

MBRN & the Islam-UK Centre
Cardiff University
9 January 2025

Conference programme

Muslim Converts in Britain and Beyond: Transitions and Transformations

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UNIVERSITY

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Centre for the
Study of Islam in the UK

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1 Welcome

The Islam-UK Centre (Cardiff University) and MBRN (Muslims in Britain Research Network) are delighted to welcome all presenters and delegates to this one-day conference, filled with exciting contributions about Muslim converts in Europe and the transformations they undergo.

This interdisciplinary conference is open to academic scholars, non-academic professionals and practitioners, and members of religious communities.

Through a keynote lecture, parallel sessions and a practitioner panel, this conference showcases contemporary research and practice in relation to Muslim converts in Britain, and identifies topics for future research and practice by addressing the following questions:

- What impact have British Muslim converts had on Muslim communities and wider British society?
- What resources do British Muslim converts use to create progress and change in their own lives, and more widely?
- What are the challenges and needs faced by British Muslim converts in the contemporary context, and how can research help to identify and address these?

We hope you enjoy the conference and your day trip to the capital of Wales.

Best wishes and salaam from the conference committee:

Islam-UK Centre: Sophie-Gilliat Ray, Asma Khan

MBRN: Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, Laura Mora and Qudra Goodall

2 Useful information

Presentation duration

This conference hosts 4 panels (2 x 2 parallel sessions).

A parallel panel lasts 1.5 hours and consists of 4 papers.

Each presentation lasts 15 min., followed by 5 min. Q&A (=20 min. total per speaker).

At the very end of the panel, there is 10 min. for general discussion.

The plenary practitioner panel lasts 1 hour and consists of 4 presentations of 10 min. each. It concludes with a 20 min. interactive Q&A session at the end.

Submitting presentations

If you use powerpoint slides in your presentation, please design it as [accessible](#) as possible, in terms of font, colours and amount of text.

Kindly submit it before 8 January 2025 at 17.00 to a Google Drive folder that you will be granted access to after registration.

Location

The conference takes place at the [Glamorgan Building](#), Cardiff University, UK.

The keynote lecture, practitioner panel and parallel panels take place in Committee rooms 1 and 2.

Seminar rooms 0.86 and 0.81 will be used as prayer rooms.

Food & Drink

Fresh tea/coffee and a (cold) lunch package will be provided.

Any dietary needs, as well as accessibility needs, can be communicated to us through the registration form.

Questions

Send your questions to MuslimsinBritainRN@gmail.com

3 Timetable

Morning schedule

09.30–09.50	Tea/coffee and informal networking	
09.50–10.00	Welcome speech Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Batool Al-Toma and Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor	
10.00–11.00	Keynote lecture Sophie Gilliat-Ray and Asma Khan Transformational: Converts in British Muslim Life	
11.00–11.15	Short break	
11.15–12.45	Parallel Session 1	
	A Past and present	B Family affairs
	Sameeya Maqbool Travel, Islam, and literature: British Muslim women converts and Anglophone modernism	Fatima Barkatulla Changes of heart: Shifts in the impact of wife-first conversion on marriage validity in Islamic law
	Gavin Murray-Miller Performing Islam in France: Philippe Grenier, musulmanité, and French identity in the late nineteenth century	Saleema Farah Burney The special case of Female Muslim converts: Hybridity and cultural navigation in liminal spaces
	Samuel Bartlett Renegades in an Imperial Age	Fatou Sambe Becoming Muslim and raising the next generation
	Luke Wilkinson The balance of modernity and tradition in Muslim converts	Aliaa Dawoud American female converts' experience with Islamophobia
12.45–13.30	Lunch	

Afternoon schedule

13.30–14.30	Practitioner panel	
	<p>Dalia El Ariny “You do your Shahada and then what?” How converts’ needs can inspire change in Islamic institutions</p> <p>Nathan Musa Gubbins Three stages to a Muslim convert’s journey</p> <p>Shelly Pathak Convert British Muslims and the identity question: The need to belong</p> <p>Aadam Muhammad Sons of pioneers: How the children of Windrush migrants led the UK’s first ‘Revert revolution’</p>	
14.30–14.45	Short break	
14.45–16.15	Parallel Session 2	
	A Paths, groups and organisations	B Identity construction
	<p>Iman Dawood Moving beyond conversion: Exploring the long-term trajectories of British converts to salafism</p> <p>Georgina Cardo Liminality and long-term spiritual journeys of Muslim converts: A heuristic enquiry</p> <p>Ferhat Kafali Redefining British-Muslim identity: A case study of the Cambridge Muslim College</p> <p>Muhammad Nabil Interweaving cohesion: Revert-led and pro-revert Islamic charitable institutions in Britain</p>	<p>Anna Grasso Exploring the online experiences of British Muslim converts: Insights from an ongoing research project</p> <p>Halima Rahman Embodying ambiguity and piety in the lives of convert Muslim women in Britain</p> <p>Federica Bucci Turning to Islam: Identity building and space construction by Italian women converted to Islam</p> <p>Qudra Goodall Intergenerational narratives on belonging, ideology and British Islam.</p>
16.15–16.30	Closing remarks Anita Nayyar, Qudra Goodall and Laura Mora	

4 Keynote speakers

Prof Sophie Gilliat-Ray

Professor in Religious and Theological Studies,
Head of Islam UK Centre



My research focuses on the social scientific study of religion in public life in Britain, and especially in public institutions. I have conducted extensive research on chaplaincy, especially in prisons and hospitals, since 1994. I am the Founding Director of the Islam-UK Centre, established in 2005, and am committed to research that promotes understanding of Islam and the life of Muslim communities in Britain. I am currently acting as Principal Investigator, or Co-Investigator, for a number of projects funded by the Jameel Educational Foundation.

Dr Asma Khan

Research Associate in British Muslim Studies



I am a Research Associate in British Muslim Studies at Cardiff University's Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK. I am a mixed methods (QUANT-QUAL) researcher. My research interests include labour market inequalities, migration, and mental health. I enjoy working on co-produced projects with third sector organisations to conduct research that helps people to live healthy, happy and productive lives.

Transformational: Converts in British Muslim Life

In collaboration with the Convert Muslim Foundation (Batool Al-Toma and Anita Nayyar), Sophie Gilliat-Ray and Asma Khan (Islam-UK Centre) are conducting a new study about experiences of Muslim converts in Britain. The aim of this three-year project is to explore if, and how, converts play a role in shaping, or transforming, Muslim communities in Britain by exercising leadership in public and religious life.

In this study, we aim to contribute to the field of research around Muslim converts in Western contexts that focuses on their lives post-conversion. We seek to explore, in detail, the ways in which converts have settled into, and progressed within, their complex and intersectional identities.

We will be considering if, and how, Muslim converts in leadership positions, from a range of professional and ethnic backgrounds, are transforming religious practices and norms in British Muslim communities, and perceptions of those communities in wider British society.

Findings from this project will be shared in a number of ways, with the aim of creating positive impacts for convert and non-convert Muslim communities, including:

- contributing to shifting academic interest in convert Muslims by moving beyond conversion narratives, to experiences of longstanding and established convert individuals and communities;
- shifting public narratives about Muslim converts (such as media representations) away from negative, suspicious, or 'curious' accounts to a more nuanced and detailed understanding of their experiences.

Please find more information on the [project website](#).

5 Abstracts

Panel 1A Past and Present

Sameeya Maqbool

Travel, Islam, and literature: British Muslim women converts and Anglophone modernism

This paper brings together two of my research interests. The first is an interest in a selection of British Muslim women in the 20th century, which includes: Lady Evelyn Zainab Cobbold (1867–1963), the first British Muslim known to perform Hajj; Edith Miriam Spray (1870–1956), wife of Abdullah Quilliam (1856–1932) who founded England’s first mosque, the Liverpool Muslim Institute, in 1889; and Nafeesa Keep (1844–1925), an American convert to Islam who moved to Liverpool in 1895. It will explore how travel was central to encouraging discourses around Islam in 20th century modernist literature.

The second is an interest in the buried presence of Islam within selected works by 20th century modernist writers, namely, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. I shall talk about the importance of rediscovering these often overlooked Muslim women converts, and how attention to literary modernism, via a still-nascent form of scholarship called post-criticism, can enable this rediscovery.

Post-criticism or creative-critical writing is a very new form of literary scholarship which, although readerly and scholarly, is not dominated by argumentation but, instead, deploys various literary devices such as narrative, dialogue, and character. Therefore, the relationship between myself and the texts under investigation is not so much objective and analytical but personal and impressionistic; in other words, I am located not simply outside of the text but also inside as a participant. This is essential in my research as it enables me to draw on my identity—not only as a Muslim from the North West but also as a young woman. There is, then, in this reading a close attention to what might be called a female or feminine Islamic presence within Anglophone modernism.

Sameeya Maqbool is a PhD student in English Literature at Lancaster University. Her research delves into the presence of Islam and its teachings within 20th-century modernist literature.

Gavin Murray-Miller

Performing Islam in France: Philippe Grenier, musulmanité, and French identity in the late nineteenth century

Studies on Muslim converts in the United Kingdom and elsewhere have often foregrounded notions of assimilation and the “indigenization” of Islam within European social contexts. These efforts, scholars have argued, attempted to strip Islam of its putatively “foreign” character and establish a brand of syncretic Islam adapted to Western social mores and religious rituals. Many of these investigations have focused on British converts such as Abdullah Quilliam and Muslims associated with the Woking Muslim Mission located just outside London. However, across the Channel, endeavours to represent Muslim identities in the public sphere frequently revealed a range of different strategies.

This paper will examine the political career of the French Muslim convert Philippe Grenier, who in 1896 won election to the National Assembly to become France’s first elected Muslim public official. Although lampooned in the popular press of the day, Grenier worked tirelessly to present a version of Islam français characterized by orthodox religious practices culled from North Africa. His momentary notoriety emboldened Muslims living in Paris to assert themselves as a “Muslim colony” and call for greater social recognition and acceptance. Unlike British Muslims, Grenier

consciously accented Muslim difference in both his dress and comportment, crafting a persona that expressed a distinct sense of musulmanité that was nonetheless “French” in its attributes.

Performing Islam was an important aspect of convert culture and sought to define a public space and identity for French Muslims at the turn of the century that navigated between claims of loyalty, whiteness, and difference. As the paper will conclude, Grenier and his cohorts complicated concepts of French national identity and assimilation, holding out the prospect of a new social contract applicable to French metropolitans just as much as Muslim colonial subjects.

Gavin Murray-Miller is a Reader in Modern History at Cardiff University. His work has focused on French colonial North Africa, Orientalism, and Muslim politics in the long nineteenth century. His forthcoming book, Muslim Europe: How Religion and Empire Transformed European Society (Lexington Books, 2024) examines the roots of European Muslim political activism and its relationship to imperial culture between 1850 and 1918.

Samuel Bartlett

Renegades in an Imperial Age

The term ‘renegade’ has deep roots in European history, derived from the Latin, ‘renegatus’, to ‘renounce’. By the 16th Century ‘renegade’ or ‘renegado’ was a term almost exclusively reserved for the European Christian that had ‘renied’ their Christian faith and converted to Islam. Through the 20th Century till today the term has retained its wider lexical meaning, expanding to dissidents in all walks of life. As the full effects of industrialisation, secularisation, and industrial scale warfare were felt in the 20th Century European ‘renegades’ sought to challenge the claims upon which Europe’s civilising mission had been based. This presentation will seek to draw out some of the key themes upon which European renegades sought to challenge the basis of Europe’s claims of civilisational supremacy.

Looking at Muslim writers that constituted what can be categorised as a spectrum of subversive thought, I will trace the writings of several Muslim converts who acquired the status of Muslim intellectuals in the late imperial age (1880–1940). These include, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, an English convert to Islam who became the first European Muslim to translate the Quran, Rene Guenon, the French Orientalist and metaphysician, and Muhammad Assad, the Austro-Hungarian Journalist, politician, and Islamic scholar.

I will attempt to situate their thought amidst intellectual currents and thinkers of their age that contributed to their ideas. These include Indian intellectuals such as Muhammad Iqbal and Mahatma Gandhi, and movements: such as spiritualist movements such as the theosophists in Europe and political movements, such as the Khilafat movement in India. From this analysis I will seek to draw out some of the subversive potential of European converts, moving away from a discourse of indigenisation towards one of dissent. In doing so I hope to complicate a narrative of converts as gatekeepers to European societies, asking how conversion acts to challenge fixed and rigid constructions of European identities.

Samuel Bartlett is a third year PhD student at Royal Holloway University of London, where his thesis explores topics such as: the history of Quran translations in Europe and 20th Century Colonial India; Muslim Critiques of European Colonialism; and Sufism in the Colonial era. Prior to his PhD Sam studied MAs in Middle Eastern Studies and Islam in Contemporary Britain at Cardiff and Lund University respectively.

Luke Wilkinson

The balance of modernity and tradition in Muslim converts

Through analysing the thought of past and present British Muslim converts such as Gai Eaton and Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, I will analyse the unique way in which British and European Muslim converts have negotiated the relationship between Islamic tradition and the challenges of modernity. I will first sketch a history of the relationship between Orientalist studies of mystical Islam and the growing interest and conversion to Islam. For instance, I will consider the importance of the work of Louis Massignon and Henry Corbin at the Eranos Circle in the period of the 1930s–1960s; and how the latter related to the World of Islam festival in Britain in 1976.

From this foundation, I will focus on the interaction of Islamic mysticism and European philosophy in Muslim converts such as Gai Eaton and Martin Lings. Using comparative philosophy to compare this to modern born Muslim thinkers like Muhammad Iqbal, I will consider how far Muslim converts in Britain and Europe were able to offer an alternative intellectual negotiation of Islamic mysticism with secular European philosophy. I will end by considering the impact of this intellectual fusion upon born Muslims living in Europe, with a short case study of the impact of the World of Islam Festival upon Muslims in Britain.

I work on Muslim-Christian relations in Malta (1600–1800) as part of my PhD project at the Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge, under the supervision of Professor Justin Meggitt and Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, I also am interested in interfaith practice and dialogue in Cambridge, working as an Honorary Scholar under the Woolf Institute to precipitate better dialogue.

Panel 1B Family Affairs

Fatima Barkatulla

Changes of heart: Shifts in the impact of wife-first conversion on marriage validity in Islamic law

In 2001, the European Council for Fatwa and Research contradicted the majority opinion of traditional Islamic schools of law by issuing a fatwa (legal decree) ruling that any female convert to Islam whose husband had not converted may “remain with him, allowing and enjoying full conjugal rights, if he does not prevent her from exercising her religion and she has hope in him reverting to Islam.” This paper interrogates that fatwa in light of classical jurisprudential debates, examining its reception by three British shari’ah council judges of both a conservative and a pragmatist bent. I analyse data from the purposive sampling of 37 women whose husbands were non-Muslims at the time of their conversion and from in-depth interviews with ten British respondents to investigate these women’s first encounters with Islamic law, the complexities of their experiences, and the social, psychological, and legal ramifications of declaring their faith.

Fatima Barkatulla is a classically trained Islamic scholar who graduated from the Ebrahim College seminary. She has an MA in Islamic Law with Distinction and was awarded the Doreen Hinchcliffe Memorial Prize in Islamic Law from SOAS and a Postgraduate Diploma in Law from King’s College London.

Saleema Farah Burney

The special case of Female Muslim converts: Hybridity and cultural Navigation in liminal spaces

For women converts to Islam, hybridity, the third space and cultural navigation take on a different meaning. Their identity negotiations involve responding to not just a feeling of being disadvantaged by their religious choice, but also by members of their own ethnic group. The barriers to being accepted by the mainstream remain high for converts, causing them to often withdraw into limited social microcosms. Zebiri also reports that ‘sometimes marginalised within the majority Muslim community, converts often inhabit a transitional or liminal space’ (2008:3). From within this space, they can occupy the unique position of cultural mediators, by virtue of being ‘outside’ both non-Muslim communities of their origin, but also the born Muslims of their new religious affiliations.

This study exemplifies the extent to which hybrid identity building can be an especially difficult and complex process for converts. For the women in this case study, their identities have undergone significant change and development, and have done so in conversation with society and also intellectual trends. In line with both Bhabha (1995; 2004) and Brah’s (1996) conception, this process is framed as a positive and proactive synthesis, albeit often fraught with difficulty, resulting in self-actualisation for the converts in the sample under consideration. The end result, however, is

often similar to that of second-generation Muslim women grappling with multiple, and sometimes conflicting, identity constructs; most converts build hyphenated, hybrid identities through which they negotiate life in secular Britain.

This paper gives a clear sense of the daily mediation and juggling being undertaken by second- and third-generation Muslim women converts in Britain, to understand their strategies in the third, diasporic space that help them to overcome the particular difficulties that they face.

I am a sociologist of religion, with experience of working with British Muslim communities. My research interests include 'lived religion' in the West, the sociology of science and religion and research approaches that tackle the increasing populism and division observed in multicultural societies.

Fatou Sambe

Becoming Muslim and raising the next generation

The post conversion period can be a difficult time for converts. They have to navigate their new faith and lives, managing existing relationships with their families and friends, whilst trying to find their way in Muslim communities. It is not uncommon that converts experience negative reactions from non-Muslim family members and friends upon their conversion. This can lead to the straining or ceasing of relationships for a significant amount of time. By not feeling a sense of belonging in the new religious community and having little to no support during this stage, can often lead to isolation and loneliness. It is therefore understandable why converts seek to find their place with other Muslims where they can be themselves, make friends, and learn how to 'be Muslim', especially as they raise a family. Whilst it has been shown that becoming part of Muslim communities can be difficult right after the conversion (LCC report, p.89), for many converts in this study, this remained a struggle throughout their religious journey.

There are new challenges and choices that converts have to make as they start raising their (Muslim) children: the religious education of their children, extended non-Muslim family members, and finding a supportive social environment for both themselves and their children. There are a unique set of challenges for converts who became Muslim when their children were old enough to witness (and understand) their parents' conversion. Not only do they deal with the same issues as most other converts, but their experience is further complicated by having to consider their children, and sometimes, the other parent, often an ex-partner.

In this paper, I will present some of my findings from my research on Muslim Convert families, for which I conducted 46 interviews with convert parents and (adult) children of converts.

Fatou is a final year PhD student at Cardiff University. She holds a BSc in Psychology and Sociology and a MA in Religion and Public Life. Her thesis is entitled 'Converts and the next generation of British Muslims', and her research interests include religious conversion, race, and gender.

Aliaa Dawoud

American female converts' experience with Islamophobia

This study is based on semi-structured interviews with seven female converts, three white converts from Christianity, two white converts from Judaism and one convert from a Catholic/Buddhist/atheist background who is half white and half Japanese. This study argues that the main form of Islamophobia that female converts experience is sarcastic comments from family, co-workers and friends. The sarcastic comments revolve around their observance of Islamic practices, such as refraining from drinking alcohol and eating pork.

The study further argues that converts from Judaism have a considerably different experience with Islamophobia than converts from Christianity. The well documented phenomenon of losing white privilege and being re-racialized as non-white, does not seem to apply to converts from Judaism. This is because they were never racialized as fully white to begin with and therefore, they never enjoyed as much white privilege as white Christian converts. Some converts from Judaism even feel double othered because they continue to be haunted by the legacy of Jewish persecution, while also encountering Islamophobia.

Finally, the study provides an overview of two of the dilemmas that converts face with their extended families. The first one is how many converts subdue their Muslim identity in front of their extended families. For example, one convert only covers her hair using a baseball hat while she is with her family, while another convert considered being ‘a part-time’ hijabi because she felt that she could never wear the hijab around her family. The second one is how converts struggle to emphasize Muslim holidays for their children, while still allowing them to celebrate Christian/Jewish holidays with their extended families to avoid alienating them. In some cases, the reactions of extended family members included some elements of what other researchers have described as accusations of betrayal of their country and/or race.

Aliaa Dawoud is an adjunct Assistant Professor in the Arabic Program at Hunter College and the Media Culture Department at the College of Staten Island. She is a holder of a Doctorate of Philosophy from the School of Media, Arts and Design at the University of Westminster and a Master of Arts in Middle Eastern Studies from The CUNY Graduate Center.

Practitioner panel

Dalia El Ariny

“You do your Shahada and then what?” How converts’ needs can inspire change in Islamic institutions

In February 2022, I conducted ethnographic research among female converts to Islam in London (2022, unpublished master’s thesis). One thought kept coming up, repeatedly, during the weekly meetings I was attending: “you do your Shahada and then what?” (field-notes, 5/02/22). Scholarly work (Moosavi 2015; Sealy 2022) describes the double “in-betweenness” experienced by converts, often “otherised” by both non-Muslims and born Muslims. This became tangible in my interlocutors’ hunger for support and resources that the mosque was not able or willing to provide. The chief imam once came by; with a mockery voice, he threatened to close the weekly converts’ meetings: “you are only chatting here. Quranic classes would do you better” (field-notes, 2/02/22). Murmurs of opposition raised from the sisters: “maybe chatting is what we need” (ibid).

Research on converts’ needs is still developing. Work on the “indigenisation” of Islam (Zebiri 2014, Lahmar 2018) highlights that converts face challenges not relevant to born Muslims. For instance, many of my interlocutors expressed feelings of “guilt” and inadequacy regarding their knowledge of Islam. One sister described the surprise of mosque “aunties” at her using a “prayer app”: “How else would I learn? No one taught me as a child” (field-notes, 2/03/22). Tensions with non-Muslim family’s expectations were also common, as converts navigated cultural and religious identities—for instance, balancing the desire to avoid Christmas celebrations with the wish to enjoy the festive atmosphere of family gatherings (field-notes, 9/03/22).

These experiences highlight a gap in traditional mosque responses. Convert experiences offer an opportunity for change, not only by bridging born Muslim communities and the non-Muslim majority (Roald 2004, Suleiman 2013), but also within Islamic institutions. By addressing converts’ needs, these institutions can develop reflexivity and greater awareness of the socio-political context in which an increasing number of Muslims (born or converted) practice their religious lives.

Dalia El Ariny, PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at SOAS, researches the identities of individuals from mixed-faith backgrounds in the UK. Her master’s thesis explores female conversion to Islam in London. She is the founder of MyMixedHeritage, a small organization which supports interfaith families. Her work combines academic research and community involvement, aiming to foster broader social impact.

Nathan Musa Gubbins

Three stages to a Muslim convert’s journey

In the last decade there has been a rise in services which look to help the growing number of Muslim converts in the UK. Many of these services provide the foundational knowledge for new Muslims such as learning about the five pillars of the faith as well as organising social events especially during the month of Ramadan. However, there is a lack of adequate support in dealing with the needs and challenges for Muslim converts in Britain specifically for those who have outgrown the 'new Muslim' stage.

One explanation for this is a lack of understanding regarding the different stages of conversion. This presentation would look to argue the theory that there are three-stages to a Muslim convert's journey with each stage being evidenced through case studies. The initial stage occurs from the 'shahada' to around 2 years while the second stage starts from 3 years until 10 years. The final stage is around 10 years plus in a Muslim convert's journey.

Each stage has unique benefits as well as challenges that would need to be supported. For example, a Muslim convert who has entered Islam in the last year would require different services to a Muslim convert five years in their faith. Currently, the majority services in the UK that aim to assist new Muslims whether led by born Muslims or converts themselves specifically focus on the initial stage in a convert's journey. As a consequence, there is a lack of understanding in how to support the needs of converts that are further along in their journey as a Muslim and for many this lack of support leads them to distance themselves from practicing the faith.

Nathan leads the New Muslim services at the East London Mosque all the while completing his PhD in Islamic law at the University of Exeter. As a convert of 12 years, Nathan is passionate about building a supportive community which assists converts to feel settled in their faith.

Shelly Pathak

Convert British Muslims and the identity question: The need to belong

Human-beings require a basic need to belong, and social identity is connected to a sense of belonging. Feeling out of place can set off a fight-or-flight reaction, which, if persistent, can have detrimental health repercussions, physically, mentally and spiritually. In the context of British converts to Islam, as each path into the religion is exceptionally unique, there are no basic or suggested guidelines to handle the change associated with adopting a new religion, and often modification in lifestyle choices which can be conflicting with existing paradigms. This adjustment further becomes intricately nuanced with the involvement of friends, family and working relationships.

Whilst converts embrace the religion, they aim to retain the positive parts of their 'former' self and thus can initiate the beginning of the identity inquiry. The common theme amongst the limited published literature regarding this topic is that most often, converts also get lost in between culture and religion and that interferes with the identity and indeed the religion itself. According to an ethnic framework and lens, they are viewed as existing "in-between" the two, neither one nor the other. This raises a key question of how to tackle the issue with identity and sense of belonging amongst converts, especially in the Western world.

This talk addresses the fundamental real life perspective research that should be conducted, both at a local, national and international level to facilitate the creation of a basic guideline framework, free of cultural bias, to help converts navigate their journey through Islam.

I work in Health Research Operations, with a background in genetics and rare disease. I have been a convert for over 12 years. I am passionate about giving back to the Muslim Community, especially those who have come to the religion with very little support.

Aadam Muhammad

Sons of pioneers: How the children of Windrush migrants led the UK's first 'Revert revolution'

The 1960s saw a tremendous sum of changes happening throughout the UK. Breakthroughs in gender politics, race relations and a booming economy were constant features of this decade. One oft-overlooked fact of this period was the

birth of 1000's of children across the country, those being, the progeny of Windrush migrants from The Caribbean and Africa since 1948. They were the first generation who would have full equality, opportunity and access to all the UK offered.

Yet, these children, filled with such hope and optimism, found a system that treated them much less than equal and actively suppressed them. Much of this eventually led to a deep lack of identity, direction and self worth. Through iconic Black figures such as Muhammad Ali, our 'older brothers' began to subsequently gain a fleeting insight into this 'new religion' called Islam and also a sense of racial pride that had been denied them.

The seminal 1977 TV series 'Roots', once again brought Islam back to them - this time through the story of a Gambian Muslim youth called Kunta Kinteh, which massively inspired them now to fully research Islam and then ultimately embrace it. Through their fervent Islamic discussions with their friends and family, they began to witness a phenomenal number of reversions occurring all over the UK. Little did they realise they had created the first UK nationwide, mass dawah movement of the 21st Century, where an astonishing number of young people of African heritage were embracing Islam in droves. This was the first 'golden age' of national, mass reversion in the UK - only to be followed by yet another one post 1992, as a result of the Spike Lee motion picture movie, Malcolm X.

Aadam Muhammad is a revert 'elder' who at the time of writing this has been a Muslim for almost 41 years. He has been consistently active with Muslim reverts in Leicester and is a driving force behind a number of community initiatives for this segment of the UK Islamic community.

Panel 2A Paths, groups and organisations

Iman Dawood

Moving beyond conversion: Exploring the long-term trajectories of British converts to salafism

Literature on Salafism in the UK has long acknowledged that British converts to Islam compose a substantial part of the British Salafi movement (Hamid 2016, Inge 2016), and that Salafism has played a role in facilitating the conversion of British converts to Islam (Anwar 2022). Most of these works, however, have focused on conversion and initial experiences in Salafi communities. This paper departs from this focus, and instead engages with the growing body of work on conversion as an "ongoing" process that may at times be contested (Korte 2023). It adopts a long-term lens to conversion, as Van Nieuwkerk (2023) has—demonstrating how conversion can include moments of weak belief, religious doubt, and ambivalence.

This paper is based on interviews with both male and female converts from different ethnic backgrounds who joined Salafi circles in London between 1980 and 2010s. It thus reflects on issues of gender and race that do not always receive attention in the literature on British converts. It examines converts' experiences over the years, shedding light on the challenges that British converts have faced as they sought to live their lives according to Salafi discourses. In doing so, it sheds light on our understanding of the challenges and needs faced by British Muslim converts in the contemporary context.

It finds that converts have shared many of the same challenges that "born" Muslims have faced in Salafi circles, as well as their own unique challenges. It pays particular attention to converts' shifting perceptions of religious authority, conceptions of the distinction between Islam and culture, and approaches to gender roles. This paper thus not only adds to our understanding of converts' experiences, but the trends occurring within Salafism and the British Muslim community more generally.

Iman Dawood is currently a Postdoctoral Research and Outreach Associate at the Centre of Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the Department of Government at the London School

of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Her doctoral research examined the emergence, evolution, and impact of the Salafi movement in the UK.

Georgina Cardo

Liminality and long-term spiritual journeys of Muslim converts: A heuristic enquiry

This article explores the lived experience of liminality among converts to Islam through a heuristic enquiry into the state of being “Alaq,” characterised by inner conflict and transformation, particularly concerning identity formation, psychological impasse, and spiritual development (*tazkiyat-un-nafs*). Drawing on both Islamic and Western psychological perspectives, the research presents original findings from a convert to Islam, whose doctoral study titled “A Heuristic Enquiry of Being “Alaq,” Suspended in Liminality as a Convert to Islam” (Cardo, 2024) offers deep self-enquiry into the challenges faced by converts, providing insights into integrating Islamic practices within psychotherapeutic frameworks.

The methodology employed is heuristic enquiry, chosen for its resonance with both the experiential nature of the study and the spiritual objectives of *tazkiyat-un-nafs*. Through immersive phases of self-reflection, including immersion, incubation, illumination, and creative synthesis, the researcher engaged in personal religious practices such as prayer, meditation, and supplication. This process facilitated a profound exploration of both the researcher's and co-researchers' experiences, revealing nuanced understandings of liminality and psycho-spiritual transformation.

The conclusions highlight the parallel processes between the liminality of religious conversion and the journey through heuristic enquiry, demonstrating how these experiences can foster both personal healing and professional development. The research underscores the critical role of converts as “bridge builders” in multicultural and interfaith contexts and advocates for the utilisation of heuristic enquiry by Muslim psychotherapists to deepen self-awareness and authenticity in their practice. This study contributes to the evolving field of Islamic psychology by illustrating that the pursuit of knowledge and well-being benefits profoundly from a harmonious blend of rigorous academic enquiry and committed personal embodiment of *tazkiyah* principles, thereby promoting holistic healing and enriched understanding across diverse contexts.

Dr Georgina Cardo is a lecturer in Counselling & Psychotherapy at the University of Salford, United Kingdom and is a qualified BACP-accredited psychotherapist. She lives in Manchester with her husband and their four children. She completed her PhD in Psychology with Metanoia Institute and Middlesex University, a joint programme.

Ferhat Kafali

Redefining British-Muslim identity: A case study of the Cambridge Muslim College

The CMC represents one of the most pivotal—arguably the foremost—Muslim educational institutions in Europe. It signifies a critical development in the intellectual self-articulation of British Muslims and serves as an inspiration for comparable institutions internationally. By offering access to the intellectual heritage of the Islamic tradition from within the tradition itself, the CMC allows young British Muslims to engage with their cultural and religious heritage without the necessity of studying abroad or relying on predominantly external, often Western-centric, perspectives. This approach marks a significant turning point in the evolving self-definition of British Muslims. The CMC seeks recognition as a British-Muslim institution, thus providing a concrete framework for a distinct British-Muslim identity.

A notable aspect of the CMC is the substantial presence of Muslim converts among its core team, a reflection of an emerging new understanding of Muslim identity in Europe. This development reorients the perception of Muslims from that of foreign individuals—primarily associated with the Middle East—to members who are integral to the fabric of British society. In this respect, the CMC contributes pioneering work, generating valuable insights and attracting emulation on an international scale.

In my presentation, I aim to present the findings of my research to date, with particular emphasis on the CMC's influence in reshaping the discourse and collective understanding of Muslim identity within the British context.

I completed my Bachelor's degree in Sociology and Islamic Theology at the University of Münster, with a study exchange at Leiden University. I am now pursuing an MPhil at the University of Cambridge, dedicating my thesis to investigating the social impact and role of the Cambridge Muslim College.

Muhammad Nabil

Interweaving cohesion: Revert-led and pro-revert Islamic charitable institutions in Britain

The Qur'an upholds the heightened status of reverts to Islam by designating a portion of Muslim obligatory charities (Q9:60) in support of converts who might become financially insolvent particularly due to alienation, social isolation or cultural ambivalence, known to occur even in affluent countries like Britain. A high prevalence of these hurdles drives Muslims including converts to survive more meaningfully by enlivening their faith through setting up initiatives like charitable institutions to cater not only to converts, but also going beyond and address the wider society. By far, these charitable foundations established by and catering to reverts have remained underexplored in research.

Well-known for benevolence, British Muslims donated over £2.2 billion in 2023. Unlike charitable donations, the impact of charitable initiatives for convert/revert Muslims, particularly those led by converts themselves, are not quantifiable. Although their roles are known in addressing the unique and financial needs of new Muslims, fostering community integration and challenging stereotypes, the full breadth of their societal contribution from within the charitable landscape has not been studied.

By analysing the Charity Commission and charities' website data, this research takes a fresh look at around 50 revert-centric charities to map the field of their impact on British society. Preliminary analyses reveal overarching themes such as supporting reverts, tackling domestic issues, confronting Islamophobia, extending interfaith and humanitarian outreach, expanding charitable giving, revitalising traditional practices, raising awareness of Islam and promoting Islamic scholarship. Findings suggest that a strong focus on community engagement and social cohesion enables convert/revert-centric charities to promote a narrative of Islam that resonates with British values of inclusivity and public service.

Muhammad Nabil is a PhD Candidate at SOAS, University of London. His research, under the supervision of Prof Muhammad Abdel-Haleem PhD OBE, examines contemporary practices of British Muslim Charities and their similitudes to Qur'an, sunnah and generations of Islamic charitable traditions.

Panel 2B Identity construction

Anna Grasso

Exploring the online experiences of British Muslim converts: Insights from an ongoing research project

In this presentation we wish to share some initial results from the CHANSE-funded DigitIslam project. Digital Islam Across Europe (DigitIslam) is a multi-country research project analysing how Online Islamic Environments (OIE) shape Muslims' social and religious practices in diverse European contexts. It involves research teams working across five European countries: the United Kingdom, Poland, Sweden, Spain, and Lithuania.

This presentation is based on qualitative interviews conducted as part of the UK leg of the project. Our focus will be on the biographies and online experiences of two individuals, both of whom identify as "converts" (or reverts) to Islam—one a content producer and the other a content user. We aim to explore how their convert identity shapes their online practices and experiences. In the case of the content producer, we will focus on how his convert identity enhances his role as an online religious authority. In the case of the user, we will centre on how his religious conversion fostered a digital rebirth.

Anna Grasso earned her PhD from SciencesPo Aix-en-Provence in 2018. Her research focused on Islam's institutional and political place in Tunisia (2011-2017). She also carried out fieldwork in France on issues tied to religious authority, religion and public policy, religion and gender (2016-2022). Anna is currently a Post-Doctoral researcher for the DigitIslam project (<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/digitalislameurope/>), working on web-archiving methods as well as on UK-focused quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis.

Halima Rahman

Embodying Ambiguity and piety in the lives of convert Muslim women in Britain

This paper draws from the findings of my doctoral research to intricately explore the stories of three Muslim female 'converts', Hanna, Lana and Sara, and their tenuous journeys of embracing a visible Muslim identity in Britain. Much research looking into the experiences of convert Muslims in Britain has captured the challenges of racialisation, specifically one of which the privileges of whiteness are replaced with experiences of anti-Muslim hostility, thus highlighting the necessity to fully grasp the complexity of Muslims experiences of Islamophobia.

Whilst this paper certainly probes into the insidious ways in which White Muslim women experience anti-Muslim hatred, I aim to elucidate to the spiritual struggles of embodying an Islamic identity and how this is navigated alongside experiences of racialisation white Muslim women come to encounter. The task of this paper is to then explore the notion - 'ambiguous piety': a state of engaging in a series of techniques of a pious self-making to self-fashion and articulate their responsibility and commitment to Islam; and how this is adopted to deal with the hostile situations they find themselves in.

Bridging Saba Mahmood's work on the 'politics of piety', specifically the notion of 'piety' to frame the embodiment of an ethical self, along with Goffman's micro-social interaction theory to place the different ways performances of piety are managed across various spatial and relational contexts. I argue that when crossing the borders of 'whiteness' and stepping into uncharted territories of 'hypervisibility', convert Muslim women seek to utilise 'ambiguous piety' as a way of navigating conversational, relational and spatial interactions with Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Dr. Halima Rahman is an early career academic, she graduated in December 2023 with a PhD in Sociology where her doctoral research titled: "A Feminography of Muslim Women's Experiences in Greater Manchester: Locating Identity, Agency, and Resistance to the Triple-Bind oppression of Racism, Sexism, and Cultural Patriarchy". During her time at Liverpool University, she worked as a Teaching Associate in Sociology, Criminology and Social Policy. She has been awarded as an Associate Fellow in Higher Education (AFHEA). Since graduating Halima has obtained honorary status at Liverpool and has temporarily covered teaching in the Sociology of Religion. She has also worked as a Research Assistant at Leeds Trinity University, Race institute.

Federica Bucci

Turning to Islam: Identity building and space construction by Italian women converted to Islam

My aim is to explore the spaces—physical and virtual—occupied and experienced by female converts, as well as their process of identity construction. From an initial collection of data, the starting hypothesis developed is that women converted to Islam prefer spaces of exclusively female interaction, especially among women who are not born Muslim: in this way, they feel they can educate themselves in a more complete and equal manner than in more institutional spaces (mosques, Islamic centres). In fact, the data collected shows that within these centres, female converts do not always receive an adequate Islamic education; moreover, they are not always comfortable manifesting their identity as Italian Muslim women.

From this, and from the estrangement that follows, comes the process of deterritorialization of the community, which leads many of these women to turn to online groups to create their own network, in which they can perceive their identity as valid. The question of identity is in fact another key issue in this work: these women embody a compromise of identity, in which the relationship between culture and religion is a main question. This relationship often blurs the boundary daily crossed by female converts, who, precisely through this crossing, define new identities, new spaces of movement and sometimes a new Islam too.

The expected results aspire to fill the partial gap in the academic literature concerning the conversion of women to Islam. The starting hypothesis is that female converts often move away from the spaces they initially frequented, preferring to use other spaces—mostly virtual—in which they perceive their identity as legitimate.

Federica Bucci graduated from the University of Naples 'L'Orientale' with a degree in Asian and African Relations and Institutions, and she is currently pursuing a PhD in International Studies there. Her project concerns Italian women converted to Islam and her research interests are contemporary Islam, Italian Islam and gender studies in the Islamic context.

Qudra Goodall

Intergenerational narratives on belonging, ideology and British Islam

The Murabitun community was an intentional project to build community and establish generations of British Muslims. It is considered the longest-standing indigenous British Muslim community in the UK. Analysed for its global distribution and theoretical stance, it defies standard Sufi movements in the West, claiming a radical difference, that it is an original project rooted in both Islamic and Western traditions. This inculcation of Western framed ideology has been channelled into the propagation of da'wa and the call for 'transition, transformation and change'. It is a multi-scalar, spiritual-political project which aims to transform society and culture through a return to the ethics and ethos of Muslim society and the remaking of political and economic values, practices and relationships characterised by the time of the Prophet Muhammad, heralding a millenarian, Utopian future. However, contained therein is a fracturing, or mix-matched ideals, that tip between the individual, national and global, the past, present and future, demanding slow, piecemeal change (purity) alongside drastic and fast measures (rupture). It is a grappling between oppositions.

This adoption of the convert Muslim way of life has played a significant role in the style of Islam that has attracted and sustained converts' interest and commitment to this community, and more pointedly its transmission across subsequent generations. While many of the 'first-hour' Sufi converts made an active choice to convert, it is their children, who did not make that choice, that are growing up as British Muslims. Children of converts (CCM) inhabit a 'liminal' space, and through looking at where they narrate their experiences, I examine the two-pronged impact of intergenerational and ideological attitudes towards community, family and belonging. The analysis of 'Fresh contact', how each generation approaches and assimilates shared cultural material is useful in unravelling and contextualising agency, identity construction and one's own journey with their faith. These narratives demonstrate that without translation from ideology into first hand experiences, what is left is an absence of meaning. As a result, CCM traverse the socio-religious context and 'lived realities' of this liminal space and as such become vanguards of religious renewal.

Qudra Goodall is an ESRC funded PhD candidate and Associate Tutor at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. Her doctoral research 'Coming into Being' – An ethnography of ethics and change amongst young British-Born Muslim women in Norfolk collates narratives and everyday experiences around belonging, womanhood and representation that reflexively challenge intergenerational and ideological perspectives and reimagine their British Muslim identity. Qudra is part of the collaborative and interdisciplinary RCUK-funded British Muslim Values Project (UEA/BBC), producing a film exploring second-generation British converts. She has a BA Honours in International Politics and Modern Languages (University of Aberystwyth, Wales), and a Research Masters in Social Sciences Research Methods (UEA, International Development).



Roath Park, Cardiff
Photo by Laura Mora