug/alcohol abuse and criminal activity.

Ethnic exclusion

It was noted throughout the research process that converts of all ethnic origins, but not all converts, experienced issues surrounding inclusion into Leicester's established Muslim communities. Such experiences are not exclusive to Leicester and are found throughout the Muslim communities of Britain. The comments of several of Leicester's converts along with findings from previous research are mentioned below to highlight the nature of these issues.

While converts may experience marginalisation many black converts complain of racist attitudes displayed towards them particularly from older members of the Asian community.¹⁰² Maha Al-Qwidi's research found that the Asian community although initially welcoming to converts were more amenable to white converts than those from African-Caribbean background to whom behaviour was often openly racist and discriminatory.¹⁰³ The initial welcome is often accompanied by difficulties in relating to converts from Western culture.

Such sentiments are reiterated by Manazir Ahsan who observed, 'The immigrant community has not been able to fraternise with them (new Muslims) and absorb them in the way Islam asked them to do. As conversion to Islam in some cases results in the break up of the previous family life, Muslims as a whole have failed to give emotional, psychological and material support to such newcomers to Islam.'¹⁰⁴

Ahsan further suggests that the born Muslims were not readily 'equipped to meet the multi-pronged challenges of Western society to many aspects of

¹⁰² Zebiri, K., (2008) *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*, p.65, Oneworld Publications, Oxford

¹⁰³ al-Qwidi, M., (2002) 'Understanding the Stages of Conversion to Islam: The Voices of British Converts' p.265, PhD thesis, University of Leeds 2002

¹⁰⁴ Ahsan, M.M. (1989) cited in Adnan, A., *New Muslims in Britain*, p.16, London: Ta Ha 1999

their life.’¹⁰⁵ Of more immediate importance was the application of ‘a contingency plan to safeguard their religion, their values and traditions and more importantly their family life,’ which has served to exclude white and African-Caribbean converts.¹⁰⁶

Al-Qwidi considered the pressures South Asians felt as an ethnic minority who had ‘established boundaries as a mechanism of community preservation’ which involved preserving their indigenous cultures within their communities in Britain were in part responsible for types of exclusionary responses.¹⁰⁷ Abdul Haq Baker, the Chair of Brixton Mosque, commented that he’s experienced more racism since becoming Muslim than prior to his conversion.¹⁰⁸ While collating evidence for this report several converts of white, dual heritage and African-Caribbean heritage commented on experiences of ethnic exclusion in Leicester.

A respondent commented,

‘I think it’s a cultural thing because the people that come from Africa where I live, the majority do treat me like a long lost sister. There has always been a problem with people from Asia and stuff like that I can’t understand why they can’t see that a black person from the Caribbean can be a Muslim. They have got it all wrong about who Muslims are. Anybody can be a Muslim, it doesn’t matter where you are from but people just have this concept and I just find it very strange that people who have the book and the knowledge would treat another person like that. That’s what I can’t get over; it does go around in my mind.’

Several African Caribbean converts referred to other African Caribbean converts being frequently marginalised to such an extent in Leicester that they become virtually invisible, demoralised and end up not actively practising their faith. An established convert of African Caribbean heritage commented on the lack of services available especially in finding suitable educational facilities for children.

‘Our children embrace Islam and they are eventually out in the wilderness on their own, those embracing Islam have no where to go, no sisters around them, no brothers around them...no one to care for them... we need an organisation set up to help these people. We need to cater for our own people. Eid’s coming up I’d like to have a get together but my house is not big enough, we have got no where we can have an Eid celebration...we need to cater for our own selves.’

¹⁰⁵ Ahsan, M.M. (1989) cited in Adnan, A. *New Muslims in Britain*, p.16, London: Ta Ha 1999

¹⁰⁶ Ahsan, M.M. (1989) cited in Adnan, A. *New Muslims in Britain*, p.16, London: Ta Ha 1999

¹⁰⁷ al-Qwidi, M., (2002) ‘Understanding the Stages of Conversion to Islam: The Voices of British Converts’ p.265-266, PhD thesis, University of Leeds 2002

¹⁰⁸ Dr. A.H. Baker, Chair of Brixton Mosque interviewed on (Young, Muslim and Black, Radio 4 broadcast, 19.12.2010)

'When I first embraced the deen (during the 1980's) the Asian community done well with me....I cannot blame the Asian community because if it was not for them nothing would be here.... but for the younger ones I think that is where the problem is...'

A white convert recounted his experiences of ethnic exclusion in Leicester.

'A lot of the mosques that I go to people are pretty racist towards me and they don't really accept you and don't even say hello a lot of the time. Other mosques like Masjid (name removed), people are different there and they accept me and there are a lot of different people there from different communities and everyone gets on and I used to go to Masjid (name removed) quite a lot for Jummah prayer and I used to get a bad reception, people there would really annoy me so I stopped going there. There is a lot of racism if you're white I think and I don't think I knew what racism was until I became a Muslim. I definitely do now.'

Exclusion that could be construed as containing elements of ethnic superiority was also alluded to.

'How can you come to the community? I know loads of brothers who have left Islam and sisters who have come to Islam and then left it because they were left alone. Nobody was there for them and they couldn't trust anyone. I used to know a sister and people used to look at her like she was a piece of muck on the end of their shoe just because she didn't wear a head scarf and I met this girl and she embraced Islam and she was wearing short skirts, it's not going to happen like that. This thing takes time and you have to instil that belief. No one made them feel welcome and you need to make people feel welcome because they have all cut off. I am the only one left standing out of them I think because I have been fortunate enough to feel something when I recited the Kalima, to know that all these people... I found it difficult to trust people and if I have a problem that I want to tell someone then I can't go to any brother because I can't trust them because I don't know what they do as soon as I turn my back.'

'It seems that everybody is doing their own thing like the Somali community and this community and that community and I guess as a convert you are kind of left out unless you marry one of them. And then, I guess there is a convert community and it would be nice to bring them all together more.'

Issues here to be addressed need to be the provision of services open to all of the convert community. If not situations will arise that propel converts from certain ethnic backgrounds to seek to provide services primarily for converts of their own ethnicities which would maintain exclusion rather than foster inclusion and integration between converts of different ethnicities. As cited earlier in the report the establishment of Brixton mosque in London arose because African Caribbean converts were marginalised from the mainstream body of practising Muslims and similar scenarios need not occur in Leicester which run counter to the universality of Islam.

Chapter five

Converts to Islam in Leicester: the case of mosques and Islamic organisations, group and individual support

The city of Leicester boasts 25 Mosques, 'of which five (20%) are purpose built'¹⁰⁹ which serve a growing diverse community of Muslims numbering in the region of just over 30,000¹¹⁰. Situated mainly in the Highfields and Evington areas of the city each Mosque represents a strand in the wide representation of Islam that is prevalent in the city and reflect the ethnic diversity of the Muslim communities that chose to settle here 'attracted by the reputation of a more tolerant culture'¹¹¹ which Leicester proudly upholds. In its 2025 vision for Leicester it is suggested that the city will be one of 'the most cohesive cities in Europe, with safe and strong communities where people successfully live, work and learn together, new arrivals are made welcome, and where diverse cultural traditions enrich one another and lives of all its citizens.'¹¹² Many challenges lie ahead for the city in maintaining such cohesion.

Consequently Mosques in Leicester, whose origins are largely the heritage of the South Asian and East African communities, have in the last two decades experienced a constant influx of Muslim communities from across the globe. As mentioned earlier in the report the 1990's saw the arrival of the Bosnian Muslims and, more recently in the first five years of the new millennium, an estimated 10,000 strong Somali community comprising of asylum seekers directly from the home country with equal numbers coming from EU countries such as the Netherlands. The later stemmed from difficulties in settling due to racial and religious tensions experienced in the Netherlands, problems relating to housing¹¹³ as well as a lack of access to an Islamic infrastructure.

Out of this rich tapestry of faith representation has steadily, but more so in recent years, emerged the convert community of individuals, and in some remote cases families who, for a variety of reasons dealt with in the earlier pages of this report, chose to adopt Islam as their new found faith. Finding support and information is usually the first essential requirement for this individual or group and while many will have met and interacted with individual Muslims in the work place, educational or recreational centres, the need for a deeper sense of belonging tends to express itself in the desire to 'employ the

¹⁰⁹ Allievi, Stefano. 2009 Conflicts over Mosques in Europe: Policy issues and trends p.29, Alliance Publishing Trust, London

¹¹⁰ Census 2001 cited in At Home in Europe: Muslims in Leicester

¹¹¹ At Home in Europe: Muslims in Leicester, pp. 32 - 33

¹¹² Leicester City Council and Leicester Partnership, The Strategy for Leicester. 2006 p.2

¹¹³ Bowley, G., (2005) New Islam in an Old English Town., International Herald Tribune Nov. 7th

specific rhetoric of the religious group, thereby incorporating into their life ways the language of transformation inherent to the particular group.¹¹⁴

The natural progression at this point is the desire to commit to the chosen path in the way of a personal testimony of faith and enter into the practice of the required rituals of the faith which 'help consolidate a convert's beliefs and involvement in the group'¹¹⁵ or local community of Muslims. The local Mosque or Islamic Organisation is sought out for that purpose.

Methodological considerations

To briefly recap on the methodology outlined earlier in the introduction, questionnaires were dispatched to mosques and Islamic organisations in Leicester and were followed up by fifteen interviews with what were thought to be the most frequently attended facilities by the convert community given their locations within the area. The representative sample was also chosen to reflect the diversity of understanding of Islam in Leicester. The questionnaire, in two parts, was designed to gather information on the established service provisions of the mosque for the general community, whether specific structures were in place to address the needs of converts or plans for such provisions were part of its future strategy. The second part of the questionnaire addressed the issue of directing converts to Islam towards known organisations solely involved in the provisions of support to the convert community. Questions were also designed to assess the willingness of the mosques to enter into a programme of training that would inform them of the processes of conversion and assist them in the provision of basic services for the convert community.

Leicester's mosques

Since the origins of the growth of mosques in Leicester in the 1950's each facility has, depending on its ability and capacity, tried to provide the basic requirements such as five times daily prayer, *madrassah* for the communities children and access, where and when required, to other services such as family support, advice and counselling. Currently, mosques which have been purpose built or which were able to acquire buildings large enough to meet the demands of the community, provide a whole range of services such as supplementary education, counselling and family support, classes for males and females for the study of the Qur'an, Arabic and other languages in the community, a variety of social events such as those that celebrate Eid and Ramadan and where possible, marriage and funeral services. Where a mosque does not have the capacity to provide funeral arrangements for its

¹¹⁴ Rambo & Farhadian (1999) *Converting: Stages of Religious Change*, p.30, in Lamb, C, & Darrol Bryant, M (eds) *Religious Conversion: Contemporary practices and controversies*, Cassel, London & New York

¹¹⁵ Rambo & Farhadian (1999) *Converting: Stages of Religious Change* p.32, in Lamb, C., & Darrol Bryant, M., *Religious Conversion: Contemporary practices and controversies*, Cassel, London & New York

congregation the Muslim Burial Council of Leicester provides help, support, advice and practical assistance in the event of death directing the family to a mosque, usually Leicester Central Mosque that has the necessary facilities available.¹¹⁶ Leicester Central Mosque is registered with County Hall for the performance marriage. The registrar will, if requested in advance, attend the *nikah* ceremony and register the marriage for legal purposes. Half of the mosques which took part in the report performed the Nikah ceremony only and provided documentary evidence of this. These essential services make the mosques who are party to them particularly sought after by the whole of the Muslim community not least the convert community.

One mosque was eager to point out that the *Khutbah*, the sermon delivered on Fridays before midday prayer, was in Arabic with a comprehensive translation in English, clearly an attempt to serve the needs of the growing diversity of their congregation. From the interviews conducted it is clear that mosques are currently recognising the ethnic diversity and multi lingual nature of their worshippers and are keen to do what is necessary to facilitate worship so that all feel welcome. As well as hosting open days for visits by non Muslims facilitated through Islamic Awareness initiatives and taking a keen interest in involving themselves in Interfaith dialogue the larger mosques in Leicester host school visits throughout the academic year and generally open their doors to the public as a gesture of goodwill and a means towards fostering community cohesion. Though this is something they would like to encourage they are acutely aware that 'many people believe they are not allowed to enter a mosque' and those who show interest can often be seen 'standing outside, hovering, then walking off.'¹¹⁷ Though none offered structured support services particular to the needs of converts to Islam all of the mosques felt that their general services were accessed by all Muslims in the community including converts. Though generally unsure of how many converts to Islam attended the facility the representatives interviewed at the mosques expressed a desire to welcome and support them as far as it was possible for them to do so.

With the exception of three, two who were doubtful, none of the representatives of the mosques interviewed appeared to register details of or provide certification to those who made their *Shahadah*, declaration of faith, at their facility. *Shahadah* certification, whilst clearly understood not to be a requirement on pronouncing ones commitment to the Islam, has been shown to be a useful document to have to hand. Many converts to Islam who wished to embark on the pilgrimage of *Hajj* or *Umrah* have been requested to provide such documentation on application for visas and often when there is little time to secure one. This is a useful document that may resolve a legal dispute if properly witnessed and certified and is at times a vital document to include with ones will as a testament of their change of faith should issues arise within the extended family relating to burial following the death of a convert.

¹¹⁶ Muslim Burial Council of Leicester www.mbicol.co.uk

¹¹⁷ Flintoff, J.P., (2010) 'A funny thing happened on the way to the Mosque,' The Sunday Times May 23rd

Shahadah certification would be considered vital as a basic means of continued contact with the convert in the way of informing them of any educational, self development initiatives or socially interactive opportunities that might be available through the network of mosques and Islamic organisations in Leicester. Information of this vital nature appears to be circulated by word of mouth only or by fliers, should the event or service provided merit one. All but one of the mosques interviewed in the report were unaware of any plans by their governing bodies to look at the specific concerns of the convert community and address them within their service delivery. It is important to note however that all of the responding mosques considered the list of services suggested on the questionnaire essential to the development of the convert community and that they, as facilitators, would ideally aspire towards providing within their future strategy. It is also important to indicate that while the services suggested in the questionnaire were not formally part of the overall service delivery of the participating mosques all those approached would happily, and with genuine sincerity, provide as much help and support as was necessary or possible, within the constraints placed upon them, to anyone who sought such assistance. During the course of conversations with representatives of the mosques it was emphasised that it was 'definitely very important' to provide services to converts and that such help and support should come from 'people who have first hand knowledge of converts problems.'

One of the participating mosques felt that they should actively seek funding for services for converts to Islam and should provide some kind of venue where converts to Islam could undergo induction programmes and continued personal development training. They felt this was necessary to 'create the necessary environment for converts to Islam' where they felt comfortable to speak freely of their experiences and get the necessary support required. They also felt that it was necessary to establish a trust fund 'purposely for them' and where the needs of converts 'would take priority over others.' Three of the mosques were more reticent on this matter with one suggesting they would prefer to refer those requesting financial support on to the appropriate aid organisations on the basis that it is highly problematic to 'know of a person's circumstances.' The mosque policy was a blanket one which applied to all donations requested on the basis of an 'abuse of the system of *Zakat*' and previous 'fraudulent incidences' which tarnished the degree of trust required in the application of this service.

One Mosque directed those interested in or new to Islam to a nearby shop which sells an elaborate stock of Islamic artefact and a wide variety of Islamic books in English and other languages familiar to the surrounding community. Support was provided based on the various 'talents' of those seeking information which it was felt demanded 'different responses' and, following considerable discussion with the client, appropriate reading material that matched their 'social status, intellectual ability and situation' would be given. Advice, guidance and teaching where necessary were also offered and there appeared to be considerable care and attention applied to the whole phenomena of conversion.

When questioned about their understanding of the initial and longer term challenges that might arise for converts to Islam the responses from the representatives of the Mosques were wide and varied:

'...the need to feel part of the Muslim community and bring them within that community... communication, social integration and engagement within the Muslim community... feelings of not being not welcomed perhaps by the elderly Muslim community...'

'...need for more guidance, help and advice... lack of guidance... lack of Islamic programmes to cater for their needs... ... learning to recite the Qur'an and understand the beliefs of Islam itself... need for Islamic education...'

'...cultural expressions of Islam imposed by the Muslim community...lack of freedom to find their own particular path and understanding...guidance that is not forceful in a particular direction... overwhelming them with information...imposing rather than taking things easy...bombarding them with information and creating bad experiences...'

'...difficulties of understanding the divisions between Muslim groups...where to find information about and understand about divisions in Muslim community... divisions within the community...'

'...abandonment by friends and family.... being disowned with nowhere to go and nowhere to turn to...family confrontation... addressing feelings of desertion and lack of moral support... loss of family and friends... loss of family support... exclusion from their community...'

'...lack of help including financial... needing support for the not very well off amongst them....financial problems... housing support at the initial stages of conversion... to relocate them...'

'...finding marriage partners for both men and women...issues around wearing hijab... problems caused by wearing hijab in front of family and friends...particular concerns about the safety of converts from particular cultural backgrounds...assault and conflict...'

'...feelings of leaving Islam due to lack of support...'

In spite of this the question of whether the Mosques had a support network within its existing structures to provide a suitable response towards the vast array of challenges mentioned above were disappointing. None had any structured support while three offered assistance only when it was sought. The rest were 'open to suggestions' and expressed that they 'would like' to be in a position, given the necessary guidance, support and training, to make these provisions a reality.

The final question in this first part of the questionnaire was offered as optional one on advice tendered through consulting with community advisors who suggested it was a sensitive issue and that it should be removed altogether. This question addressed the issue of who, in terms of gender, has access to the Mosque. The researchers felt it was essential to the whole exercise since converts to Islam are of both gender with women, as has generally been proven by research across the whole of the UK, taking the majority position in the conversion phenomena.¹¹⁸ Access to the Mosques, generally felt to be a vital part of integration into the community as well as to learning and support, is therefore essential to this phenomena both in the early transitional and the ongoing 'continuing conversion'¹¹⁹ process for both male and female converts. An indication of this is borne out through experiences shared over the years in convert support groups which cites that early stages of learning amongst male converts is accelerated through easier and less impeded access to the mosques.

Nine of the mosques interviewed were accessible to men, women and children while three were accessed by men and children only. Two of these happen to be modern purpose built mosques with the most recent of which curiously allows access to children of over seven years only. Of those which have provisions for women it was clear from the mosque representatives interviewed that the women's activities are a source of pride in that they are instrumental in organising educational and social events and are working together for the general benefit and improvement of women in particular and families generally in the community. Such access and opportunities offered through women's activities in mosques often provide crucial platforms for discussion on aspects that pose challenges to converts to Islam and the various barriers to their learning and development. Often very positive and supportive relationships are formed through events organised by the mosques which, to some extent at least, compensate to for the breakdown in family relations following conversion.

Section two of the questionnaire sought to determine whether the mosques and Islamic organisations were in a position to refer those seeking assistance towards the appropriate support. Of the Mosques interviewed two were unsure about whom or where they could refer converts to both locally and nationally for help and assistance. From the remainder half were confident they could refer converts to both local and national support while the other half knew only of local support. When asked to cite such organisations it was clear that there was some confusion as to the whether those mentioned were just local or national organisations known to the respondents and therefore perhaps ill equipped in terms of what could be realistically provided or relevant to the needs of converts.

The following four questions which focused on the offer of training on the conversion process to the Mosques and how to assist converts, a willingness

¹¹⁸ Brice, M.A.K., (2011) on behalf of Faith Matters, 'A Minority Within A Minority: a report on converts to Islam in the United Kingdom

¹¹⁹ Edgar, T., (1999) 'Continuing Conversion: a personal journey,' Religious Conversion; contemporary practices and controversies, CASSELL, London & New York

to display information on their notice boards indicating where and how to access local support and their desire to have suitable welcome packs for converts to Islam were met with resounding agreement by all the Mosques. All were welcoming of any further contact to discuss, advice or share any further information that would be helpful towards assisting them to provide the necessary services required as well as positively engaging in any processes that would improve their knowledge and awareness of the convert community.

Of the three Islamic Organisations involved in the research one, established solely for the benefit of the convert community which, 'rather than providing classes and services' acts as a referral organisation signposting 'people to the appropriate services they need' which presently exist within the community. Beyond this their primary aim is to organise social events which assist in bringing the convert community together thus offering a platform for discussion, interaction and support each other through sharing narratives and experiences. Each social occasion is planned in advance, publicised through email contact and will have an educational dimension appropriate to the event. Oddly enough the organisation, though keeping records of the converts who contacted them, did not keep a register of *Shahadahs* taking place nor do they provide *Shahdah* certification. This may be due to not having a central office or indeed any kind of structure from which to co ordinate this work. In spite of this a wide range of services has been established and is attended to by a volunteer network. These include separate help lines for men and women, access to Imams to respond to questions raised by the converts, classes for women who are considered 'beginners,' social events and a blog site for introducing and advertising local events and generally giving advice and addressing concerns expressed.

In the area of organising social events which have included a very successful programme during Ramadan which has offered *Iftars* (meals taken during the evening at the time when the fast is broken) the above organisation has broken new ground. The venue for this event, offered by a benevolent benefactor, has been particularly advantageous because it offers a neutral, non-partisan place where converts can come together. That more is not offered to converts is a source of concern for the group of volunteers who are constrained in their abilities to offer more services to the convert community through a lack of volunteers to assist with the development and implementation of services. Unfortunately, having visited the group's website, it does not provide links to a whole host of convert related support groups around the whole of the UK that would certainly benefit this group. Most notable is the fact that the site does not provide a link to the largest national organisation established for the sole purpose of supporting converts to Islam and which is based in Leicester.

The other two organisations, one of which was established primarily to deliver good quality educational and social programmes to the Muslim community generally, are well recognised for their success in this arena and attract male and female converts to Islam, as well as the children of converts, to their initiatives. The other was established mainly as an outreach organisation providing awareness of Islam to the rest of society through hosting other faith

representative groups, school visits and cultural awareness programmes. Through this initiative came the realisation for the need to support those who accepted Islam as their new found faith. It was 'unsure' and not clear what mechanisms or whether a structured method of record keeping existed for those who access their facilities. One offered *Shahadah* certification while both do try to maintain contact by email thereby informing as many as possible of their pending programmes and events.

The three organisations are quite categorical in their support for education and training, particularly in the transitional stages of conversion. One claims to 'have a full syllabus to cater for converts to Islam' while another is making courageous efforts to include converts in its already existing schedule of study programmes and where necessary providing smaller more specifically oriented classes to the needs of converts. From their perspective the problems and barriers outlined were:

'Shahadah certification required...The need for good literature specifically designed for new Muslims...The need for suitable tutors and teachers for Arabic...Social contact through classes and platforms that would facilitate that...Facilitating marriage and needing experienced and responsible Wali...Integration into the wider Muslim community...Acceptance...Accessing classes, courses, family counselling services...Mediation services for family conflict on conversion...Marriage and finding suitable partners is a particular issue...Feeling isolated during religious events...Female converts don't have the same sense of the community as male converts by virtue of their access to the Masjid...Not being surrounded by Islamic practices...'

It was suggested by one organisation that since the convert community were 'such a disparate group of people' it is not possible to be able to condense the challenges they encounter into a meaningful response. Responding to the question of whether the organisation had any structured response to the needs of converts, a particular programme aimed specifically for that purpose was presented. Though a study of their website does not mention this or indeed any support for converts interviews conducted with representatives of the organisation indicate that considerable effort is being made to initiate opportunities for socialising through coffee mornings, a helpline or at least an opportunity to speak to someone who is proficient in the needs of converts is available and converts are kept fully informed of all the educational initiatives organised so that they may access them if they choose.

Section two of the questionnaire brought a better more informed response from all three organisations in a confident expression of being able to refer converts to Islam to both local and national support. With the exception of one they were also keen to avail of any training that might be offered as a means of informing themselves more thoroughly on the phenomena of conversion overall. Any assistance of appropriate reading material available and information shared as to where to access particular services were greatly appreciated.

Individual and group initiatives designed to support converts

A number of individuals, families or small groups of Muslims, in Leicester offer support to those converting or contemplating conversion to Islam. Converts may encounter individual support through a chance encounter with another Muslim or by being directed to that supportive individual by other Muslims. Often this person or persons have considered it their duty to inform converts or potential converts of the process of conversion and to educate them about what the Islamic faith entails.

These initiatives help to support converts who may at times experience ambiguous responses from the born Muslims. In spite of the warm welcome extended on first and subsequent encounters with born Muslims in Mosques or other facilities, this 'good reception does not necessarily mean that one is wholly accepted into the new faith community' as 'most born Muslims oscillate between 'liking' and 'disliking' and it differs from person to person how one accepts and receives a new Muslim.'¹²⁰

These individuals are often the ones who provide a lifeline to converts to Islam who find they are struggling to understand the myriad of expressions of Islam. Such help enable the converts to eventually find a comfortable structure that gives meaning and direction to their everyday lives. These individuals or families 'incorporate' the convert into their families as a means of providing effective support throughout the transitional years. Converts to Islam speak with great affection of such acts of kindness when reflecting on the difficult experiences encountered in their early days and years of religious change.

A number of female converts in Leicester refer to the kindness shown to them and to the ongoing support provided by individuals and families within the community who 'practically adopted' them at a time when they felt alone and confused.¹²¹ Often they were referred to these supportive initiatives by others who had experienced the warmth of 'informal meetings' which 'offered instruction about Islam.' There, women could ask questions and speak freely about their own experiences and concerns, getting the necessary support from those who continued to attend long after they has reached a degree of self confidence in their new found belief. Social gatherings are organised at the homes of individuals as well as picnics, swimming and other activities when and where possible. Women spoke of a recently organised visit to a newly constructed Mosque in Leicester that does not provide a space for women and which, for some in the group who were converts to Islam for up to two years, was their first ever visit to a Mosque.

Other examples, are groups of converts and born Muslim women who have organised together to offer a range of social activities and support to those new to Islam. Here, *iftars* during Ramadan, coffee mornings and pampering

¹²⁰ Roald, A.S., (2004) *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Muslims*, p. 256, Brill, Leiden

¹²¹ Roald, A.S., (2004) *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Muslims*, p. 256, Brill, Leiden

sessions naturally create opportunities to network with women where contact is established and maintained as a means of informing every one of other events where they can continue to meet and sustain close ties and offer mutual support. Beyond this comfortable arena women were referred to other means of educational support which they found challenging with '*one who was comfortable with the structure*' while '*others found it regimented and robotic*' (Interviewee). The range of issues that frequently came up for discussion and gave cause for concern was '*housing, work related problems and the need of emotional and sometimes financial support.*'

Similar forms of support were also provided to men by a several male Muslims in Leicester who offer a variety of avenues of assistance for converts to become integrated into the wider Muslim community. However, concerns expressed by these support networks highlighted the need for increased support for male converts who it was felt were sometimes wary of approaching Mosques and needed some kind of intermediary support to make this process a comfortable experience. They also suggested that Mosque Imams should periodically remind the congregation of the *Adhab*, manners, that are required when welcoming outsiders to the Mosque. Social events that would provide opportunities for networking for both male and female members of the convert community were also considered highly desirable.

Findings

The study overall offers optimism for the future though it also suggests problems of recognition, acknowledgement and respect for the needs of this minority community. The mosques and organisations which took part show willingness to provide the necessary services that would undoubtedly address much of the concerns expressed by the converts themselves. However the representatives interviewed, though sincere in their understanding of the issues and their efforts to address them albeit on an individual and only when approached basis, appeared to suggest that the sluggish response to the needs of converts are more to do with the failure of their governing bodies to initiate and address the situation strategically and with the urgency and seriousness it deserves. While there are understandable issues of resources it might suggested that this will always pose a problem for this growing and developing community and simply requires inspirational and imaginative approaches of dealing with it. In recent years concerns have been expressed surrounding the considerable contributions of *Zakat* and *Sadaqa* from within the community across the whole of the UK usually sent abroad with little apportioned towards supporting education and training of Muslim minorities in the UK and even less allocated towards supporting an infrastructure that is in dire need of bolstering. Mosques and their governing bodies have both the responsibility and the leverage to influence this resource but have so far preferred to which would support the necessary services required to meet the demands of their communities as a whole. The converts to Islam who are widely regarded by Muslim scholars as included in the outlined recipients of *Zakat* would benefit from this provision where and when necessary.

The convert community has not sought, except in the case of the Brixton Mosque and this due in essence to a degree of racism not usually expressed or experienced generally within Muslim communities, to establish Mosques or organisations that would further create divisions, barriers to integration and hostility within the existing Muslim communities. This has been borne out historically in the very clear strategy enacted by the early Liverpool Muslim community led by Abdullah Quilliam where he, as mentioned earlier in this report, 'was able to bring together the various constituents of the nineteenth century Muslim presence in Britain and draw upon the resources of the mosque in Liverpool to create a hub around which these often itinerant Muslim presences could cohere.'¹²² Based on the earliest sources in Islam the Muslim community is duty bound to welcome and provide for, to educate and address the specific needs of those who, by whatever means and for whatever reasons, wish to join their ranks. This support must cross ethnic, social and sectarian divides and fully respect the gender equality expressed so eloquently in the Qur'an and in the earliest historical accounts of the origins of Islam.

The Muslim communities, and in particular the structures within which provide the backdrop of facilities that maintain it, must realise and harness the value laden component within their grasp that is the convert community. Many of the converts to Islam come from backgrounds where a variety of religious and social experiences are expressed and with skills and abilities that would add to that rich tapestry of Muslim communities that exist across the UK. Roald raises the point that 'New Muslims can be seen as intermediaries between Muslim communities' and wider society at 'various levels' and act as 'bridge builders between Muslim society and the majority society.'¹²³ This should be seen as a broader and more useful resource in terms of cultural awareness training, interfaith and intercultural dialogue and presenting practical examples of 'Living Faith' in school RE classes rather than the use of converts in the rudimentary *dawah* activities in town centres which target shoppers in the course of their weekend shopping. This is also supported by studies in Denmark where it is suggested that converts to Islam 'play an important part in the representation of Islam and Muslims in the media, and in the organisation of Muslim federations. They are thus given a certain agency due to their symbolic capital in the form of language and education. However, they often have limited roles in Muslim communities, where they experience exclusion at various levels and are perceived as a threat to established Muslim organisational identities. They are therefore in an ambiguous position with respect to authority and power.'¹²⁴

Mosques need to see the importance of the provision of pre and post Sahhadah care and after care as it is through these testing transitional times it

¹²² Geaves, R., (2010) *Islam in Victorian Britain: The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam*, Kube Publishing, Markfield

¹²³ Roald, A.S., (2004) *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts*, P. 289, Brill, Leiden

¹²⁴ Gudron Jensen, T., (2006) *Religious Authority and Autonomy Intertwined: The case of converts to Islam in Denmark*. P. 647, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 96

is needed most. By failing in their duties there is the danger that converts to Islam may be open to influences that are fuelled by particular agendas set by individuals or groups which may be counter productive to the mainstream peaceful coexistence Muslim communities foster in British society as a whole. Intra religious dialogue addressing the confusing presentations of the whole range and spectrum of Islam and the variety of sects within the community representing these dichotomies must be considered for the whole of the Muslim community as it appears to lend itself to confusion for the younger generations of Muslims in the UK not least for the convert community within it. Mosques must also take responsibility for those who, on finding themselves bereft of the necessary direction towards navigating themselves through the whole myriad of expressions of Islam, back away eventually leaving Islam altogether.

Those who elect to provide the necessary support for converts must be realistic in the delivery of Islamic education and tuition, making sure that they pace the provision in a way that does not rush the process thereby placing unnecessary expectations on the new practitioner to the faith. For this purpose it is necessary for Mosques and Islamic Organisations to seek out the necessary acknowledgement and appreciation of the background of the convert paying particular attention to the process of change that has taken place over time and how it has impacted on the individual, and just as importantly, those of another or no faith that surround them. This would assist in some ways towards contextualising Islam thereby presenting it as a living faith that sits comfortably and can be implemented in the course of the convert's daily life rather than something apart from or alien to it.

Based on the suggestion that the convert community themselves ought to act as the guiding lights for other converts based on their personal experiences necessitates full and frank discussion between the Mosques and the convert community towards establishing a legitimate support network in Leicester. This can only proceed if there is meaningful appreciation, acknowledgement and respect for the concerns expressed on both sides and a real, genuine and lasting partnership established in an attempt to fulfil the needs of this growing and dynamic convert community in the city.

Conclusions

The report highlights that the convert community in Leicester comprises a highly disparate group of people, both male and female, who come from a variety of ethnic groups and socio-economic backgrounds. Levels of conversion to Islam appear higher amongst women than men, possibly on a 2:1 ratio, but this does not negate the significant numbers of men who embrace the faith. Levels of educational attainment and occupation range from the less qualified to well educated professionals. The majority appear attracted to Islam due to spiritual and intellectual reasons, with friends and personal relationships, which may include marriage, being factors for many converts in initial introductions to the faith. Others pursue more solitary paths to Islam through self exploration of religious beliefs as part of a general search to understand the fundamental truths of life.

While the personal journeys of converts make it difficult to make generalisations about converts the challenges faced by converts to Islam as they explore and embrace the faith stem from a generic set of issues. These issues primarily revolve around how to incorporate the converts understanding of Islam into their own lives in terms of renegotiating their identity while attempting to maintain relationships with family, friends, work colleagues and wider society.

The journey travelled by converts during their post-conversion lives is ongoing and is not a static affair. Beliefs and interpretations of Islam may be revised and changed and many converts dabble in a variety of expressions of the faith which may lead them to an understanding of the faith that proves satisfying. For many, but not all converts, development within the faith is part of a life long process of learning that leads to deeper appreciation and more nuanced expressions of the faith.

The immediate period following conversion appears to a point of vulnerability for the majority of converts who experience confusion and uncertainty as to how to they are going to facilitate their personal expression of Islam. This is exacerbated by competing and conflicting advice from other Muslims they come into contact along with the uncertainty of trying to understand the numerous interpretations of Islam that it is possible to adhere to. In terms of family relationships the early post conversion period also frequently presents enormous challenges in terms of dealing with often fractured relationships within families resulting from the way in which the conversion was presented to family members and the way in which it has been received by them. It is here that converts are thought to need the most support from Muslims to counter possible isolation and anomie which may be experienced.

In terms of converting to Islam in Leicester the diversity of the city's multi-cultural population provide an easy backdrop through which cultural and religious exploration are increasingly possible. The large Muslim population and the institutional facilities already established provide an infrastructure that can be accessed by converts to Islam. How and why some converts are more successful in their integration into Leicester's mainstream Muslim

communities may be due to a multitude of factors which include personality, ethnicity, the type of people introduced to, the expressions of Islam that are available and readily accessible and the willingness with which a person chooses to adapt and conform to the established communities. For a number of converts less able to gain entry into established communities of Muslims their experience can be one of loneliness and isolation, marginalised both from their communities of origin and from the Muslim communities they seek to access.

In terms of religious provision for converts the city has a well established network of mosques, Islamic organisations and educational facilities. For converts issues arise over how to access existing facilities and services. This is because there are no central points of access that house details on the services and events occurring within the city which can be attended or used by converts. Converts find it difficult to know what is available other than through word of mouth.

The city's Muslim communities offer a variety of educational and recreational services which can be accessed by all Muslims but these are limited in their range and expressions of Islam. For example, there are few outlets for creative and artistic expressions of Islam and the rich cultural diversity of the arts that are found throughout the Muslim world are not replicated in Leicester. This reflects a loss not only to the city's Muslim communities but to the wider population of Leicester and beyond who do not have access to Islamic art forms which can transcend ethnic and cultural divides and may be a means of facilitating enhanced inter-cultural and religious dialogue.

In terms of the wider applicability of the research findings to other cities around the country that possess large concentrations of converts, it was considered that the experience of Leicester did largely replicate the patterns found elsewhere in the country through the experiences of the NMP National Network Support Services. However, exceptions in the three cities in the North of England were noted and these were largely the result of the input of enlightened mosques with multicultural populations and the organisational skills of groups of motivated converts who have devoted their time and expertise to improving the situations of converts to Islam in their locality.

Conversion to Islam is a growing phenomenon and continuous process which demands that services be provided to meet the needs of an expanding and disparate community. Ideally, converts need to be integrated in wider Muslim communities. However the wider communities, already struggling to respond to the needs of those born into the faith, do not have the necessary responses in place to meet the varied needs of converts. Having said this, there is still much cause for optimism. With foresight and provision the challenges faced by converts are not insurmountable and motivated leaders from the convert community in partnership with more established groups of Muslims can provide the ways in which the experience of being Muslim in Leicester can be improved.

Recommendations

Based on the research conducted with members of the convert community this report suggests a number of recommendations. It is hoped these will enhance the lives of this richly diverse community and empower them towards becoming more actively involved in society generally as well as their faith community in particular in a positive and wholesome way.

Towards Community Cohesion

1. The convert community, which widely reflects the composition of society as a whole, should be seen as a valuable asset towards building bridges between society at large and the Muslim communities through involvement in interfaith and intercultural dialogue.
2. Converts to Islam should be involved in the governing bodies of community organisations and Mosques so that their narratives and experiences inspire and inform a more nuanced approach to service delivery.
3. A fully trained volunteer network from within the convert community is required so that 'surgeries' can be established in community organisations that will serve this minority group.
4. A strategy to empower the convert communities to enable them to work in tandem with existing services provided by community organisations rather than being solely reliant on the Muslim communities for support is necessary. This will also enable them to unhitch themselves from the cultural and traditional baggage that is often unfairly foisted upon them and to develop cooperative initiatives whilst retaining a degree of autonomy.
5. As the arts are an effective means of transcending cultural barriers and engendering cohesion both between communities and across ethnicities the celebration of arts reflecting the rich Muslim cultural heritage would have considerable benefit.

Education and Training

1. A structured and comprehensive education package is required for converts to Islam that could inform them of the spiritual and practical elements required to be able to navigate their way confidently through the confusion that characterises in the early transitional stages of conversion. The package should also aim to educate about the diversity of the Muslim communities in Leicester, particularly where Islam is expressed through the various traditions and cultures that inform them.
2. A robust training programme, which looks at the process and stages of conversion and which involves practical aspects of interfacing with

members of the convert community for the benefit of Imams, Mosque governing bodies and key people such as volunteers in Islamic Organisations and other facilities, is required. This will provide the necessary information and education to assist in establishing and becoming more specialised in their service delivery.

Muslim voluntary sector and Mosques

1. Mosques should have dedicated outreach programme that provides the necessary services for members of the convert community who access their facilities.
2. There is a demand for 'intra faith' and intercultural dialogue *within* the Muslim community to bridge ethnic and cultural barriers thus reducing marginalisation and isolation.
3. Responses that are more sensitive to the needs of converts and are culturally located more firmly within the British context need to be generated from within the Muslim communities.
4. Muslim community organisations must explore the need for structures that assist in supporting marriage and family life thereby strengthening families and leading to stable and solid communities.
5. Muslim communities need to acknowledge the need for emergency support for those in vulnerable situations and who find themselves homeless, ostracised or marginalised by family on account of conversion.

Independent Facilities for Convert Community

1. The need for a space, a central office or location that would provide a secure and welcoming space for the converts to Islam is vital. Essential local government funding would be necessary to train, empower and equip such a facility with the necessary growth and ability to strategically plan and direct its service delivery.
2. A website is necessary to provide up to date information to converts to Islam where they could access social and educational facilities in Leicester. This should also serve as a signposting or referral site that would inform on resources available, mosques and Islamic centres that welcome converts along with information regarding how to access the necessary support required.
3. A registration system is required that would keep the convert community informed of the appropriate services and opportunities available to them both locally and nationally and which would assist in their ongoing personal development.

Further Research

1. Further research is required as a means of empowering converts as a marginalised group so that a degree of self determination is established through a more in depth knowledge of themselves.
2. Targeted, thematic analyses into specific areas of this report is required as a means of establishing a more informed engagement with Leicester's growing and developing convert community

Glossary of Terms

Ahl al-Kitab: Literally 'People of the Book,' refers to the followers of Divine Revelation before the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Alhamdulillah: 'Thanks be to God' – a supplication used by Muslims to thank Him for His blessings and bounties on mankind

Allah: The greatest and most inclusive of the names of God. It is an Arabic word of rich and varied meaning, denoting the one who is adored in worship, who creates all that exists, who has priority over all creation, who is lofty and hidden, who confounds all human understanding. Allah is the same God worshipped by Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Alawi tariqas: A Sufi movement

Al-Farooq: (also spelled El-Farouk or Al Farouk) is an Arabic given and family name derived from an honorific of Umar, an early Muslim leader, and by extension has become a common given or place name throughout the Muslim world.

Aayah: (plural: aayaat): Literally a sign, indication or message; an aspect of God's creation; a section of the Qur'anic text often referred to as a `verse.'

Brelwi: A movement of Sunni Islam originating in the Indian subcontinent.

Caliphate: Is a political system from Islam that enshrines: the rule of law, representative government, accountability by the people through an independent judiciary and the principle of representative consultation.

Darqawi: A Sufi movement

Da`wah: Invitation; call. The propagation of Islam through word and action, calling the people to follow the commandments of Allah and His Messenger Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Deen: The core meaning of deen is obedience. Deen refers to the way of life and the system of conduct based on recognizing God as one's sovereign and committing oneself to obey Him. According to Islam, true deen consists of living in total submission to God, and the way to do so is to accept as binding the guidance communicated through the Prophets.

Deobandi: A Deobandi, is a follower of the Deoband Islamic movement. The movement began at Darul Uloom Deoband (a *madrasah*) in Deoband, India.

Eid Al-Adha: A four-day festival that completes the rites of pilgrimage literally means "the feast of the sacrifice."

Eid Al-Fitr: Three day festival marking the end of Ramadan the 10th month of the Islamic calendar.

Fitra: Meaning 'disposition', 'nature', 'constitution', or 'instinct' and can connote intuition or insight. According to Islamic theology, human beings are born with an innate knowledge of *tawhid* (Oneness), which is encapsulated in the *fitra* along with intelligence, *ihsan* and all other attributes that embody what it is to be human.

Hadeeth: (Ahaadeeth - plural). The verbalized form of a tradition of the Prophet, (pbuh).

Halal: Lawful as defined by Allah the Almighty.

Hajj: (Major Pilgrimage) Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam, a duty one must perform during one's life-time if one has the financial resources for it.

Haram: Any act or deed which is prohibited by Allah and will incur His wrath and punishment.

Hjab: Head covering for Muslim women.

Iftar: literally means opening the fast – denotes a meal consumed at the end of a fasting period

Ihsan: Literally denotes doing something in a goodly manner. When used in the Islamic religious context, it signifies excellence of behaviour arising out of a strong love for God and a profound sense of close relationship with Him. According to a Tradition the Prophet (pbuh) defined *ihsan* as worshipping God as though one sees Him.

Iman: A person who leads the prayer.

Islamaphobia: Defined by the Runnymede Trust as the dread or hatred of Islam and therefore, to the fear and dislike of all Muslims. The practice of discriminating against Muslims by excluding them from the economic, social, and public life of the nation.

Jihad: Jihad literally means 'to strive' or 'to exert to the utmost.' It signifies all forms of striving but most importantly the inner struggles to improve and correct ones character and desires. It also includes armed struggle aimed at those who aggress against God and mankind.

Jum'ah: Friday, the Muslims' day of gathering together, when all Muslim males must go to the Masjid to hear the Friday *Khutba* (sermon) and to do the '*Jum'ah Salat*' or Friday prayer.

Khutbah: Sermon.

Madrasah: A madrasah is an Islamic religious school.

Masjid: Mosque. (Pl. Masajid).

Murabitun: A Sufi movement.

Muslim: A person who accepts Islam as his or her way of life.

Naqshbandi Tariqa: A sufi religious order

Nikah: Marriage ceremony.

PBUH: Peace be upon him, used whenever the name of Prophet Muhammad is read or heard.

Qur'an: The book of divine guidance and moral direction for mankind considered by Muslims as the original Arabic verbal text to be the final revelation of God

Ramadan: The ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Fasting is obligatory during this month for all Muslims except for certain exemptions

Raqsor hadrah: Circular dance of Spanish Sufi orders.

Sadaqa: Anything given away in charity for the pleasure of Allah.

Salafi: A movement advocating a return to a shari'a-minded orthodoxy that would purify Islam from unwarranted accretions, the criteria for judging which would be the Qur'an and hadith.

Shahadah: The declaration of faith in Islam the meaning of which is 'There is no god but God (Allah) and Muhammed is His messenger and servant.'

Shadhili: A Sufi movement

Shia: Is the second largest denomination of Islam, after Sunni Islam. The followers of Shia Islam are called Shi'ites or Shias.

Sufi: Sufism, or *Tasawwuf* as it is known in the Muslim world as Islamic mysticism. Sufi orders (*Tariqas*) can be found in Sunni, Shia and other Islamic groups. Sufism can be described as total dedication to God and disentanglement from the pleasures of this world through worship.

Tariqa: An Islamic religious, usually Sufi, order.

Ummah: Community, or nation, is a special name given to Muslim brotherhood and unity. The Qur'an refers to Muslims as 'the middle nation' (Umma Wasat) a unique characteristic of the Islamic community which has been asked to maintain equitable balance between extremes, pursue the path of moderation and establish the middle way.

Umrah: The lesser pilgrimage which can be performed any number of times throughout ones lifetime.

Wali: A guardian.

Zakah: Literally means 'purification' and refers to the mandatory amount that a Muslim must pay out of his property. The detailed rules of zakah have been laid down in books of Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence).

Zawiyas: An Islamic religious school or monastery, roughly corresponding to the Eastern term "madrassah."

Bibliography

Abbas, T., (ed) *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, London: Zed Books 2005

Abdullah, A.L., 'Understanding Conversion: Bridging the Two Selves'
<http://www.islamfortoday.com/abdullah06.htm>

Adnan, A., *New Muslims in Britain*, London: Ta Ha 1999

Ally, M.M., 'History of Muslims in Britain 1850-1980, MA Thesis, University of Birmingham 1981

Allievi, S., The Shifting Significance of the Halal/Haram Frontier: Narratives on the Hijab and other issues, in van Nieuwkerk (ed) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas, Austin 2006

Ansari, H., 'The History of Muslims in Britain/ 1800 to the Present
C. Hurst &Co., London, 2004

Anway, C *Daughter of Another Path: Experiences of American Women
Choosing Islam*' Lee's Summit, MO: Yawna Publications 2000

Baker, A.H., 'Countering Terrorism in the UK, PhD Thesis, University of Exeter 2009

Barro, R., Hwang, J., McCleary, R.M., 'Religious Conversion in 40 Countries,
Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion Vol.49 Issue 1 Wiley Online Library
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01490.x/pdf> 2010

BBC History of Islam in the UK, 2009
www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/uk_1.shtml

Birt, Y., 'Building New Medinas in these Sceptred Isles' Q News no. 343-4,
May/June 2002 www.yahyabirt.com

Birt, Y., 'Lies, Damn Lies, Statistics and Conversion!' Q-News no. 350 October
2002 www.yahyabirt.com

Birt, J., 'Locating the British Imam: The Deobandi Ulama between Contested
Authority and Public Policy Post 9/11 in J. Cesari and S. McLoughlin (Eds),
European Muslims and the Secular State, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Aldershot,
UK and Burlington USA, 2005

Birt, Y., 'We Muslim Converts are not Traitors in your Midst, *The Spectator*, 19,
August 2006

Birt, Y., 'The Veil and the Limits of English Tolerance' 2006
www.yahyabirt.com/?p=36

- Birt, J., 'Good Imam, Bad Imam: Civic Religion and National Integration in Britain post 9/11, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 96 No. 4 pp687-704 2006
- Birt, J., Abdullah Quilliam: Britain's First Islamist? www.yahyabirt.com/?p=136, 2008
- Bowley, G., 'New Islam in an Old English Town', *New York Times*, 7.11.05 www.nytimes.com/2005/10/30/world/europe/30iht-islam2.html?_r+1&page=wanted=2
- Brice, M.A.K, *Assimilation and Alienation in a Multicultural Society – Non-visible minorities: Lessons Learnt from indigenous converts to Islam in the United Kingdom*, presented at Citizenship, Security and Democracy, International Conference, Istanbul, Turkey, September 2006
- Brice, M.A.K, 'Sleepwalking to segregation or wide-awake separation: investigating factors influencing choices of location among White British Converts to Islam,' *Global Built Environment Review*, Vol. 6 No 2, pp18-27, 2007
- Brice, M.A.K, 'An English Muslim in Search of an Identity,' Hart, C (Ed) *Approaches to Englishness: Differences, Diversities and Identities*, Kingswinford :Midrash Publishing 2008
- Brice, M.A.K., 'Media Representations of the White British Converts to Islam', presented at *Representing Islam: Comparative Perspectives*, Manchester, September 2008
- Brice, M.A.K., 'White British Muslims – a minority within a minority: constructing a demographic and socio-economic profile', presented a Religion, Landscapes and other Uncertain Boundaries, BASR 2009 Annual Conference , Bangor, September 2009.
- Brice, M.A.K., 'A minority within a minority: identity problems for white English converts to Islam,' presented a Studying Contemporary Islam in the UK, Study organized in conjunction with the BSA Sociology of Religion study group and the Muslims in Britain Research Network, London January 2010
- Bunting, M., 'The new anti-semitism,' *The Guardian*, 3 December 2007 www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2001/dec/03/race.world accessed 11.05.10
- Bushill-Matthews, L, 'Welcome to Islam – a convert's tale,' Continuum, London & New York, 2008
- Chande, A., 'Islam in the African American Community: Negotiating Between Black Nationalism and Historical Islam,' *Islamic Studies* 47:2 pp221-241 2008
- Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 'Islamophobia issues, challenges and action,' Trentham Books, Stoke on Trent and Sterling UK 2004

- Compton, N., 'The New Face of Islam' Evening Standard 15 March 2002
- Cooke, R., 'Free Radical,' The Observer' 6 July 2008
www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/jul/06/women.features4/print
- Crain, W.C., Theories of Development, Prentice Hall 1985
- Dannin, R., 'Black Pilgrimage to Islam,' Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002
- Edgar, T., Continuing Conversion: a personal journey in Lamb, C and Darrol Bryant, M., (ed)s Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies, Cassell, London 1999
- Elliott, A. 'Between Black and Immigrant Muslims' An Uneasy Alliance, The New York Times (March 11 2007)
www.nytimes.com/2007/03/11/nyregion/11muslim/html
- Flintoff, J.P., 'A funny thing happened on the way to the mosque,' The Sunday Times, May 23 2010
- Franks, M, 'Crossing the borders of whiteness? White Muslim women who wear the hijab in Britain today,' Ethnic and Racial Studies, Volume 23 No.5 September 2000 pp. 917-929
- Geaves, R., 'Sectarian Influences Within Islam in Britain - with reference to the concepts of 'ummah and community', Community Religions Project, University of Leeds 1996
- Geaves, R., Islam in Victorian Britain: The life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam, Kube Publishing, Markfield 2010
- Gerholm, T., 1988, 'Three European Intellectuals as Converts to Islam: Cultural Mediators or Social Critics?' in, The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe, ed. T. Gerholm & Y.G. Lithman, pp 263-278, Mansell, London
- Gudron Jensen, T., Religious Authority and Autonomy Intertwined: The case of converts to Islam in Denmark, The Muslim World, Vol.,96, 2006 pp 643-660
- Gilliat-Ray, S., Muslims in Britain: An Introduction, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010
- Haddad, Y.Z., The Quest for Peace in Submission: Reflections on the Journey of American Women Converts to Islam, in van Nieuwkerk, K., (ed) Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West, University of Texas Press, Austin 2006
- Hellyer, H.A., British Muslims: Past, Present and Future, The Muslim World, Vol.97, No.2 pp.225-258

Hendersen, L., From Suffolk to Saudi, 2009 www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/content/articles/2009/05/05/evelyn_cobbold_feature.shtml

Hermansen, M., 'Roads to Mecca: Conversion Narratives of European and Euro-American Muslims' in *Muslim World* 89 (1) 56-90

Hermansen, M., Keeping the Faith: Convert Muslim Mothers and the Transmission of Female Muslim Identity in the West in van Nieuwkerk (ed) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2006

Haleem, H.A., 'Experiences, Needs and Potentials of New Muslim Women in Britain,' in *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*, ed. H.Jawad and T. Benn, pp91-105, Leiden, Brill

Hussain, D 'British Muslim Identity in Seddon, M.S., Hussain, D., & Malik, N., *British Muslims Between Assimilation and Segregation*, pp.83-118., The Islamic Foundation, Markfield 2004

Ismail, Y., 'The Challenges Faced by Converts to Islam in Leicester', unpublished dissertation, B.A in Islamic Studies, University of Birmingham (2009)

Islam, Y 'White, Weird and Wonderful'
www.muslimwakeup.com/main/archives/2004/12/002238print.php

Köse, A., 'The Journey for the Secular to the Sacred: Experiences of Native British Converts to Islam', *Social Compass* 46 (3), pp 301-312, 1999

Köse, A., 'Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts. London and New York: Kegan Paul International, Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1996

Köse, A and Lowenthal, K. 'Conversion Motifs among British Converts to Islam' *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10 2000 101-10

Lakhdar, M, and Vinsonneau, G, Apter, M.J., Mullet, E., 'Conversion to Islam Among French Adolescents and Adults: A Systematic Inventory of Motives', *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 17 (1), pp 1-15, 2007

Lewis, P., *Islamic Britain, Religion, Politics and Identity among British Muslims*, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., London & New York

Lamb, C and Darrol Bryant, M (Eds), *Religious Conversion – Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, Cassell, London & New York

Luckmann, T., 'The Religious Situation in Europe: the Background to Contemporary Conversions', *Social Compass*, 46 (3), pp 251-258, 1999

- Maslow, A.H., *Towards a Psychology of Being*, Third Edition, John Wiley & Sons, New York
- Mattar, N., *Islam in Britain: 1558-1682*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998
- McClure, J., & Collins, R., (eds) *Bede the Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Meeting Point, The Newsletter of the New Muslims Project, 1998 no.14 p2
- Murad, A.H., 'British and Muslim?' www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/british.htm accessed 28.04.10
- Murad, A.H., *Ward the Pirate*, 2003, www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm.ward.htm
- O'Neill, B., 'Tory Terrorists?' 16 August 2006 www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/aug/16/tory/terrorists/print accessed 11.05.10
- Poston, L., *Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam*, New York: Oxford University Press 1992
- Qwidi, M. al- 'Understanding the Stages of Conversion to Islam: The Voices of British Converts' PhD thesis, University of Leeds 2002
- Rambo, L.R., '*Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change*', *Social Compass* 46 (3) pp 259-271, 1999
- Rambo, L.R., & Farhadian, C.E., *Converting: stages of religious change*, in Lamb, C and Darrol Bryant, M (eds) *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, CASSELL, London & New York 1999
- Rambo, L.R. *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1993
- Reddie, R., '*Black Muslims in Britain: Why are a Growing Number of Young Black Men Converting to Islam*', Lion Hudson ISBN 978 0 7459 5320 5
- Reddie, R., 'Face to faith – We should understand, not fear, the rise in black conversions to Islam,' *The Guardian* 12 December 2009, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/dec/12/black-conversions-islam... accessed 11.05.10
- Roald, A.S., '*Women in Islam- The Western Experience*,' Routledge 2001, London
- Roald, A.S., '*New Muslims in the European Context*', Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands 2004

Roald, A.S., *The Shaping of Scandinavian Islam: Converts and Gender Equal Opportunity*, in van Nieuwkerk (ed) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2006

Roberts, N. *'From My Sister's Lips'*, Bantam Press, London, 2005

Rosser-Owen, D., *The History of Islam in the British Isles: An Overview*, www.members.tripod.com/~british_muslims_assn/history_of_islam_inb_the_b_i.html

Runnymede Trust, *'Islamaphobia a challenge for us all'* 1997

Sears, N., *'Unmasked: the veiled white Muslim convert whose great grandmother was a suffragette'*, MailOnline, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-425442/Unmasked-veiled-white-Mulsim-con... accessed 11.05.10

Smith, L., *'More switch to faith'*, 16 July 2005., www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2005/jul/16/religion.july7 accessed 11.05.10

Soanes, C., & Stevenson, A., (eds) *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Eleventh Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004

Sookhdeo P., *'The British Muslim Community in February 2005'*

Stewart, G. *'The King who wanted Shariah England'*, *The Times*, 16.02.08 accessed 17.06.10
www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/graham_stewart/article3378885.ece

Sultan, M., *'Choosing Islam: a Study of Swedish Converts'*, *Social Compass* 46 (3), pp 325-335, 1999

The Guardian, *'From scholarship, sailors and sects to the mills and mosques'*, 18th June 2002 www.guardian.co.uk/2002/jun/18september11.religion/print accessed 11.05.10

The Guardian, Question time, *'Islam is one of the world's great religions, not a cult: Yahya Birt, son of Sir John, on faith, family and the people who think he's a 'crank'* 23 November 2006
www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/nov/23/religion.uk/

The Independent., *'Forgotten champion of Islam: One man and his mosque'*, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/forgotten-champion-of-islam-one-... accessed 11.05.10

Wohlrab-Sahr, M., *Symbolising Distance: Conversion to Islam in Germany and the United States*, in van Nieuwkerk, K., (ed), *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, University of Texas Press, 2006, Austin

Van Nieuwkerk, K (Ed), '*Women Embracing Islam – Gender and Conversion in the West*', University of Texas Press, 2006, Austin, Texas

Wagdi, R.G., Mini English/Arabic and Arabic/English Dictionary, Librairie du Liban Publishers, Beirut 1996

Wohlrab-Sahr, M., '*Conversion to Islam: Between Syncretism and Symbolic Battle*', *Social Compass* 46 (3) pp 351-362 1999

Young, M, 'Frustrations of a Muslim Convert,' November 2000
www.islamfortoday.com/frustrations.com accessed 28.04.10

Mosques in the United Kingdom' (with Sophie Gilliat-Ray, University of Cardiff) in Stefano Allievi (ed.) *Conflicts over Mosques in Europe: Policy Issues and Trends* (Alliance Publishing Trust, 2010).

Zebiri, K, '*British Muslim Converts, Choosing Alternative Lives*', Oneworld Publications 2008, Oxford

Reports

De Montford University, Preventing Support for Violent Extremism through Community Interventions: A Review of the Evidence Rapid Evidence Assessment –

Change Institute, Summary Report, 'Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities,' Department of Communities and Local Government, March 2010

www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/1203896.pdf

Community Cohesion Executive Group, 'Leicester's Community Cohesion Commissioning Plan www.oneleicester.com/leicester-partnership/about-us/stronger-communities/community-cohesion/community-cohesion-key-documents/

Conflicts over Mosques in Europe: Policy issues and trends by Stefano Allievi, Alliance Publishing Trust, London, 2009

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Dame Anne Owers, Muslim Prisoners' Experiences, www.justice.gov.uk/inspectors/hmiprisoners/doc/Muslim_prisoners_2010_rps.pdf June 2010

Leicester City Council, Leicester Partnership, One Leicester: Preventing Violent Extremism through Mainstream Moderation
www.oneleicester.com/leicester-partnership/about-us/stronger-communities/mainstreaming-moderation/

Leicester's Community Cohesion Strategy 2009-2014 (October 2009 Final Draft)

Office for Public Management, 'Literature review of attitudes towards violent extremism amongst Muslim communities in the UK
Department of Communities and Local Government March 2010

Open Society Institute, At Home in Europe Project: 'Muslims in Leicester,'
2010

Preventing Violent Extremism – Winning hearts and minds
Department of Communities and Local Government 2007

Preventing Violent Extremism – Next Steps for Communities
Department of Communities and Local Government, London 2008
www.experiencecorps.co.uk/faithleaders.asp

Roberts-Thompson, T., 'The Demographics of Leicester,' Leicester City
Council, 3 July 2009

Websites

Muslim Burial Council of Leicester	www.mbicol.co.uk
Brixton Mosque, London	www.brixtonmasjid.co.uk/
Ihsan Mosque, Norwich	www.muslimsofnorwich.org.uk/

Broadcasts

BBC Radio 4, 'Young, Muslim and Black,' broadcast 19th December 2010