

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 and Asma Khan

MBRN: Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor and Laura Mora

2 Useful information

Presentation duration

This conference hosts 4 paper 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).

This leaves 10 min. for general discussion at the end.

The conference also hosts a plenary practitioner panel that lasts 1 hour and consists of 3 presentations of 15 min. each.

It concludes with a single 15 min. Q&A session for all speakers combined.

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. If for any reason you can't, please come to the room 5 min. early to upload your slides.

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) vegetarian lunch package will be provided.

Attendants with allergies will have their name written on their package.

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 – Chair: Abdul-Azim Ahmed 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 – Chair: Michael Munnik	B Family affairs – Chair: Hanan Basher
	Muhammed Hasanoglu Bridging identities: Exploring the impact and challenges of British Muslim converts through the life of Ahmed Robert Quilliam	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	Fatou Sambe Becoming Muslim and raising the next generation
	Samuel Bartlett Renegades in an Imperial Age: From a discourse of indigenisation towards one of dissent	Amanda Morris New Muslim Support: how research into the identity struggles of children of converts informed our grassroots community building efforts
	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 – Chair: Anita Nayyar	
	<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>	
14.30–14.45	Short break	
14.45–16.15	Parallel Session 2	
	A Salafi and Sufi paths – Chair: Talha Bhamji	B Identity construction – Chair: Asma Khan
	<p>Iman Dawood Moving beyond conversion: Exploring the long-term trajectories of British converts to salafism</p> <p>Ulya Fuhaidah From Theresia to Aisyah: The spiritual journey to become Muslimah and Salafi</p> <p>Georgina Cardo Liminality and long-term spiritual journeys of Muslim converts: A heuristic enquiry</p> <p>Barbara Cecile Denuelle Converts’ Long-Term Spiritual Journeys on the Sufi Path</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>Ferhat Kafali Redefining British-Muslim identity: A case study of the Cambridge Muslim College</p>
16.15–16.30	Closing remarks Anita Nayyar 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 – Chair: Michael Munnik

Muhammed Hasanoğlu

Bridging identities: Exploring the impact and challenges of British Muslim converts through the life of Ahmed Robert Quilliam

Ahmed Robert Quilliam (1879–1953), the son of Abdullah Quilliam, offers a unique lens into the life of early British Muslim converts and their impact on both Muslim communities and broader British society. From his early involvement with the Liverpool Muslim Institute (LMI) to his dual roles as an Ottoman consular official and an active community leader, Ahmed exemplifies the intersections of faith, identity, and diplomacy.

This presentation explores Ahmed Quilliam's efforts to foster community cohesion and represent Muslim interests in Britain. It examines his role in advancing Muslim visibility through diplomatic activities, including facilitating the needs of Ottoman subjects and British Muslims, organizing religious events, and engaging with local communities. Ahmed's story also highlights the challenges faced by British Muslim converts, such as navigating dual identities, financial instability, and political shifts in the Ottoman Empire.

In addressing the conference's core questions, the presentation will discuss the resources Ahmed leveraged—such as education in Istanbul and connections with Ottoman elites—and the resilience he exhibited amid systemic barriers. The session concludes by identifying the need for further research into the nuanced experiences of Muslim converts in diplomatic and community leadership roles, offering Ahmed Quilliam as a case study for broader reflections on identity and belonging.

Muhammed Hasanoğlu is a PhD candidate in Contemporary History at Liverpool John Moores University (2022–2026). His research focuses on the Ottoman political presence in North-West England during the 19th and 20th centuries, specifically exploring Ottoman consuls' interactions with Liverpool's Muslim community and their intelligence activities related to Armenian affairs in Liverpool and Manchester. He previously earned a Master's in International Relations from the same institution and a Bachelor's in History from Fatih Sultan Mehmed Vakıf University in Istanbul. Proficient in Ottoman Turkish, English, and French, Muhammed's research is grounded in extensive archival studies. Additionally, he has worked with the Abdullah Quilliam Society as a researcher, translating historical Ottoman documents and collaborating with scholars to investigate cross-cultural dynamics.

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: From a discourse of indigenisation towards one of dissent

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 – Chair: Hanan Basher

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.

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.

Amanda Morris

New Muslim Support: how research into the identity struggles of children of converts informed our grassroots community building efforts.

This presentation is based on my qualitative research project on adult children of convert women, conducted in 2015-16. At the time, there was a wealth, some may argue an excess, of research conducted on converts to Islam, yet there was—and still is—a lack of literature about converts’ children. The few existing works that did mention children of converts, were mainly investigations into the convert parents’ concern, attitude, or educational methods with regards to their children.

My project sought to address this research gap by focusing on the lived experiences of the children themselves, and exploring how their identities as adults had formed over their childhood and adolescence. Specifically, my study asked how young British Muslims, who are children of converts to Islam, determined their identity, and what factors were constitutive of this process. As such, this study formed the beginning of an emerging field of inquiry.

To build a bridge between research and practice, in this presentation I not only share my research findings but also discuss how these have informed our work at the Cardiff New Muslim Community. I suggest how other such networks might anchor their grassroots practice in similar research being carried out, with a view to supporting the long-term religious nurture and socialisation for future generations of convert-descended British Muslims.

Amanda Morris holds an MA in Islam in Contemporary Britain from Cardiff University, and an MA in Applied Japanese Linguistics from SOAS. For the last decade, she has been deeply involved in the support and mentoring of new converts to Islam, and in 2021 helped to set up the Cardiff New Muslim Community. This grassroots initiative provides social and pastoral support to convert Muslim men and women, and their families. Amanda further teaches Japanese language at Cardiff University’s Language for All programme.

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 – Chair: Anita Nayyar

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.

Panel 2A Salafi and Sufi paths – Chair: Talha Bhamji

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.

Ulya Fuhaidah

From Theresia to Aisyah: The spiritual journey to become Muslimah and Salafi

This project seeks to investigate the experiences of women converting to Islam in Indonesia. Conversion, regardless of the religion, frequently entails distinct obstacles. In the context of my research, my interlocutor encountered two separate challenges: firstly, familial wrath, and secondly, societal outrage. She was originally Catholic but subsequently converted to Salafi Islam. I conducted research with a qualitative approach and in-depth interviews to gather data. The objective is to examine her experiences, thoughts, and behaviors prior to and after her conversion to Islam and adherence to Salafism. I examined my participant's experiences through the lens of everyday religion theory.

Salafi adherents in Indonesia face stigma due to their association with terrorism, radicalism, textualism, and exclusivity. I found that my participant's journey into Islam is nuanced. She encountered obstacles from her family, her fellow Salafi Muslimah, and the Muslim society in Jambi, Indonesia. She had been expelled from her family, as her parents consistently sought to revert her to their prior religion under all circumstances. She encounters persecution in society due to her adherence to the Salafi manhaj, a specific Islamic denomination that tends to support anti-bid'ah (innovation in religion) in Indonesia. Bid'ah is one of the crucial doctrines in Salafi that has become a significant part of the contention between the Muslim community and Salafi adherents in Indonesia. The majority Muslim population in Indonesia shows considerable tolerance towards indigenous traditions assimilated into Islam, including commemorative kenduri (gatherings for deceased relatives), Isra' Mi'raj day (the prophet Muhammad's night journey), Muharram eve (Islamic New Year), Nuzul al Quran day (the revelation of the Quran), and other cultural activities. The societal hostility and campaign anti-bid'ah merely fortify her identity as a Salafi Muslimah.

Ulya Fuhaidah is a lecturer at UIN Sultan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Indonesia. She has been teaching at UIN STS Jambi since 2011. Her specialisation includes Islamic Studies, the Social and Political History of Indonesia, the History of Islam, and Research Methodology. She is presently obtaining a doctoral degree at Coventry University.

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.

Barbara Cecile Denuelle

Converts' Long-Term Spiritual Journeys on the Sufi Path

Whilst literature on conversion includes references to models and stages of conversion (Rambo 1993, Köse 1996, Qwidi 2002, and Roald 2004), the notion of conversion as a lifelong journey of discovery is also present in the literature on conversion to Islam as highlighted in *Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain* (NMP and CCIS 2013). My thesis aims to fill in the gap in the literature on converts' lifelong spiritual journeys through an in-depth examination of how converts relate to the Sufi path as a lifelong journey and an inward quest for meaning. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork within a Qadiri-Shadhili-Darqawi Sufi order which includes numerous converts, some of whom have themselves become shaykhs and teachers of Islam's inward and outward sciences.

My presentation will focus on the experiential dimension of converts' spiritual journeys within the context of the Sufi Path. I will examine how seekers engage with the Sufi concept of experiential knowledge or witnessing (*mushahada*) and why it is a significant means for seekers to understand their spiritual quests for meaning. I will also explore how the Sufi concept of tasting (*dhawq*) is connected to experiential knowledge and examine some of the rich metaphors associated with tasting, such as the metaphor of drunkenness in relation to spiritual states (*hal*) and the metaphor of honey in relation to spiritual stations (*maqam*).

I will reflect on how the inward path of Sufism enables converts to establish deep and meaningful relationships with kindred souls in the form of belonging to a community of seekers and/or through the *murid-murshid* (seeker-guide) relationship. To conclude, I will offer my perspective on the legacy of converts who take on the role of mediators and regulators of Islam's inward and outward dimensions.

Barbara Denuelle is a final-year PhD researcher in Social Anthropology at the University of Kent with an interest in spiritual journeys and spiritual authority. Barbara holds a BA in Social Anthropology and Spanish from the University of Sussex and an MA in Near and Middle Eastern Studies from SOAS.

Panel 2B Identity construction – Chair: Asma Khan

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 Buccì

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.

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.



Roath Park, Cardiff
Photo by Laura Mora