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Why do men convert to Islam in Britain? How do they relate to the heritage Muslim communities in Britain and to other Muslims worldwide? How do they relate to family and friends post-conversion? Does the experience of converting to Islam vary according to race or ethnicity? Why do some prisoners convert to Islam? How does the government's focus on radicalisation affect converts? These are some of the questions this report seeks to answer.

Based on an extended set of conversations held at the University of Cambridge in 2014/5 with male converts to Islam, this report provides a candid narrative of the above and other issues that are raised by conversion to Islam. **Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Male Perspectives** follows on from the huge success of the first report in the series, **Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Female Perspectives** (2013). As an insider account, the report presents the complexity of the experience of conversion through the voices of the converts themselves. This is reflected in the multiple responses that are given to one and the same question, illustrating the diversity within Islam and the unending quest among converts to reach answers that are truthful to their faith in its new native setting.

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# NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION TO ISLAM IN BRITAIN MALE PERSPECTIVES

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Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain • Male Perspectives

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NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION  
TO ISLAM IN BRITAIN  
MALE PERSPECTIVES



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# NARRATIVES *of* CONVERSION TO ISLAM IN BRITAIN • Male Perspectives

## Introduction

Conversion to Islam holds a lot of promise for converts. It signals the configuration of the self in a direction in which spirituality, balance, peace of mind and commitment to an ethical code act as guiding principles that help the convert navigate life with fortitude and a sense of purpose. As truth seekers, converts subscribe to an aesthetic of continuous self-probing and discovery to reach higher levels of engagement with the world in which they live. In this schema, converts understand that man's mastery of his destiny is an ideal that can never be satisfied; hence the need for divine guidance. Turning to Islam is the wilful surrender to God as the source of this guidance. By following this path converts aim to develop an internal order in which God's will and human endeavour are brought into harmony with each other. It is against this abiding background of hope and positive spirit that I present the following commentary.

Conversion to Islam has become a fashionable topic in the public sphere in recent years, but not always for the right reasons. In the West, it has been tarnished by claims of extremism (violent and non-violent), radicalisation and, sadly, terrorism that envelope the image of Islam in the world. It has also fallen victim to the general apathy towards faith in largely secular societies which consider religion as a pre-modern / pre-enlightenment phenomenon that has little validity in a proof dominated world. These facts have affected the public understanding of conversion to Islam in Western societies, causing those who convert to be described by some not only as eccentric misfits, outcasts and rebels but also as muddle-headed renegades, traitors, enemies or members of a fifth-column who have turned their back on their original culture, and a superior one at that, in favour of an amalgam of faith and culture that is alien, primitive and threatening.

This conceptualisation of conversion to Islam is a cause of pain and bewilderment among converts. 'Pain' because it turns the supposed insider of yesterday - I am talking about White converts here - into the outsider of today, threatening in the process to produce a rupture in what most converts see as continuity in their life stories. And 'bewilderment' because it has become a

social reflex that is unthinkingly applied as a 'statement of fact', one in need of little or no proof, in societies that pride themselves on proof as a mode of knowledge production. The socially corrosive nature of this self-contradictory stance is not lost on converts who, as this report reveals, think of conversion to Islam as much a matter of the 'head' as it is one of the 'heart' and 'soul' regardless of the entry point to Islam. For conversion to Islam to take hold beyond the first decisive step of the formal act of conversion, the saying of the *shahadah*, a 'full alignment of the heart, soul and head' is thought to be necessary. But this is easier said than done, not least because of the impeding intervention of heritage culture that might swerve a convert's focus from belief to lifestyle, making conversion to Islam a challenging experience in spite of the joy and spiritual satisfaction it brings.

This tension between rupture and continuity in the converts' experience unfolds with similar pain and bewilderment with regard to their reception by the heritage Muslim communities: the heritage or born Muslims in Western societies. This report highlights how, on this side of the equation, the convert is made to feel as an outsider - at least culturally - who is constantly in need of coaching not just in his new faith and social moorings, but also in matters that extend to the external displays of faith in society. This outsider status compounds the feeling of pain for converts who, as a result, end up in a liminal space of not being completely in, nor being completely out, on both sides of the conversion experience (heritage Muslims and wider non-Muslim communities). Unable and / or unwilling to expunge all aspects of their past or accept all aspects of their present, the convert holds to a rope which is in constant motion in these two directions (past and present), threatening to hobble him in his endeavour to keep his person intact. Imagination, resilience, commitment and a sense of humour may come to the rescue, as this report reveals, but this varies from convert to convert, with some finding the transition to Islam more challenging than others. The present report explores this and other aspects of conversion to Islam through a multiplicity of voices to inform public debate on the topic.

Conversion to Islam is not a templated experience. It has many entry points, some of which are inchoate but all of which are thought to be equally valid. A convert may accept Islam rationally before he embraces it emotionally and spiritually. Or he may embrace it emotionally before he accepts it rationally and deepens his involvement in it spiritually. However, regardless of what the route to Islam may be it is clear that the nesting period for any conversion exercises a defining effect on a new Muslim. Not only does this period offer

bonds of friendship but it may also offer models or anti-models and (mis)directions that affect a convert's outlook on his new faith and later reactions to it, a fact alluded to several times in this report. Music may be a trigger for conversion, in spite of the fact that some Muslims do not approve of music. Art may serve as another trigger, in spite of the fact that, in its representation of human form, art may be frowned upon in some Muslim circles. Both may be considered as examples of creativity that, for some, conflict with Orthodox interpretations of Islam. For others, the creativity inscribed in music and art is fully consistent with the creative impulses of Islam in its exhortation to the believer to reflect on God's creation. Architectural forms are cited as examples of wonder that may lead converts to ponder nature and the universe as the ultimate expressions of cosmic beauty, balance and order on their journey to Islam, what one participant described as the 'sacred architecture of the natural world' which ought to draw all Muslims, both converts and non-converts, into 'aesthetic and spiritual immersion in nature'.

Converts come to Islam through love, marriage, reflection, study, spiritual searching or a combination of any or all of these. For some, tragedy acts as a spur on the road to conversion. For others, personal crises of different kinds may play that role. Some converts are led to Islam through revelatory dreams that offer metaphysical guidance by speaking in a voice that resonates with the internal calling / murmurings of an emergent self, or, as described by one participant at the symposia, 'dreams that seem to know more than the dreamer'. It is a measure of the dominance of the secularist discourse in Western societies that most converts hardly ever express these 'epiphanies' in their conversion experience, to avoid having their journey to Islam questioned by a 'Western mind-set' that does not tend to acknowledge dreams as an important part of life, opting instead to couch their conversion narrative in the language of love and convenience. Instead, marriage to a Muslim wife, rather than conviction and spiritual yearning, may be given as the reason behind a conversion, trading in this regard on what seems like a wide-spread view in society that men who convert to Islam do so for love rather than for any other reason.

While this may provide the new convert with some cultural cover and a foil against further enquiry, it could also save his family - who embark on their own journey of coming to terms with the conversion - from the burden of social stigma, guilt or remorse. Readers may consider this to be a deceitful cop-out, a ruse unworthy of the much-vaunted, high moral ground of the new path a convert had chosen for himself. But converts may justify this by appealing to the value Islam places on maintaining family ties and sparing parents the pain

that an offspring's conversion may cause them as much as possible. The assertive display of conversion, its public visibility, must therefore be weighed against the social benefits of invisibility, at least at the beginning, when friends and family may not be receptive to such display. Participants at the symposia, however, acknowledged that this is easier for male than female converts owing to the importance of particular forms of clothing such as the *hijab* for the latter. As one participant put it, convert women 'fly the flag of Islam with their bodies' in Western societies in ways that convert men are not called upon to do. It is therefore inevitable that narratives of conversion to Islam in Western societies will be gendered to some extent.

In describing any route to Islam converts are aware that narratives of conversion describe what is past and unfolding from the perspective of the present time that, by its very nature, reduces the fluidity and multi-dimensionality of the conversion experience in the act of telling and inscribing in reports of this kind. While this retrospective, 'rear-view mirror perspective' of conversion is inevitable in all narrations, it is nevertheless important to gain access, no matter how impaired, into what makes a person convert to Islam and of the social situatedness of this experience, the challenges and opportunities it poses and the responses and coping mechanisms converts use, individually and in groups, to deal with these challenges. The report that follows provides diverse and sometimes contradictory answers to these issues. This is to be expected in a subject of this kind and may in fact be taken as evidence that it is not possible to construct a blue-print of conversion that can help us predict who will convert and how their conversion may come about and unfold. We just have to accept that an unconstrained kind of variability pervades conversion to Islam, but that the general direction of this process is dominated by a search for meaning - what one convert called 'searching for a home' - as well as a moral and ethical compass that makes life more meaningful and navigable.

As the report reveals, conversions to Islam in prison provide an acute version of this search for meaning in which focus, purpose, self-discipline and peace of mind are sought as an antidote to adversity and as a pathway for a positive and future-oriented reconciliation with a violent past-self that had spun out of control. Conversion is a transformative feature in the lives of many converts in prison, but this vulnerable category of converts can remain vulnerable after release from prison owing to the lack of faith-tailored services by Muslim organisations on the outside. But this search and yearning for self-control finds it equivalent among converts generally in their dealings with what they consider as the excessive materiality of the modern world which puts the self, in a

narcissistic manner, at the centre of the universe, giving it what seems like a free licence to roam for gain, pleasure or desire. Although outsiders may consider Islam as a constraining force in the life of a convert, converts perceive it as a liberating impulse and as a ‘muscular option’ in dealing with the challenges posed by what some consider to be the effete-ness of modernity.

The symposia underpinning this report generated a set of talking points and debates, often spirited but always good-hearted. As may be expected, it is impossible to highlight every talking point in this introduction. Instead, I will pull out some of the major themes (in addition to those that have been highlighted above) which recurred across the symposia. What follows is my take on these themes as the Project Leader and Chair of the symposia. I am of course aware that others at the symposia might not opt for the same selection and / or they may in fact disagree with my take on them. What follows therefore must be treated with caution: the final word is for the report that follows.

One such theme was what one participant called ‘naïve sincerity’. The euphoria of conversion to Islam may be accompanied by excessive enthusiasm / zeal, even zealotry, for the new faith. Seeking the advice of those who the convert considers to be more knowledgeable in his new faith than he is, the convert may favour a streamlined form of Islam that elides the variability of legal rulings and practices that are inherent in the religion. Salafi iterations of Islam are (rightly or wrongly) said to provide such a refuge for some converts who find the stark binaries of *halal* (what is allowed) and *haram* (what is forbidden) – captured in the maxim of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong (*al-amr bi-l-ma‘rūf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar*) – to be a source of comfort. While the search for a strict structure and the elimination of ambiguity at the start of conversion is understandable in producing order and a framework for orientation, it was generally thought by the participants that this stance be reconsidered later to allow for a form of variability that grows from the inside out.

The onset of such an attitude would signal that the convert had started to gain more confidence in his knowledge of the faith with a greater ability to question those who pose as experts in the religion. This transition in the life of a convert is anxiety-inducing for both the convert and his (self-appointed) mentors, especially for the latter who may fear that, by leaving the ‘nest’, the convert may be reneging on his new faith. Converts have been known to be subject to ill-considered advice that mixes life-style (growing a beard or adopting a particular mode of dress), culture (eating a particular kind of food, adopting a new ‘Muslim’ name, or using formulaic ‘Islamic’ expressions when ordinary English

ones will do) and faith, with little discrimination among them. In some cases, converts are encouraged, even pressured, to choose a 'factional' group under the pretext that a generic Islam is not possible, a stance which one participant reported, from personal experience, as 'now that you have eaten curry, you must pick your sect' kind of attitude.

These pressures can take their toll on the new convert who has to contend with estrangement from his old family and friendship networks - making him an intimate stranger - together with his derisive classification as a 'White Paki' ('turning Turk' in an earlier iteration) in a society that treats Islam as an alien, non-native religion. By embracing Islam, a White British convert finds himself in the disconcerting position of an 'insider-cum-outsider' who undergoes the 'immigrant experience' of having to integrate into a society in which, paradoxically, he is already culturally a part. This condition of 'Un/Belonging', as one participant described it, accompanies converts in their post-conversion lives.

Not everyone at the symposia accepted the label of 'naïve sincerity' above. Some felt that 'innocent sincerity' might be a better expression since it captures the element of 'good faith' that, unknowingly, induces a new convert to look for certitude over certainty and information over knowledge. It is a natural tendency for converts to look for models and charismatic leaders, whenever possible, who can guide them on their journey through Islam, although some of these models may in fact be wanting. It was acknowledged that information can be gained from a variety of sources, including the Internet, although some participants at the symposia warned against confusing mass communication with real education. There was also recognition that a convert must be wary of the cult of personality and celebrity status as validating factors in assessing the true worth of the knowledge he receives, although this does not deny that converts may derive inspiration from charismatic leaders and others who can serve as trusted models. Patient and painstaking gradualism is a surer path for converts. One of the participants at the symposia summed this up metaphorically by describing 'Islam as an ocean', adding 'if you dive in, you are going to drown.' Gradualism is essential for a convert to proceed from naïve / innocent sincerity to spiritual adolescence.

Another recurrent theme at the symposia was that of 'White privilege' and the implications this has in conversion to Islam. 'White privilege' refers to the symbolic power that is ascribed to White converts to Islam owing to the social and political meanings associated with their skin colour as socio-cultural markers of identity. White privilege is expressed through the 'proprietary

attitude [or protectionism] of the heritage Muslim community towards the White person who wishes to convert' in ways that are not accorded to converts of other skin tones. In this connection, heritage Muslims may interpret white conversions as a validation of the 'truth of Islam,' or, paradoxically, as an acknowledgement of the superiority of the formerly colonised over their former colonisers. The latter view seems to deny the thesis of White privilege. Be that as it may conversion by White men to Islam unfolds against a historical background in which coloniality, as a force of the past, is acknowledged in order to be defeated. Here the symbolic power of the White convert succumbs to the power of a superior faith to whose culture he must accommodate in his journey through Islam to be fully recognised as Muslim. Instead of being a privilege, 'Whiteness,' at least discursively, is transmuted here into a 'burden' or a 'plight' in a new relationship in which the victor and vanquished exchange places. Some converts accept this as a consequence of the fact that whatever privileges their Whiteness confers on them are considered to be 'unearned,' not to mention the fact that for some non-Muslims White converts 'forfeit' the privileges they have by turning to an inferior religion and culture.

It is therefore not surprising that 'White privilege' may, on the flip side, be experienced by converts as White *deficit* according to which (some) members of the heritage community may expect the new convert to shed his past culture and enter Islam (as though) cultureless. Any attempt by the convert to hold on to or reclaim aspects of his pre-Islamic culture may therefore be regarded as 'cultural apostasy' which could threaten the sustainability of his new faith. While some converts may succumb to this prescription at the start of their conversion to Islam to aid their conversion process, they often grow out of it and move to assert their previous selves by reclaiming their old names, accommodating practices they were told to shun such as Christmas celebrations, attending the funerals of family and old friends or finding legitimate ways to 'inherit' from their parents, against an Islamic ruling on such inheritance, to mitigate offending them.

In this context, one participant described 'self-renunciation' as the 'most poisonous part' of post-conversion life. Converts are aware of this. In a discussion of mosque architecture, one of the participants at the symposia, a young man, expressed the impossibility of coming into Islam cultureless, declaring that it is the cathedral and not the mosque that speaks to his architectural sensibility. Another young participant added that it was Christian, rather than Islamic, architecture that 'had the first claim on his emotional response and sense of belonging' without, however, seeing any contradiction

between this feeling and his being Muslim. This attitude of asserting cultural belonging leads some converts to seek deep rooted accommodations between Islam and British culture, raising the possibility that Islam and Muslims have been natively present in the British Isles since the 8<sup>th</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> century (hence the talk of a 'Celts-Saxon' Muslim heritage in this report) and that, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Liverpool, native White Muslims were not inconspicuous. While the claims about an 8<sup>th</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> century British Islam may not be historically valid, if not in fact entirely fanciful, the sentiment behind them is pretty clear: Islam is not foreign to the British Isles.

Non-white converts, for example those of Afro-Caribbean or South Asian heritage, are excluded from the purview of White privilege. Afro-Caribbeans have a rich Islamic heritage that connects them to its ideals of liberation that go back in history; as one participant from this background put it, 'Islam offered more to people like [me] than Christianity did [in that] it provided more answers to the suffering of black history, to bondage and forced migration'. In spite of this, converts from this background have little or no voice in the Muslim community. They are often offered a racialised form of Islam to accord with their racialized conversion. A participant exemplified this by the way in which converts from this background are 'directed by heritage Muslims to the figure of Bilal, the trusted black companion of the Prophet and freed slave' as a model of the past in the present.

As far as converts from a South-Asian background are concerned, namely those of Hindu or Sikh origin, the challenges are far greater. For a start, converts from this background are the most invisible of all converts. Their physiognomy does not differentiate them from the stereotypical appearance of heritage Muslims of South Asian in the UK. Second, these converts end up being totally ostracised by their families and old social networks who, to this day, recount the bitter memory of old inter-communal conflicts in the Indian sub-continent, including that of 'forced' conversions from Hinduism to Islam under Mughal rule. Third, voluntary Muslim organisations that cater for the needs of this category of converts hardly exist. Finally, the situation for these converts is especially acute when seeking spouses from the same background, being treated by Muslims of South-Asian heritage in particular with huge suspicion and not a small degree of hostility. This situation turns into outright rejection should the marriage end up in separation or divorce, leaving the convert with no one to turn to, having burnt his bridges with his family of origin.

'White privilege' is but one strand in the complex relationship that converts have with the heritage community. This relationship was the most dominant

theme in the symposia: it kept recurring, in one shape or another, throughout the whole project as this report shows. In dealing with this theme participants spoke in a multiplicity of voices, mixing criticism with gratitude, although, as one participant cautioned, the views canvassed at the symposia represented a one-sided picture of the relationship in hand. Apart from the Project Leader and Project Manager (who observed a condition of neutrality), there were no heritage Muslims at the symposia to speak from the perspective of this group (and this would in fact be a good topic for future symposia). The perception of converts among some heritage Muslims as ‘puritanical and unsavoury’ or as not ‘proper’ Muslims must therefore be treated with caution since it represents what converts believe heritage Muslims think of them.

Be that as it may, this perception is countered by a more positive impression which considers converts as better Muslims than those of heritage Muslim background, owing to the fact that they [converts] can separate culture from faith and, as a result, are better able to represent Islam in the public sphere. In addition, converts are said to have chosen Islam instead of inheriting it, as it were, in the manner of heritage Muslims. Converts reciprocate this stance by acknowledging the racism and economic hardship that the early generations of South Asian Muslims in the UK had to endure to keep their faith alive. Building mosques, setting up educational institutions and establishing charitable organisations, heritage Muslims have ensured that Muslims continue to enjoy a modicum of religious and social structures that can cater for the needs of all communities, including converts to Islam. Participants at the symposia were keen to register this debt of duty to heritage Muslims in spite of the critical tone they expressed of some of the practices that exist among members of this community.

In delineating the relationship of converts to heritage Muslims, participants gave thought to what the *ummah* (world-wide Muslim community) meant to them. The majority felt that the concept was too vague and ineffectual to have any real relevance for them, in spite of the fact that they do sympathise with the plight of Muslim communities worldwide. While a Muslim is required to show solidarity with members of his faith, in reality this is not a condition that can be easily or reflexively fulfilled. Solidarity must be self-aware and critical. It must also be subject to ethical considerations that extend beyond the *ummah*. One participant asked if holding one thing in common (one faith) was sufficient ‘to bind together a worldwide community’ of believers. The same convert added that ‘the *ummah* started at home and was, in the first instance, synonymous with the family.’ An Internet-based virtual *ummah* offered feelings

of false closeness. Although not everyone agreed with these views, there was a general feeling that converts must start with their most immediate environment and that they must hold to values which, in their universality, make it incumbent on Muslims to be ethically engaged members of their neighbourhoods with Muslims and non-Muslims.

The well-known metaphor of the convert as a bridge between the heritage Muslim community and native British culture was discussed at length at the symposia. A survey of converts revealed the ubiquitous nature of this metaphor. In spite of this, participants did not accept it uncritically. It was pointed out that this metaphor does not fully acknowledge the diversities that exist among heritage Muslims in Britain and the equally diverse British culture. This perspective on the metaphor shifts our attention from the bridge itself to the gaps that are thought to exist between multiple, criss-crossing parties on all sides. Some participants warned that by choosing to act as bridges, converts may in fact 'lose track of themselves'. In this connection, it was thought that 'since a convert could not ... fit entirely within one of the established communities, [hence the condition of 'Un/Belonging' above] ... it was more important to be comfortable with [oneself] than stuck in the middle.' Some participants believed that a better rendition of this metaphor would be to view converts as part of the bridgehead rather than the bridge itself, leaving the traversing function for multiple parties to fulfil. However, no matter which aspect of the bridge metaphor one favours, it was agreed that discourse is the key concept in activating this multimodal metaphor. This led one participant to assert that 'discourse is the bridge'. A third view preferred to conceptualise converts, 'by virtue of their middle position', as a river 'rolling between two banks'. The metaphor of the rolling river is an appealing one: it captures the formal / abstract continuity of the watercourse while acknowledging the constantly changing content that runs through the river.

Marriage is highly regarded in Islam, being considered half of one's religion. This puts pressure on all converts (male and female) who are directed by heritage Muslims to 'complete their religion' as quickly as possible now that they have embraced Islam. Yet this is easier said than done. Participants at the symposia reported how these same heritage Muslims distrust converts in this sphere; one participant expressed this by saying that 'even your closest Muslim mentor will not welcome the prospect of you marrying one of his female relatives' in spite of the fact that converts are often fetishised by heritage Muslim women as 'ideal Muslim husbands, respectful and not repressive'. The problem becomes more acute when, as reported at the symposia, marriages between

converts may not be successful. Although all converts may find it difficult to find spouses from among the heritage Muslim community, it is reported that Afro-Caribbean converts may be particularly disadvantaged in this respect. This applies to women from this background too, giving more evidence of the racialised view of conversion to Islam among heritage Muslims.

The symposia also explored polygyny, the taking of more than one wife in Islam. The majority of the participants were against it, treating it as a source of instability in family life. In addition, since most people would not be able to satisfy the condition of equality between wives by setting up a separate household for each as demanded in Islam, polygyny should not be practised. Even for those who can fulfil this condition, it was judged to be important for Muslims in Britain to be in tune with 'socially acceptable behaviour' in their country of abode. On the other side, a minority view believed that "if marriage in Islam constitutes half of one's faith, then engaging in polygyny 'turbocharges the reflectivity' that enhances the spiritual life of each partner". In addition, polygyny may also be regarded as an option for career women who do not wish to be the sole partners in a marriage.

Linked to marriage was the question of converts' offspring. Children from this background were reported to suffer confusion when their parents are not 'quite comfortable with their Muslim identity'. Even when parents are comfortable with their identity as Muslims, they may still feel that their children are not as committed to Islam as they are. In schools with a majority of heritage Muslim children, pupils of convert background may suffer cultural dislocation, discrimination and bullying. Their English may also suffer owing to the dominance of languages spoken by heritage Muslim communities, such as Urdu. Considering the sometimes critical attitude of converts towards heritage Muslims, one participant found it baffling that parents of his (convert) background were prepared to expose their children to that same culture. In response, the view was expressed that state schools may not be that much better in terms of behaviour and academic achievement and that some Muslim schools have in fact been very successful academically and otherwise.

Homosexuality generated an intense debate at the symposia. All participants agreed that the practice of homosexuality was not permitted in Islam. Some believed that homosexuality is a lifestyle rather than the result of biological imprinting. If called upon to explain the teachings of Islam on the topic, typically by the media, they agreed that Muslims should be clear and considerate, rejecting phobic tendencies among Muslims as they would do against Islamophobia in society. One of the participants expressed this stance

by saying that Muslims may disagree with homosexuality but they should not discriminate against homosexuals. In the course of dealing with this topic the participants deplored some of the contradictions surrounding this topic among Muslims: the fact that they seem to be more tolerant of sex before marriage, eating pork, consuming alcohol or taking forbidden substances than they are of homosexual practices, although Islam declares all these practices to be equally *haram* (forbidden).

The symposia also dealt with apostasy, although it was not possible to get ex-converts to be present in spite of the Project Manager's extensive efforts to do so. The participants acknowledged that a very small minority of converts do leave Islam. But this is equally true of members of the heritage Muslim community. Converts therefore called for a more nuanced understanding of this matter in the Muslim community where there is often suspicion that converts are vulnerable to de-conversion. One participant described this by saying that "to a born Muslim leaving Islam, the reaction was 'we hope he will come back; to a convert doing the same, the feeling was 'oh, he's gone back to his old ways'". Disengaging from the community or not attending the mosque does not equate with leaving Islam. The general attitude among Muslims should be 'unless someone is explicit in his rejection of Islam, we don't have the right to take him out of the fold'.

The securitisation of the Muslim community in Britain in recent years has made converts the subject of the attention of the security services. Participants agreed that the security services had a job to do keeping law and order in the country, and that they [converts] would voluntarily report activity that is intended to harm the country, but some felt uncomfortable with some of the tactics used by these services. Co-opting converts in the service of state security was said to move from 'flattery' at the initial point of contact with converts to 'veiled intimidation' when converts reject such overtures. Some participants reported that involvement with the security services would threaten the ability of a convert to practice Islam with integrity and transparency, especially as some heritage Muslims believe that some converts were 'pretending to be Muslims and were in fact employed by the government to infiltrate various [Muslim] groups'. Radicalisation must therefore be treated with sensitivity. In prison, the participants were told, radicalisation occurs when an inmate has a tenuous understanding of his faith, falls under the influence of charismatic leaders with no moderate models to counter them or as a result of the 'discriminatory attitude towards Islam' within prisons and among prison staff. It was also stated that reports of extremism are levelled against Muslim prisoners when they 'had ideological differences with their imams' in prison.

The acute sense of ‘Un/Belonging’ and the special needs of converts were thought to necessitate the establishment of special organisations that can address their condition as a ‘minority within a minority’. Participants believed that these voluntary organisations should address the ‘full complement of converts’ spiritual, educational, emotional and social needs.’ To be successful these organisations must be accessible and practical in their response to these needs. These organisations must also be ready to collaborate with sister organisations instead of the stance of protectionism and unhealthy rivalry that currently exists among some Muslim organisations that cater for converts. They would also need to be independent and neutral to avoid factionalism, partisanship, including close association with a particular mosque, or toeing the political line of those who fund them. The latter stipulation was the subject of some discussion, especially as funders may expect a master-client relationship from those they fund. Government funding was thought to be suspect because the ‘government ... [gives] money to people who tell them what they want to hear [or] those who are not interested in community development – which is the only thing that will help’. Participants therefore felt that in the absence / dearth of ‘angel funders’ who are mindful of all these parameters when they make their gifts, the Muslim community may provide the necessary support through alms-giving and other types of personal or community donations. In return, convert organisations must gain the trust of the community, act with integrity, transparency and professionalism as well as show dynamism and a cooperative attitude towards similar bodies. Organisations of this kind are sorely lacking in the prison sector in particular owing to the stigma of incarceration in the Muslim community; as one participant put it: ‘Whereas heritage Muslims who leave prison have a re-entry programme of a kind – families and communities who would take them back and help them – black Muslims had no infrastructure to return to’; here again we see the racialisation of the convert experience. There is also an acute need for organisations that deal with converts who are struggling with the faith and may be contemplating leaving Islam.

This report on male conversion to Islam in Britain is a sequel to an earlier report on female conversion that the Centre of Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge published in May, 2013 (*Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Female Perspectives*: <http://www.cis.cam.ac.uk/reports/post/203-narratives-of-conversion-to-islam-in-britain-female-perspectives>). This report has been downloaded more than 150,000 times. A similar methodology was used in the project upon which this report is based, as in the project on female conversion. A small group of converts were convened at Cambridge in 2014 to

look into the feasibility of conducting a study of male converts in Britain. A set of questions were generated from this inaugural meeting which then served as the basis for the symposia that followed. Each symposium consisted of four sessions, starting with a presentation and followed by a group discussion extending over a weekend. All the sessions were convened under Chatham House rules and were chaired by the Project Leader. All sessions were video-recorded to assist in the compilation of the report. Participants were encouraged to speak freely in the full knowledge that confidentiality will not be breached.

Participants came from a variety of ethnic, professional, educational, age and geographical backgrounds, using snowballing as one of the methods for enhancing the membership of the project. Some participants converted to Islam in the 1960s and 70s but others converted more recently. It was not possible to represent all the rainbow colours within Islam in terms of sect or school (*madhhab*). This may be considered a weakness of the project and this report, but it was not one the Project Manager could overcome in spite of her great efforts. As a result the report does not claim to represent the totality of the converts' experience in Britain. A core of the participants attended all the symposia. Others participated in one or two symposia. This formula was adopted to ensure continuity and change.

A first draft report was compiled, edited and sent to all the participants for feedback with a confidentiality agreement to prevent disclosure. Upon receiving the participants' feedback a second draft was produced, taking into consideration the comments sent to the Project Manager. This report was sent again to the entire group for comments. Based on the comments received, a third version was produced as a working draft for the Project Manager and Project Leader to work from in preparing the final version. Participants were given the right to include their name in the project or to withhold it. Only Two participants asked for their names to be withheld; the rest are included for each symposium separately.

*Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Male Perspectives* shares some of its themes with its predecessor *Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Female Perspectives*. This is inevitable. However, there are differences between the two reports in terms of content, form and style. The first of these I will leave for the reader to judge, but the differences in form and style would benefit from some comment.

In terms of form, we have elected to report on each session in every symposium

separately, with summaries of the presentations followed by the ensuing discussions. This will enable the reader to track the conversation at a level close to how the symposia unfolded. This way of organising the report has inevitably led to some repetition, but the repetition serves a purpose. It helps the reader discern the themes that held the greatest significance / sway for the participants. One such theme is the relationship between converts and heritage Muslims; another is the relation between faith and culture. To help the reader tie the recurrent themes in different parts of the report together, footnotes have been used providing information on where to follow a particular theme.

In terms of style, the report is compiled in a way that, I hope, will give the reader a feel for the cut and thrust of the debates that took place at the symposia. These debates were frank, robust and good-natured. Participants agreed and disagreed among themselves, producing a finely textured set of ideas and arguments that show movement and the diversity and richness of the convert experience in Britain. The role of the Project Leader and Chair as a devil's advocate is captured well. Descriptions of the atmosphere in the symposia help make the report read like a narrative in the real sense of the term. In comparison with its predecessor, this report promises to be more engaging and more tantalisingly provocative because it asserts and negates in close proximity. The report will also show that convert men are great conversationalists and that they bared their souls in ways that the women in the female narratives did not. An example of this is the discussion of dreams which the women mentioned but left largely untouched but which received a good airing by the men.

Organising the symposia for this report was a great challenge. Compiling the report in time was equally challenging. It is therefore my duty and absolute pleasure to thank all those who helped make the project a great success. My first set of thanks goes to all the presenters and the participants, the presenters for kick-starting the discussion with their own elegant and soul-searching narratives and reflections, and to the participants for engaging the presentations with great candour, intellectual integrity and emotional honesty. I am also grateful to the Møller Centre, University of Cambridge for providing excellent facilities which helped the participants feel at home. The warm welcome, great hospitality and attention to detail by all Møller staff ensured that we had the perfect place to pursue our discussions. Often the discussions continued into the small hours of the morning in the Møller's comfortable surroundings, adding value to the formal part of the symposia proceedings. Also, thanks are due to Louise Beazor, Administrator of the Centre of Islamic Studies, who provided logistical support, ensuring that no participant was out of pocket for too long after they had submitted their expense claims.

I would also like to offer my sincere thanks to Ben Fried for compiling the first draft of the report with such sensitivity and eagerness to learn. Keeping a low profile, Ben set about documenting the conversations at the symposia with precision and dedication to both the big picture and the supporting detail. And he did so with great cheer in spite of the fact his right-hand arm ached from the intensity of note-taking. Thank you Ben!

Thanks are also due to Philip Rushworth who travelled the length and breadth of Britain to interview some of the participants whose voices are inscribed in the accompanying video recordings. This is the first time we have added an audio-visual component to one of our reports at the Centre. I therefore want to thank those participants who took part. I hope they will be satisfied with the result.

Shiraz Khan has been a stalwart supporter of the Centre from the very beginning, designing every major project report that has been published since 2010. She has always risen to the challenge of meeting our tight deadlines while responding to requests for last minute changes with good humour. For all of this and more, I am delighted to record the Centre's thanks to her.

However, my biggest 'thank you' is to the Project Manager, Shahla Awad Suleiman who was a full partner in the project from the beginning to end. Shahla's work encompassed every aspect of the project: helping conceptualise the project intellectually; securing the attendance of all the participants; tracking the progress of the project between symposia; dealing with many sensitive matters before, during and after each symposium; reading the different drafts of the report and commenting on them; liaising with the designer of the report; organising the video recordings; organising the launch; and liaising with the communications department at Cambridge to ensure that the report is given wide publicity. So extensive were Shahla's contributions to this report I could not imagine doing it without her keen eye for detail and sensitive attention to matters of content, form and style.

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## Glossary of Islamic Terms

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| <i>Da'wah</i>    | the call to Islam                        |
| <i>Din</i>       | religion, faith                          |
| <i>Fiqh</i>      | Islamic law                              |
| <i>Hadith</i>    | the sayings and teaching of the Prophet  |
| <i>Halal</i>     | what is permissible in Islam             |
| <i>Haram</i>     | what is forbidden in Islam               |
| <i>Hijab</i>     | a veil often worn by Muslim women        |
| <i>Iman</i>      | faith                                    |
| <i>Jannah</i>    | paradise                                 |
| <i>Madrasa</i>   | Islamic school                           |
| <i>Salafisma</i> | conservative doctrine within Sunni Islam |
| <i>Shahadah</i>  | a Muslim's declaration of faith          |
| <i>Sharia</i>    | the Islamic legal system                 |
| <i>Shia</i>      | the second largest denomination of Islam |
| <i>Sufism</i>    | a mystical school of Islam               |
| <i>Sunnah</i>    | the example of the Prophet               |
| <i>Sunni</i>     | the largest denomination of Islam        |
| <i>Tawakkul</i>  | trust in God                             |
| <i>Ummah</i>     | the worldwide community of Muslims       |
| <i>'Urf</i>      | Islamic custom                           |

**Brainstorming Session**  
**Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Male Perspectives**  
**14th December 2014**

**PARTICIPANTS**

Mark Barrett

M. A. Kevin Brice

Thomas (Tommy) Evans

Alex (Mujib) Gallagher

David (Daud) Gibson

Jeremy Henzell-Thomas

Maurice Irfan Coles

Jamal Jenkins

Ahmed Paul Keeler

Adam Kelwick

Daud R. Mathews

Uthman Ibrahim-Morrison

Ibrahim Pagliari

Mohammed Anthony Whelbourne

Adam Williamson

**Symposium I**  
**Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Male Perspectives**  
**Journeys to Islam • 21st – 22nd February 2015**

**PARTICIPANTS**

|                             |                             |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Mark Barrett                | Ahmed Paul Keeler           |
| M. A. Kevin Brice           | Adam Kelwick                |
| Paul Carvajal               | Daud R. Matthews            |
| Jordan Cascoe               | Uthman Ibrahim-Morrison     |
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| Jeremy Henzell-Thomas       | Mohammed Anthony Whelbourne |
| Muhammad Houghton           | Omer Williams               |
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## Contents

Introduction • 21

1. First Interest in Islam and Conversion • 22

2. *Discussion* • 25

3. Learning Islam • 33

4. *Discussion* • 36

5. Spirituality • 41

6. *Discussion* • 44

7. 'Becoming Muslim' and the Responses of  
Family & Friends • 47

8. *Discussion* • 49

Conclusion • 55

*Appendix I: 'Privileged'* • 56

*Appendix II: Symposium I Guiding Questions* • 58

*Endnotes* • 173

## Introduction

The overarching theme of the first symposium was ‘Journeys to Islam’.

The forum was divided into four discussion sessions, each centred around a topic- and tone-setting presentation delivered by a selected participant. Their subjects were ‘First Interest in Islam and Conversion’, ‘Learning Islam’, ‘Spirituality’, and “‘Becoming Muslim” and the Responses of Family & Friends’. Each presentation followed the same basic trajectory—recounting a narrative of how the convert had come to embrace Islam—through the changing territory of class, race, and history. The speakers’ motivations and inspirations ranged broadly, taking in friendship, art, politics, personal crisis, spiritual yearning, and dreams. Their span extended across generations, while occasional overlap elaborated, rather than recapitulated, central concerns.

The discussion that followed each presentation encompassed numerous aspects of the convert’s experience, both before and immediately after his conversion. Certain subjects recurred and deepened over the course of the symposium: the construction of personal narrative itself, the relation of art to religion, the difference between emotional and rational acceptance of Islam, the sources of a convert’s knowledge and inspiration, the cultural alienation of some converts from both heritage Muslim communities and their communities of origin, Sufism and Salafism, spiritual quests and the importance of dreams, the appeal of tradition and discipline, and White privilege. Above all, the participants focused on the particular enthusiasm of the recent convert, the strength and the dangers of what was variously termed his ‘naïve sincerity’, ‘innocent sincerity’, ‘spiritual adolescence’, and ‘zealotry’.

Twenty-two converts attended the symposium. They ranged in age from their twenties to their seventies; they came from England, Wales, and Scotland (with only Northern Ireland unrepresented); and they spoke without reservation, secure in the knowledge that the proceedings were protected under Chatham House rules.

The reader is advised that the traditional Islamic formula (‘Peace be upon him’, shortened as ‘pbuh’) should be associated with all references to the Prophet Muhammad in the report.

## 1. FIRST INTEREST IN ISLAM AND CONVERSION

### 1.1 Themes

The first presentation on the symposium's general subject of 'Journeys to Islam' introduced and encompassed themes which would recur with deepening complexity throughout the symposium. Among them were the degree to which the presenter's upbringing prepared a convert for conversion; the importance of friends in introducing him to Islam; his subsequent encounters with many different kinds of Muslims; the relationship between art and creativity, on the one hand, and religion on the other; the gradual transmutation of worldly aims into spiritual ones; the length of his journey, and its felt division into stages of emotional and rational acceptance of the truth of Islam; a period of crisis—personal, professional, and intellectual—preceding his declaration of faith, the *shahadah*; the sense that this official moment of conversion was, in fact, a kind of return, an acceptance of what already existed within him; and, at last, a brief intimation of the journey *after* conversion as one first of displacement, from his earlier life and habits, and then again of return, a renewed and more comfortable embrace of his persistent identity and aims.

### 1.2 Narrative<sup>1</sup>

What also emerged clearly, though less explicitly, from this first presentation was the extent to which converts consider and construct the narratives of their lives in the light of their conversion. The presenter began by confessing his initial doubt over whether to speak of the 'journey to Islam' in a general or personal tone and capacity. He had decided, however, that his contribution must be personal, that it would consist of an intimate and detailed narrative inviting both reflection and self-recognition in the other participants. He added that he was in the midst of writing a book precisely about his passage to conversion and beyond: it was fitting, therefore, that he divided that morning's abridged version into 'chapters', a series of 'stepping stones' seen in retrospect and leading in a clear direction.

### 1.3 Upbringing<sup>2</sup>

The presenter declared that, after Allah, he owed his conversion to his mother and to the humble, literate, and open environment in which he grew up and in which literature and learning were cherished. It was the very liberal nature of his early life which, he believed, had provided him with the intellectual curiosity that eventually led him to Islam. He had a creative background rather than a

religious one. His enrolment at a Church of England school had not instilled in him any sense of religious belonging, and once he was allowed to determine his own education, he chose the non-traditional route of attending an art school. To the question often asked after his conversion—‘what were you before?’—he replied that he was a human being, without religion and open to inquiry.

#### **1.4 Interplay of the Individual and the Social**

The narrative the presenter then traced to his conversion was steeped in social awareness, in a repeated attempt to locate the individual figure he cut against a larger historical, political, and cultural canvas. He was, he asserted, a product of three broader phenomena: 60s liberalism (the influence of which stemmed from his mother and shaped his childhood), 80s neo-liberalism (the Thatcherism that surrounded his coming-of-age), and hip-hop (the music and culture that attracted and adopted him as a young man and musician).

#### **1.5 Hip-hop<sup>3</sup>**

Hip-hop was his first gateway to Islam. Many rappers happened to be Muslim, a fact largely arising from the African-American tradition of Islam, and much of the rap he listened to referred to Islam. Politics bridged the culture he had imbibed from his mother and the culture he embraced in his formative period, the 90s of his late teenage years. In this respect, he paid particular tribute to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, a book he recommended to all the participants (though it emerged over the symposium that this work had already played a role in the lives of several of the others).

#### **1.6 First Encounters with Muslims<sup>4</sup>**

But the path from hip-hop to Islam was paved more by people than by lyrics, by the rappers he met and the friends he made. Many of the rappers he encountered were considerate, intellectual, and interested in Islam. One Muslim friend in particular made an early impression. His discipline in rising every morning for prayer impressed; his recitation from the Qur’an was strikingly musical, putting the presenter in mind of ‘a Michael Jackson who sang in Arabic’. Gradually these acquaintances led him to attend talks given by imams and to meet converts. His first experience of the latter was soured by the aggressive proselytizing that could characterise the behaviour of converts: he was told, unceremoniously, ‘you’re next!’ His second experience of a large Muslim gathering was also troubling. He attended a street celebration of Eid

and wondered why there were no girls present; his worries about ‘the overload of testosterone’ soon proved justified as a car was blown up and riot police arrived. It was, he noted drily, ‘not a good experience’.

### **1.7 Division of the Rational and the Emotional<sup>5</sup>**

This early coexistence of attraction and trepidation in his attitude to Islam characterised the next ten years of his life, the period he now described as his ‘decade-long journey to Islam’. On the one hand, his interest burgeoned and was soon reflected in both his output at art school and in his behaviour (he gave up alcohol and ‘usury’, and he began to question the treatment of women in hip-hop). On the other hand, he could not reconcile himself intellectually to the truth of Islam, a questioning and doubting that he attributed to his ‘academic’ and ‘nerdy’ intellect. The result was a division of spirit and mind: he embraced Islam in his heart long before he accepted the Qur’an rationally.

### **1.8 Division of the Professional and the Spiritual**

A parallel division existed between his awakening sense of religion and his professional ambitions and surroundings. A professional rapper by this time, the balance of his life for several years consisted of Islam in the background and a dream of musical fame and glory in the foreground. He felt then that he was on a quest for worldly greatness, described in retrospect as ‘the cult of celebrity’—the equation of visibility with happiness. Yet he was inwardly unhappy and prone to emotional instability: the ‘rush’ of being on stage was something he still loved now that he was more ‘grounded’, but the lows he suffered after such highs were deeply painful. The pressure to succeed in narrow terms was intense and, sometimes literally, suffocating. He was, using an evocative term, an ‘extremist’ for music. Only slowly did Islam move from the background to the foreground; only gradually was the worldly pursuit of fame replaced by a different quest for glory, one ‘rooted in monotheism, in this life and the next’.

### **1.9 A Period of Crisis<sup>6</sup>**

These inner conflicts finally came to a head with a period of compounded crises, personal and professional. A friend in the music industry had ‘turned on’ the presenter and was maligning him in public. A long-prepared album was released to his overwhelming sense of anti-climax: he had expected material success to change his life, but felt no different after its release than he had before. He began to question the wisdom of predicating his personal happiness on the

approval of others, realizing that he needed to be content within himself. Then two deaths in swift succession, those of his grandfather and of a young friend, came as a ‘double whammy’. His sense of the fragility of the human condition, his awareness that death could strike at any time, climaxed with the 2004 South Asian tsunami: his family was vacationing in Sri Lanka and, though they were unhurt, he knew nothing of their situation for a few dark days. He left the music industry.

This intense period was the catalyst for his *shahadah*. At the time, he was learning more about the character of the Prophet, whose example exerted a strong influence on him. The speaker recounted one story of the Prophet’s forbearance which had stirred him, observing that ‘the more you learn about his character, the more you love him’. For the previous decade—the time of his conscious journey towards Islam—the speaker had been unable to satisfy himself intellectually with regards to religion. The moment of full conversion came, he said, when out of his crisis he understood the nature of faith. He embraced Islam rationally, as well as emotionally, when he accepted that one cannot understand everything before, or indeed after, one converts. Faith, he declared, was a belief in the unseen.

### 1.10 Conclusion

The presenter ended by declaring his particular interest in what happened to converts after their *shahadah*, the other half of the narrative which he regretted he could not address in his talk. He asked the other participants to advise him if he had said anything offensive or incorrect, and gave way to questions and discussion.

## 2. DISCUSSION

### 2.1 Themes

The discussion stemming from this presentation ranged over many aspects of the convert’s common experience, both before and after his conversion: the alternating inspiration and disillusion a creative person might feel within Islam; the possibility of cultural alienation from both his original community and from the community he aspired to join; the need among new converts for patience and mentorship; the place of race in a convert’s treatment by heritage Muslims—with particular, and extended, explorations of White privilege and the black British experience; the early stage of a convert’s ‘naïve sincerity’ (later,

and variously, referred to as ‘zealotry’, ‘innocent sincerity’, and ‘spiritual adolescence’); the emerging and contested dichotomies of creativity vs. piety, spirituality vs. religion, and emotional vs. rational approaches to Islam.

## 2.2 Language<sup>7</sup>

The first response after the presentation focused on the presenter’s ‘beautiful and poetic’ use of language. Had language been one of his paths not just to hip-hop but to Islam itself?

The presenter pointed out in response that he felt a clear affinity between the literate environment of his upbringing and the religion to which he was drawn, observing that Islam encouraged learning, literature, and academic aspiration.

## 2.3 Cultural Divisions<sup>8</sup>

He was then asked about the reactions of family and friends to his conversion. He replied that for a long time he had not told others, and that only in the last two years had he felt comfortable in his identity as a convert. There was a deep ‘cultural discontinuity’ between the people he had known, in the music industry, and the Muslims he was meeting. He did not feel like a Muslim, though he had declared *shahadah*. Separated from both the community he had known and the community he sought to join, he was also disconnected from artistic activity and spent years searching for a new channel for his creativity. At the time of the symposium, he was settling into his identity and reconnecting with aspects of his life that he had left behind at the point of conversion. He had begun to re-establish certain friendships and to reach out to others in the arts. He insisted on this point: that more should be done by Muslims to connect with and welcome people in the arts, who, though often atheistic, were nevertheless usually open-minded.

## 2.4 ‘Naïve Sincerity’<sup>9</sup>

Another participant focused on the importance of hip-hop as presented in the talk, suggesting that the speaker had offered a fine description of the environment and attitudes of many ‘millennial converts’. He himself was among those converts who had come from a background in the arts and often found that those like him were reductively associated by heritage Muslims with Yusuf Islam<sup>10</sup> and pushed towards mediocre Muslim music, not to mention opinions and attitudes. With this in mind, he asked, what did the speaker make of the challenge of mentorship for new converts?

The answer addressed what the presenter took to be the frequent condition of converts in the early stage of their lives as Muslims, employing a phrase that recurred and deepened over the symposium: ‘naïve sincerity’. In the presenter’s view, new converts, out of enthusiasm and insecurity, tended to trust people who appeared more religious than themselves. They were tempted to take only one opinion for guidance, whereas there were really many opinions they ought to canvas and consider. What the recent convert truly needed, therefore, was a broader frame of reference and a more realistic sense of the change they should be making in their lives. ‘Really, how much should your identity change?’ he asked, answering that ‘you should still be the same person’.

The enthusiastic close-mindedness of some converts brought the presenter back to the relative open-mindedness of creative people, who often found the conservatism of religion generally—not just of Islam—stifling. After all, they found their various, necessary avenues of expression in ‘liberal social spaces’. He, meanwhile, felt caught between liberal creativity, on the one hand, and religious orthodoxy, on the other. The challenge was to navigate this ‘liminal space’, which he did by following a belief system, rather than a religious lifestyle. This was the path he would recommend to young Muslims, and yet he felt that most converts were not presented with this option. Rather, they tended to be given a list of rules and prohibitions, an overwhelming emphasis on lifestyle that made it ‘miserable’ to practice Islam, that explained why ‘the young don’t practice their religion’, and that led to ‘dangerous ideologies’.

Participants picked up immediately on the phrase and concept of ‘naïve sincerity’ (though with some disagreements over its accuracy). One felt that he had approached heritage Muslims in this spirit, hoping to absorb the proper way of being Muslim, only to experience ‘awful encounters’. He was grateful, he said, that he had converted before meeting such people. They might have changed his mind and kept him from Islam.

Elaborating on the way in which new converts should manage their enthusiasm and explore the range of ways that one can be a Muslim, the presenter said that he would advise them to take their time to grow and develop as Muslims. There was no need, he felt, to plunge beyond one’s depth. This was a point he made in particular regard to female converts and to the children of Muslims. They should be given alternatives rather than narrow orthodox instruction. He had observed such pressure placed on women to make the *hijab* the primary marker of their new identity. The rhetoric he had often heard about Islam empowering women rang hollow to him; he had seen no living role models held up to

Muslim women—a revealing absence.<sup>11</sup> Sending children to Islamic schools, meanwhile, and forbidding them a normal British lifestyle could lead directly to a dangerous indulgence and over-consumption of what they had been denied. One simply could not raise British children as if they were living in Yemen or Pakistan: it would not work.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.5 The Heart and the Head I

Another participant drew the conversation back to the inner divisions that had characterised the presenter's decade-long journey to conversion. What, more specifically, were the arguments he had had with himself prior to conversion? The speaker replied that, in his experience, a full alignment of heart, spirit, and head was necessary for the convert to take his decisive step. Emotional and spiritual acceptance of Islam had come early to him; it was the head that resisted. The Qur'an presented him with intellectual difficulties, as did his first impressions of heritage Muslim culture. These were partly resolved through greater exposure to Islam and wider learning—his general assumption that Islam was oppressive towards women was contradicted by the respect accorded to Aisha, one of the Prophet's wives and a great scholar. There were also habits and aspects of his character that required reform and discipline. Nevertheless, the intellectual acceptance of Islam was not finally a question of receiving the answers he desired. Rather, it came when, in the midst of personal turmoil, he accepted that he would not achieve complete understanding either before or after conversion. He remembered thinking that if he truly believed Islam in his heart and spirit then he would have to follow this belief; the felt, emotional truth of Islam compelled him.

## 2.6 Art and Religion

Another attendee commented on the apparent centrality of art to the lives of several converts at the symposium. He was interested in the creative process of the Muslim artist, in how religion and belief could provide an artist with content, form, and language. He described his own experience of complete absorption in Islam when he was a student—suggesting that the narrative of this time, his memoir, could be titled *From Art School to Madrasa*—and expressed his own desire for Islam to emerge from and feed back into his art in a more open and expansive way.

Addressing his own creative pursuits, the presenter suggested that they were evidence of the difficulty of his immediate post-conversion life and of the productive happiness of his current situation, in which he felt more wholly

connected to the person he had been before his conversion. He began by acknowledging the privilege that allowed him to emphasise art in his experience of Islam, a luxury that many born Muslims in Britain did not share—for here, he declared, where Islam was ‘still emergent’ and enmeshed ‘in a migrant paradigm’, a born Muslim could not focus on quality of life when he or she was simply trying to live. He then described the place of religion in his art. Generally quite private in his religious life, he felt that Islam informed his art without defining it. His consciousness was rooted in Islamic monotheism and his creativity thus bore a much clearer and more coherent intellectual blueprint than before; nevertheless, he considered that the art he now made was not especially different from that which he had made prior to his conversion. This congruence was, however, a recent state of affairs. The conversion had disrupted his artistic life deeply in the first years, blocking the channel for his creativity—music. But when, after several years, he again found artistic means of expression, it felt like coming full circle and reuniting disparate parts of himself in a new whole.

## 2.7 The Heart and the Head II<sup>13</sup>

The discussion of creativity led one participant to warn against the establishment of false and rigid dichotomies in their conversation. It seemed to him that they were placing creativity in opposition to reductive notions both of religion and of non-creativity. He felt there was nothing irreligious about the alliance of spirituality and creativity; moreover, he questioned how true it was to speak of ‘creative people’ as if others were devoid of creativity.

The presenter acknowledged the truth of these warnings and the danger of arrogance in both artists and converts. Yet while he agreed that religion should properly be spiritual, and not merely a collection of rules and habits, his own experience had confronted him with the latter more than the former. He believed that there was some truth to the typical outsider’s perspective of Islam: it often was miserable to practise. Spirituality was not necessarily presented as an essential aspect of religion to the average layperson, and in meetings of Muslim brothers he had often found the language of love absent.

Another participant revealed that the separation—even the dichotomy—of emotional and intellectual acceptance of Islam was also true to his experience, but that their sequence had been reversed in his journey towards conversion. The intellectual position came first. A comparative study of religions had led him to view Islam as the most logical, rational, and coherent of faiths. Only later did he feel its truth more personally, and that too was a gradual process

without a particular spiritual epiphany, a ‘road-to-Damascus moment’. He wondered if others in the room believed that one aspect of the attraction to Islam, whether rooted in the heart or the head, necessarily made itself felt first and foremost.

Both the presenter and the Chair responded to this query. The first hoped that a third way was possible. He felt that this balance could emerge from the experience of born Muslims who, already rooted in Islamic culture, might require a spiritual catalyst to further explore their faith. The Chair then proposed a compromise. Though it could seem like one’s search for meaning was following the particular direction of the heart or the mind, the truth was that heart and mind were in constant dialogue.

## **2.8 Divisions Between Converts and Heritage Muslims<sup>14</sup>**

The next question explored possible tensions between converts and heritage Muslims, referring to the contradiction of contact already acknowledged by certain participants—pre-conversion enthusiasm giving way to dismay and disappointment upon engagement with heritage Muslims. While not dismissing this reaction, the questioner worried that such division could be reinforced by arrogance on the part of the convert, a sense of superiority to the merely ‘born’ Muslim. In this regard, he also raised the issue of the particular attention paid to white converts by the heritage community—the so-called ‘White privilege’ that provoked discussion throughout the symposium. The Chair intervened at this point both to recall the presenter’s experience of Muslim generosity as well as of less attractive qualities, and to point out that the attention given to white converts had also been discussed in the symposia on female perspectives<sup>15</sup>: white female converts had spoken of being seen as ‘trophy’ in the heritage community.

The presenter replied first by returning to the concept of ‘naïve sincerity’—suggesting that the new convert’s dismay stemmed from unrealistic expectations of what practising Muslims were like—but then raised the related difficulty of the convert’s own cultural baggage. He felt that white converts should certainly be aware of their social and, in all likelihood, economic privilege. They should not attempt to shed their background and succumb to the temptation to feel part of ‘a narrative of virtuous victimhood’. The Chair emphasised the point that religion, as lived experience, could not be separated from culture, and he added that all cultures were composed of both benevolent and malevolent elements. In this vein, he asked, to what extent did born

Muslims actually see themselves as the monolithic unity being referred to in this discussion—‘the heritage community’?

One participant asserted that it was impossible to enter the *din*, the religion of Islam, cultureless and that much damage had been done, emotionally and mentally, to converts who attempted to do so. He felt that the convert’s wholesale adoption of Islamic cultural practice was rather contrived. It denied the fact that the culture in which the convert had been brought up was inevitably going to express itself in his behaviour. Such denial led to ‘madness’.

## 2.9 White Privilege<sup>16</sup>

A further aspect of White privilege—that it might be relinquished through conversion—was identified by another participant. He recognised that privilege existed and needed to be critiqued, but equally felt that a spectrum should be drawn which acknowledged the potential marginalisation of white converts in both their community of origin and the community of heritage Muslims. He added that such questions had been discussed, and precedents established, in Islamic history and law. These issues were not new.

The possibility of white plight to balance White privilege received both criticism and support. One participant echoed the claim that white converts lost at least part of their privilege when embracing Islam, but then pointed out that this privilege was unearned to begin with: losing it only meant facing life as so many others already did. However, a different speaker explained that he had never experienced White privilege as a convert, though he felt privileged in other respects. Rather, he had frequently been the target of cultural hostility from heritage Muslims and made to feel unwelcome in mosques.

Another speaker suggested that, counter-intuitive as it might seem to a new convert, maintaining his pre-conversion identity might actually make him a better and more useful Muslim. A convert should still be rooted in his time, place, and family; from this vantage point, he would be better situated to critique and bridge the two communities of which he was now a part.

## 2.10 ‘Naïve Sincerity’ vs. Zealotry

The conversation continued to focus on the new convert’s attempts to fit in with the heritage community, returning to the theme of ‘naïve sincerity’ and including the issue of language. One attendee felt that ‘naïve sincerity’, though a fine label for a certain kind of enthusiasm, did not do justice to his own post-conversion attitude: the other side of ‘naïve sincerity’ was ‘zealotry’. If he could

go back to his first fervent years as a Muslim, he declared, he would not like himself. He would, in fact, advise new converts against taking his own zealous course.

Others testified to an enduring sense of being an outsider among heritage Muslims. One participant recounted his degrees of discomfort in traditional Muslim gatherings, ranging from his difficulty in tying a turban, to men suspiciously questioning his very pronunciation of ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’, to the absence of women at such meetings. The imposition of cultural norms upon the convert troubled him. Another participant picked up on the inextricable bond between language and culture, sceptically addressing the discourse that converts were encouraged to adopt in the Islamic sphere. He questioned the motivation for using Arabic phrases rather than English ones when the sayings and sentiments expressed were fairly universal. He suggested that while these phrases signified a certain belonging to the community, they could also be the means of alienation—a way of isolating the brethren, of separating the initiated from outsiders. He asked himself and the others in what context, and in front of what kind of audience, they would use Arabic phrases. With co-workers, he thought that he was more likely to use an English equivalent; but in front of Jews, he felt he would use the Arabic to prove his difference.

Another participant addressed the lack for which he thought converts were compensating, and perhaps overcompensating, in their periods of ‘naïve sincerity’ or ‘zealotry’. What converts had missed was the profound childhood experience of Islam. This ‘beautiful’ early engagement with a religion and a culture, the two tied together and embedded in associations of family and food, seemed to him an endless resource which converts sought to reproduce in adulthood and in vain.

### 2.11 The Black Experience<sup>17</sup>

The discussion of White privilege was then balanced and deepened by reflections on the community of black converts. One participant revealed that black converts were usually directed by heritage Muslims to the figure of Bilal, the trusted companion of the Prophet and a freed slave. The racialising of Bilal, and the blanket attitudes towards black Muslims it betrayed, seemed obvious and insensitive to him. Yet communities did exist and each community had its particular means of finding ‘cultural currency’ in Islam. What spoke to him in his pre-conversion phase, and what stuck out almost like ‘a miracle’, was what he learned of poetry in the time of the Prophet. The oral tradition and the

competitiveness of poets recalled his own experience of rap battles. Hearing the story of a poet who had challenged the Prophet and found himself unable to match divine utterance gave him a cultural connection to Islam, a personal purchase. He felt that White privilege was becoming a sticking point in the symposium and wanted to point out that every community had its privilege and its problems: the tragedy of the black convert community, for example, was the centrality of prison to its experience.

## 2.12 Cultural Diversity

Another participant returned to the general theme of ‘cultural apostasy’, the detrimental expectation that converts needed to give up everything, their culture and their identity, for Allah. He connected this absolutist position to the extremely dangerous debate over identifying oneself as either British or Muslim. This was a division, he felt, that ‘only extremists in both Islam and the government’ had an interest in opening. He had witnessed the damage this caused to people’s lives and families, damage that took ‘such a long time to repair’. Breaking a family, he reminded the gathering, was a great sin in Islam. What should replace the felt imperative of apostasy for converts was, first, a recognition that Islamic cultures were beautifully diverse and, second, an attempt to beautify one’s own culture with Islam.

The morning’s discussion concluded with the recital of ‘Privileged’ (see Appendix I) by the presenter. A poem that expresses the isolation of the convert and that pleads for greater nuance and complexity in his relationship to Islam and to other Muslims—it was a fitting summation of this first conversation.

## 3. LEARNING ISLAM

### 3.1 Themes

The next session began with two back-to-back individual presentations. They covered the same trajectory, though through different territory, as the first presentation: the speakers’ journeys to Islam. There was greater emphasis, however, on the convert’s search for peace and community *after* saying *shahadah*: the continued learning of Islam post-conversion. Thus a thematic continuity ordered the day’s discussion, but broadened its subjects to include unhappiness with ‘Western life’, spiritual yearning and seeking, and the need for structure and community.

### 3.2 Searching for Significance

The first presenter began by comparing his fear and discomfort at speaking in front of the others with the terror and disorientation of his young adulthood, when he began a quest for meaning that eventually, though only after years of searching, led to Islam. He now felt that he had been looking for Islam all along, though he had first had to explore dead ends and exhaust other paths.

Like the earlier session's presenter, he situated his individual case against a social and historical background: the breakdown of community absence of community in Thatcher's Britain. Thus, despite the comparative comfort of his loving, middle-class upbringing, he had felt miserable and unsatisfied from an early age. He had attempted to overcome his unhappiness with the material and rational solutions offered by the West, leading a hedonistic life for a time, but he eventually came to see the source of his despair in the communal poverty of the very Western model he was following. The 'cultural richness' that existed outside the West, meanwhile, increasingly informed his wide travels and his search for enlightenment.

He repeated a point made several times over the symposium: that he had had to reach a point of crisis, a moment when the situation of his life became impossible and escape the only option, before taking the decisive, 'epic' step towards conversion. He characterised this desire to escape as 'looking for Medina'.<sup>18</sup> Through art and mysticism he came closer to Islam, not consciously, he explained, but through an indirect absorption of principles which he later came to recognise as Islamic. He began to make art without inhibition and to see the universe itself as a work of art. Political activism also provided him with a certain sense of community and an understanding of the Western model as 'broken'.

He did not learn to identify his inner longings with Islam, however, until he met his Muslim wife and her family. Until that point, he had been unable to see what real purchase Islam, or any religion, had on the world. In terms of politics, he had categorised Islam as either nihilistic or collaborationist, officially in league with the British government. Yet though Islam had at first seemed too large to digest, through family and through a particular group of Muslims in the east of England, he at last found what he had been looking for: a community he felt at home with, a spiritual language he understood.

### 3.3 Finding Home<sup>19</sup>

The second presenter of the session, a member of the same circle of Muslims, situated his own narrative within a wider search for community, one that he felt could transcend the new vs. heritage Muslim dialectic that had taken up much of the discussion thus far. He pointed out that though new Muslims had founded their community, it had weathered several generations and was now a heritage Muslim collective of its own. It was from this vantage point, encompassing both perspectives, that he spoke of his own journey to understanding Islam. And in retrospect, everything that occurred along his narrative appeared ‘unavoidable’.

This journey did not culminate in conversion. In fact, he did not even consider the moment of saying *shahadah* to be the moment in which he became a Muslim. Returning to the morning’s preoccupation with art, he offered an analogy of creation and becoming. In artistic creation, an inner essence finds outward form; in becoming a Muslim, something essential in a convert’s nature emerges in the form of Islam. And as with the artist, the convert often needed a model: ‘you need to be able to see in another what it is you want to become’.

His early experience was rooted in a London mosque. There he witnessed ‘naïve sincerity’ becoming sinister when the mosque was taken over by Salafist members. He saw what happened when ‘people begin to think your life does not matter because you do not agree with them, when they believe that you stand in their way’. He at first refused to leave; but like others at the symposium who had already spoken, he eventually found himself in an impossible situation and needed to make a decisive break.

The possibility of being Muslim in a different way became real to him when he left and visited another community, in a southern European city. There he saw a man who represented, not in words but in his being, that ‘the *din* was possible in this age’. The proof of the possibility lay not just in the example of this individual, but in the fact that he was surrounded by others like him. The community was populated by people—beautiful, knowledgeable, at ease with themselves—whom one could emulate. It was such a contrast to the conflict, aggression, and misplaced energy of his London experience. And the experience of it was ‘the possible moment’ from which the presenter dated his true conversion to Islam.

‘Learning the *din* is learning to inhabit this planet in a certain way’, he declared. To do so, one needed an example and one needed a safe environment, a setting

that would slow the convert down and provide him with community. This was the convergence of energies he found in the European city he visited; it was the same convergence he now found in the city where he lived. There, he claimed, the tensions described by other participants had been resolved. New converts were not asked to dispense with their cultural baggage; their origins were understood to be part of their *din*. The community, moreover, was both convert and heritage, since within it one could inherit the *din* as a young person—which was what heritage meant.

Summing up, the Chair identified three lessons to take from the presentation: the influence that a charismatic individual can wield; the importance of a sustaining environment in which conversion could take root; and the frequent fact that in searching everywhere for meaning, one often found it contained within all along.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Themes

The discussion of ‘learning Islam’ ranged over several topics—the importance of finding sources and mentors one could trust, the extent to which older converts had laid a foundation for others to follow, the pursuit of knowledge as opposed to mere information—but the unifying insistence was on the contextual nature of learning. The ways in which converts studied Islam changed with time, environment, and example. The Internet, it was agreed, had reshaped the possibilities of conversion, offering both a greater accessibility and a radical distortion of instruction to new Muslims. The final aim, many felt, should be to establish a secure setting in which trustworthy models could be followed until the convert was ready to continue his lifelong learning independently.

### 4.2 Learners, Teachers, and Sources<sup>20</sup>

The questions immediately following the presentations reemphasised the theme of the session: learning Islam. At what point did a convert move from learning to teaching? Did the presenters still consider themselves learners? The answer to the second question was a resounding yes. In teaching one was still learning, providing illumination for oneself and others; this was, in fact, when one’s learning was of ‘the highest calibre’. As for the point at which such a fusion of learning and teaching became possible, the speakers could only say that a

certain transformation took place in conversation, when they began to notice others being drawn to them and their discussions.

The first participant to respond introduced certain points of concern related to the convert's learning and connected them to a theme of complaint from the earlier discussions. He suggested that the source of learning had a crucial impact on the convert's particular narrative. Referring to the possible avenues of friends, mentors, and the Internet, he asked what he considered to be the essential question: were these sources formally trained and qualified? A recent convert would be bombarded by information that was often partial, distorted, and not to the new Muslim's benefit. He must be careful to seek out trustworthy sources. The participant then spoke of the importance for converts of channelling criticism productively. It seemed from the morning's conversation that a number of participants had been disappointed by their treatment at the hands of the heritage Muslim community. But, he suggested, perhaps their criticism would be better directed at converts themselves, particularly those older converts who had not built in Britain a community and a structure for learning to benefit those who followed them.

One attendee felt that the very structure of Islam made the question of learning difficult to answer. Without a church and without a clergy, there was no easy place for a convert to take his inquiries. But since converts were therefore reliant on individuals whose interpretations of Islam they could not clearly judge, they had to take responsibility for their own learning. He had converted before the Internet made information universally accessible, and so he had been limited to approaching only those authorities which were directly available to him.

Another participant placed his emphasis on academic-style learning for converts: acquiring Arabic, reading the Qur'an, training oneself to trace information to its classical source. In response to previous comments casting doubt on the importance of Arabic and lamenting the danger of 'cultural apostasy' for converts, he asserted that the first was required for any serious engagement with Islam and that the second was, to a certain extent, incumbent upon converts. There were certain cultural, as well as religious, practices they were obliged to adopt, and this recalibration would sometimes require them to shed aspects of their pre-conversion culture.

A participant who had been exposed to Islam through marriage indicated that family was his primary source of information. Yet he had also found guidance in the casual, open, unhurried debates and conversations of his community.

What these two arenas of learning shared was trust, an openness and availability of inquiring souls.

### 4.3 The Internet and Information

The youngest participant at the gathering emphatically warned of the dangers of relying on the Internet for information. It offered a picture of the activities of ‘our technologically obsessed society’, but objectivity was not one of its attributes. Furthermore, he believed that the Internet invited people to subscribe to the approval of others, to surrender their sense of authenticity to outsiders. Whereas religion, defined in the broader sense of habitual and meaningful human action, ought to be both personal and universal. To the common question, ‘are you religious?’ he could only answer that he did not think he had ever met anyone who was not religious.

A much older convert then recounted the great difficulty, and the necessary self-instruction, of embracing Islam in the days before the Internet. His journey began with a book, progressed through the Oxford telephone directory to a teacher, and included two trips to Pakistan to acquire texts that one could not then buy in Britain. His attempts to start a study group, and gradually pull together the necessary strands of knowledge, were at first rebuffed. But when he finally founded one, they covered half of the Qur’an in the space of six months. He then read classical texts in both English and Arabic, and what he did not understand he asked scholars to clarify. Yet these study spaces that he had struggled to construct were now available through the Internet; learning, a process rooted in context, had changed.

The young, though sceptical of the Internet, were learning from it, the next participant maintained. It was, after all, a forum in which Islam was taught by charismatic young men who spoke their language. And it was teaching, more than learning per se, that interested and troubled this speaker. He thought that the traditional way in which Islam was taught was out-and-out boring, depriving students of the ability to question and challenge the material presented to them—though he admitted that this manner of teaching was changing. To truly reform it, however, the different languages and learning styles of different communities (some used to listening, some used to dialogue) needed to be acknowledged. In the religious places he frequented in London, for example, nine out of ten converts were not white but of Caribbean descent, while ten out of ten were under the age of forty. To them, the interests and teachings of older converts were not of much use.

This participant concluded by speaking of the need to regulate the Internet, while the next spoke from his own experience in television of the difficulty of combining education with mass communication. The aim of his employer was to entice young Muslims to watch by offering them entertainment; a result of this policy was a complete absence of programming aimed at the convert community.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, he felt that viewers only needed to be enabled in furthering their own studies and teaching themselves.

The next participant to speak agreed. He had been a convert for fifteen years, of which the first seven were spent in ambivalence over whom to trust. He acknowledged that the issue of certainty was important—that certainty was a personal obligation in Islamic tradition—but wondered how converts could realistically hope to attain it. In answer, he asserted that new Muslims ought to recognise that there were multiple ways in which to interpret Islam. The object of teaching should then be to get people to the point at which they could learn for themselves, for Islam was actually simpler than they thought. Expectations of complete understanding must be adjusted early in a convert's journey.

#### 4.4 Knowledge

The general conversation about learning then concentrated more narrowly on knowledge, the kind that converts should seek and the kind they should avoid. One participant believed that celebrity now overshadowed knowledge. In academia, a person's qualifications guaranteed their expertise; yet these days, he maintained, all charismatic figures needed to fake their way to authority in certain Muslim circles was a smattering of Arabic. Nevertheless, while celebrity was fleeting, 'knowledge, and the legacy of knowledge, lasts'.

Another speaker wanted to distinguish between social and religious elements of learning, the two main modes of instruction for converts. He further refined this distinction as that between learning from the living and the dead. It was more important to equip a convert with social skills to deal with his family and his community than it was to instruct him with strictly religious practice. But this fact was not widely appreciated, and thus 'we tend to misunderstand the priorities of new Muslims' and pervert their learning process.

Pressed to indicate how converts could know the difference between necessary knowledge and distracting information, this same speaker responded that all a beginner had was trust and, hopefully, the ability to recognise the signs of a qualified mentor. Another participant answered that whereas information was trivia, knowledge manifested as behaviour. One could therefore assess a person's

knowledge on the basis of his behaviour. When one saw knowledge in another person, it was unmistakable and attractive. Information was like a ricocheting football, busy but inanimate; knowledge, meanwhile, was form-giving, literally transformative. A third speaker agreed and offered a further calibration: information became knowledge when it was imparted by another human being. A fourth speaker again associated knowledge with action, equating it to the application of understanding in one's life.

#### 4.5 Environment

The importance of a trusted model and a secure environment for converts was affirmed by another participant. He himself had grown up surrounded by Muslim friends and family—a community and a direction were already waiting for him upon his conversion. This, he believed, should be every convert's experience. And yet he felt increasingly privileged, for in London he continually observed the absence of such experience. Rather, he was struck by the absence of working examples for converts, by the sharp discontinuities between the communities they came from and those they sought to join. This was 'the situation that needs to be addressed'.

#### 4.6 Advice

The Chair then went around the conference table, asking two related questions. What one thing would each participant warn a convert not to do? What one thing would they then advise the convert to do?

The warnings generally urged prudence and reflection: do not take advice from unqualified people; do not convert immediately, but force yourself to learn more first; do not make rash decisions, but instead speak to the right people; do not ignore your spiritual development; do not abandon the Qur'an; do not rush.

The recommendations largely followed the same pattern: take your time; lead an empowered devotional life; pray to God; look for the Beautiful; buckle down and learn Arabic; read more; ease into your conversion, since a more gradual transition makes for a happier Muslim; be present in both mind and body; listen to and trust in the faculty of your heart; ask Allah for sincerity and do not attempt to become someone else.

The general consensus was for patience on the part of the potential convert. In fact, the following day and as the result of further conversation, one participant who had recommended 'seizing the moment', rather than slowing down,

withdrew his previous advice. ‘Islam is an ocean’, he declared, ‘and if you dive in, you are going to drown’.

## 5. SPIRITUALITY

### 5.1 Themes

Like the previous presentations, this one took the narrative form of a journey towards Islam, though the passage it recounted was to a much greater extent that of a spiritual quest. The presenter’s conversion in middle age was the culmination, though not the conclusion, of decades in which he had been hungry for meaning and sought enlightenment through a variety of spiritual practices. Moreover, the conversion itself stemmed from a significant dream, a mystical experience that caused him to adopt a commitment and assume a discipline as he continued to follow Islam towards greater enlightenment.

### 5.2 Authentic Lived Experience

He began his narrative by expressing reservation. He was older than several of the previous speakers and uncertain of his relevance. Furthermore, he was wary of self-absorption, particularly in ‘this age of narcissism’, with its countless selfies and autobiographies. Nevertheless, he knew that people searching for meaning were hungry not for lists of taboos and rules, but for the authentic lived experience of fellow travellers. It was this that he would attempt to provide.

### 5.3 Spiritual Quest

His youth and young adulthood were spent trying to live what he could only describe as a ‘conscious life’. Though raised in the Church of England, by adolescence he considered himself more of an agnostic than a Christian, and more of a pantheist than an agnostic. His love of nature was deep and enduring. Still he was unsatisfied with ‘the mechanical thinking’, the fixed mindsets, and the intractable dichotomies he observed in the world around him. He began a years-long search for a form that would allow him to bypass these rigid mental structures and achieve more intuitive thinking and insight—what he called enlightenment. This quest incorporated many paths and practices, including yoga, meditation, the study of dreams and even monastic living.

Insomuch as he was influenced by Islam at this time, he was drawn to the Westernised Sufi mysticism often derided by heritage Muslims. The spiritual

hunger of Sufism, its focus on love, inner life, transformation, and consciousness, spoke to him. It clarified his own spiritual movement as a passage from the inner to the outer, a search for an unknown form to express a felt essence. This was, he felt, in stark contrast to the analogous journey of heritage Muslims, who often began with the form and had to uncover the essence. Yet both were necessary, he declared. The outer without the inner was an empty husk; the inner without the outer was mute and shapeless. Thus his eventual embrace of Islam at the age of fifty was an embrace of tradition and discipline, giving outer form to his longstanding inner yearnings.

Because the presenter came to Islam through a constant, cumulative, and ongoing journey, he refused to call himself a 'convert' or a 'revert'. There was, in his experience, neither a sudden transformation nor notable reversion. Rather, his conversion consisted of making a clear commitment and concentrating his spiritual search on a particular path. He made an analogy with music. Though learning just one instrument, 'a person learns musicianship'; yet 'there are many instruments that make up an orchestra', and they must be played together. The instrument and the orchestra were, for him, images of religion and the world.

#### 5.4 Dreams and Revelation

Nevertheless, the question remained: why should Islam have become his chosen spiritual path? Here, the presenter asked the other participants to suspend their logical minds and embrace the creative faculty inherent to each of them, though 'our scientific and mechanical society is now disconnected from it'. What led him to Islam was a dream. Through his long years of spiritual inquiry, he had learned to distinguish between the varieties of dream: those that recapitulated the day, those that gave shape to desire and anxiety, and those metaphysical dreams that offered guidance. His dream was an example of this last kind.

In the dream, he was standing in a familiar, well-loved place and holding a black box in his hand. It was a gift for his wife and he knew that it symbolised the feminine, yet when he opened the box, he found that it was empty. He looked deeper into the emptiness, until it seemed to become infinite space. Then he awoke. But when, restless, he went downstairs and turned on the TV, the first thing he saw was a man holding the very same black box; he opened it to reveal the ninety-nine names of God in Islamic tradition: it was a visual representation of the *hadith* (saying of the Prophet) that 'God had ninety-nine Names, one hundred minus one; whoever enumerates them enters paradise'. The Arabic

word translated as ‘enumerate’ has the sense not only of placing on record or memorisation of the Names, but also of understanding them, being mindful of them and acting upon them.

He later made inquiries, learned that the television programme was part of a series called *Ramadan Journeys*, and met the artist who made the box (and presented it to him as a gift). He also learned that programme should have ended half an hour earlier, too soon for him to have seen it; as fate would have it, a football match went into extra time. The speaker had brought the box to the symposium and demonstrated the beauty of its geometry, pointing out that ‘everywhere you look within the box, you find the face of God’. And so the two boxes, in his dream and in reality, represented for him the inner essence and the outer form. The dream had shown him a way of bringing that inner essence to outer form. Some months later both he and his wife took *shahadah* in Istanbul.

### 5.5 Spiritual Principles

Upon his return to Britain as a Muslim and his visit to a London mosque, he encountered ‘the tribal mentality’ that other participants had complained of and that he felt Islam was supposed to abolish. Explaining that he had converted in Turkey, he had been told that there were no Muslims in Turkey, only Sufis. Yet despite this initial disillusionment, he had since encountered many inspiring Muslim exemplars and could now articulate four spiritual principles that were important to him. First, the journey to Islam went far beyond culture. He still maintained the cultural identity, ‘more Welsh than English’, of his earlier life, and conceived of conversion far more as an opening to universality than as an initiation into a brotherhood. Second, the journey would continue, having no ending. The spiritual certitude required for conversion was not the same as mental certainty, the finality of a closed book. He did not wish to reach such a terminus in his lifetime. Third, ‘God will not change you unless you change yourself’. He believed that such attempts at change must be purged of ego, of the false self. Thus activism in the world should also be rooted in spirituality and in the renunciation of ego-centred ambitions. Fourth, the black box contained the names of God and, in his dream, was meant as a gift for a woman. He urged the other participants to embrace the religious conception of the word as a living thing, an act in itself, and thus the convergence between speech and action that necessarily followed from this belief. He finally urged them to honour the feminine as both gender and principle.

## 6. DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Themes

Despite the presenter's reservations over revealing something as personal as dreams, several participants swiftly volunteered spiritual experiences that had similarly furthered their journeys to Islam. Revelatory dreams—dreams that seemed to know more than the dreamer—were a not uncommon feature of a convert's progress. However, the discussion of spirituality, and its Sufi interpretation in Islam, swiftly led to a matter of more worldly concern: the tension between Sufism and Salafism in British communities.

### 6.2 Narrative

After one participant described his own dream, he inquired further into the narrative structure the presenter had given to his story. In his telling, the journey seemed an organic process, a natural development leading him inevitably to Islam. Was it really like this? The presenter acknowledged a curious tension inherent in retrospective narration. On the one hand, he felt that if not for the dream, he could very easily have become something besides a Muslim, another instrument in the human orchestra; in this sense, the inevitability of the narrative was misleading. But on the other hand, the recounting of it caused him to see the course of his life clearly and to observe, for the first time, its surprising directness.

### 6.3 Generational Differences

The fact of the presenter's expressed reserve, meanwhile, provoked a brief discussion about the generational differences represented at the symposium. One younger attendee found this reluctance difficult to understand. Another participant of the speaker's own generation suggested that it derived from the modesty, and even the sense of shame, instilled during their upbringings. He felt, moreover, that the change in such attitudes not only demonstrated how much Britain had changed over the twentieth century, but indicated how much more his parents' generation shared with present-day Pakistan than with contemporary British culture.

### 6.4 Spirituality in Western and Muslim Thought

Yet another convert suggested that reticence in divulging dreams had less to do with generation gaps than with 'the Western mindset' and its refusal to acknowledge dreams as an important part of life. He identified self-interest as

the biggest problem with Western society and revealed that what had driven his own spiritual wanderings was precisely the desire to move beyond the self. In this light, his own significant dream loomed large. Some way along the path to conversion, he had dreamed his own execution. His head was chopped off, and yet before and after this decapitation he experienced a blissful feeling. The day after this dream, he felt he truly understood for the first time the Islamic texts he was studying. Six months later, he met a Jesuit priest and Zen teacher whose face was that of his executioner. The lesson he took from this experience was that God was a loving assassin. Sufi teachings about the extinction of the self were, in this vein, part of his path to Islam, although he added that Sufism itself could be too wild—he would have been lost without the discovery of a strong and structured Muslim community.

A certain anxiety over the confession of dreams extended to a discussion of the validity of Sufism. One participant pointed out that one was often reluctant to share dreams, particularly as epiphanies, because one did not want the validity of one's journey to Islam questioned. There was a feeling among some heritage Muslims, moreover, that to speak of revelatory dreams was presumptuous, as if one were setting oneself up as a prophet. A new Muslim did not know what was allowed and was correspondingly timid. The same could be said about Sufism, he felt. A recent convert was reluctant to experiment with spiritual practices for fear of his faith being called into question. Only with experience did he learn that he could explore.

### 6.5 Sufism and Salafism<sup>22</sup>

The Chair expressed surprise at this point that Sufi was apparently a negative term in Muslim communities. In response, several participants declared that it was increasingly used as an insult, that Sufism was increasingly seen as beyond the pale by many heritage Muslims, and that it was therefore increasingly difficult for converts to engage with that tradition. The presenter interjected to point out that he maintained an intellectual and spiritual connection to Sufism, and that it was dangerous in any case to become trapped in dichotomies such as Sufi vs. non-Sufi. What was required instead was 'a holistic understanding of human faculties', including those 'higher faculties ignored by our materialist culture' and reductive education; in this, Sufism had a role to play. Another convert simply felt that these were not issues that should be dividing Muslims. But still others insisted that the discourse of Islam was narrowing in their communities.

The resulting discussion of Sufi and Salafi, including professions of the

participants' own sympathies and descriptions of the division they saw in Muslim communities, returned the conversation to the concept of 'naïve sincerity' and its discontents. Several participants revealed that their initial exposure and adherence as new Muslims were to the Salafist approach. One attendee described his post-conversion period as one of zealotry rather than 'naïve sincerity'. He was encouraged not to speak about dreams and to disregard Sufis as unserious. Yet he now believed that many people did come to Islam through dreams and found himself more comfortable with the company of Sufis than with many others. There were many bad ways of learning Islam that, once adopted, must be unlearned. This, he concluded, was the process of a convert's maturation. Another participant divulged that he too was a zealot when he 'crash-landed' into Islam. Hardly understanding the various labels thrown around by more experienced Muslims, he quickly realised that the people he had fallen in with were extremely negative on the subject of Sufis. 'Sufi' was, in fact, their 'catch-all term' for other Muslims who disagreed with them. A third speaker also described the deep intolerance he had witnessed when, as a younger convert, he was heavily influenced by the Salafist movement. However, it was possible, he suggested, that he was simply exposed to the kind of character who embodied intolerance in any movement, rather than to a particularly bigoted doctrine.

A more sympathetic portrait of Salafism was painted by a participant who felt that the divisions drawn thus far were unrepresentative. He described his English city as a nucleus for Salafism in Britain, and acknowledged that Sufism was seen there almost as 'a fifth column'. Yet he would describe the behaviour of many Salafists as Sufi-like (for instance, he had not been taught to disregard dreams, but merely to take them to a person of knowledge), and he reminded others that Sufis too had been known to resort to violence. For his part, he was thankful that in his early years he had learned how to process knowledge. The fate of a new convert, he asserted, was to be the object of constant recruitment from all quarters. It required inner strength not to capitulate and to find one's own path. He had seen converts 'come hard and then disappear', moving from fervent *shahadah* to discouraged apostasy. Fifteen years ago, he himself would have been uncomfortable sitting in a room with other converts of such different persuasions. It took him time to become sufficiently at ease with himself before he could navigate such diverse Muslim spaces. Now the aspect of fellow Muslims that frightened him was 'literalism'. Thus, though he was not a fully-fledged member of the Salafist *da'wah* (call to Islam), he could not recognise the characterisation of Salafism made by other participants and would warn against such flippant statements.<sup>23</sup>

## 6.6 'Naïve' vs. 'Innocent' Sincerity

In relation to the negative perception and reception of Sufism, two concepts were reintroduced from previous conversation: White privilege and 'naïve sincerity'. One participant pointed out that Sufism suffered from its association with educated white people who, privileged enough to choose among various spiritual options of the 1960s, picked this path. Class and racial resentment were the result. Earlier, moreover, in response to the use of 'naïve sincerity' to describe a zealous embrace of Islam, the Chair suggested a change in terminology. He proposed the reformulation of 'innocent sincerity', since far more than 'naivety', 'innocence' connoted childhood, the stage at which all basic questions could be asked and boundaries pushed. Were he to convert to Islam, the Chair declared, he would not wish to lose this innocence immediately.

The same notion of innocence and play in the convert's approach to Islam appealed to another participant, who insisted that as new Muslims they needed above all to be realistic. 'We are children coming to the *din*', he said; doing so required humility, critical thinking, courage, and a clear model to follow. The participant who had coined the phrase 'naïve sincerity', meanwhile, was not opposed to the revision of 'innocent sincerity' and in fact enjoyed its 'sibilant sound'. But he drew a more severe conclusion from the preceding discussion, warning against the lazy mode of thinking that rendered many labels pejorative and millions of people dismissed. As new Muslims, he urged his fellow participants to avoid groupthink, to include dissenting voices, and to refuse the repudiation of any great tradition of the *din*. His young convert's attitude was altogether relaxed: 'I do my thing, you do your thing, and we're cool'.

## 7. 'BECOMING MUSLIM' AND THE RESPONSES OF FAMILY & FRIENDS

### 7.1 Themes

An older convert in attendance gave the symposium's final full account of 'Becoming Muslim', a narrative encompassing the second half of the twentieth century, the disorientation and eroded confidence of the upper class at the end of the British Empire, the various social and cultural upheavals that marked the 1960s, and a lost sense of community and purpose re-emerging through the convert's embrace of a beautiful Islamic tradition.

## 7.2 Tradition Lost

The presenter had been formed by his family, his education, and his class to run an empire, only to emerge into a postwar world where he found such services no longer needed and the tradition in which he had been trained empty. He recounted his idyllic childhood, his early enthusiasm for the Church, and his utterly traumatic exile to boarding school. The speaker dwelt on his Spartan and nationalist education, the cult-like indoctrination and grooming meant to transform boys into servants of the Empire. He recalled the supreme confidence they shared in the greatness of the English, a belief so deeply ingrained that its deconstruction, in the 1960s, left him drained and disoriented. He spent years searching for a social and cultural framework to replace the one he had lost—for a new religion, in effect. He wanted desperately to be a part of something he could believe in. Kitchen-sink drama, modern art, the 60s counterculture: he experienced them all intimately, drenching himself in the modern world after his school years of conservative nostalgia. Yet each adventure left him feeling desolate; the worlds he found were too shallow to sustain his yearning.

## 7.3 Tradition Found

The ‘inexhaustible, oceanic’ tradition that he eventually discovered—against which modern art seemed but a ‘puddle’ in comparison—was one he found through music, food, and friendship. His first introduction to Islam was through a musician whose art struck the presenter as at once deeply structured and spontaneous and whose personality seemed ‘completely integrated’. This friendship gave the speaker the idea of organizing the first Festival of Islam to be held in Britain. While waiting for it to open, moreover, he was surrounded by ‘the beauty of Islam’—the assembled artworks and objects, the various scholars who attended. Thus he found himself on a trajectory along which he met more and more Muslims. He had not been looking for a religion or for spirituality, but he found a community and a tradition in which he could feel properly at home for the first time since childhood. Six months before the opening of the Festival, he received Islam.

## 7.4 Tradition and Perfection

An ‘achievable perfection’ was what the speaker found in Islam, in its masters and in its tradition. Several figures stood out as examples to him for their work in reviving a traditional aesthetic in architecture and agriculture, in art and in living that Western colonialism had broken. Through their work he observed

that endless possibilities of beauty were available ‘through the tradition, through remaining in the tradition’. The great terrace agriculture of north Yemen, for instance, was the sophisticated product of thousands of years of sustainable land and water use. The whole of the knowledge of these farmers was contained in epic poetry, poetry that lived through oral transmission. Yet this perfect, traditional practice had been undercut by irrigation technology and by subsidised wheat from the US and Europe. Within a few years, the terraces had collapsed. Despite this tragedy, however, the presenter had witnessed and understood the inexhaustible nature of a great and profound tradition.

## 8. DISCUSSION

### 8.1 Themes

The conversation following this presentation focused on family relationships and reactions in the convert’s experience; the attitudes of converts towards migrant Muslim communities; and the roles of class, race, and history in the convert’s choice of Islam.

### 8.2 Family Reactions<sup>24</sup>

Pressed to describe the effect his conversion had on his family, the presenter admitted that the situation was initially complicated. He took *shahadah* alone, and his wife followed him a year later. Yet his mother had never reconciled to his conversion and, while his sibling relationships had improved, in his branch of the family he remained the only Muslim. Other mothers proved more supportive: one speaker revealed that although his mother was at first embarrassed by his conversion, she now declared that ‘for their own good’, all children in the U.K. should be Muslim ‘until the age of twenty-five’.

A convert of the speaker’s own generation recounted an episode of blatant prejudice on the part of a relative. Though he later discovered that this in-law had been combing through his writings to find incriminating phrases, it came as an utter and unprovoked surprise to be informed that he was ‘the enemy’, ‘a Muslim and a traitor’. It was class that lent the relative’s bigotry its particular animus: he could not understand why the participant, white and privileged, should have thrown in his lot with Islam. He was a traitor in the mould of the Cambridge spies, Burgess and Maclean, whose great crime had been to ‘let the side down’.

### 8.3 Family and Narrative

Later in the discussion, several participants revealed that, for the purposes of narrative and explanation, it was often easier to let others believe that their conversion was the product of family convenience—not of dreams, convictions, spiritual or cultural yearning. It was tempting and it was dangerous, they felt, to adopt less challenging narratives for public consumption and so distort their own experience. The usual story, often assumed or tacitly condoned, was that they converted for marriage and a Muslim wife, for love rather than faith. It was felt that people close to the converts often told themselves this easier story about their conversion in order to protect themselves from deeper enquiry. One participant added that this closed-mindedness to conversion narratives and assumption of a more convenient family angle were more usually directed at female converts.

### 8.4 Converts and Heritage Muslims

Another participant asked the presenter to comment on the criticism of migrant Muslim communities made previously by participants. He replied that in the context of the degeneration of religion in Britain over the past fifty years, the resilience of Muslim communities had remained an endless source of amazement. He compared the arrogant mentality of the Western humanist tradition, placing the human at the centre of existence, with the humble perseverance of Muslim immigrants who, invited to this country to do the jobs that native-born Britons no longer wanted to do, ‘stuck to it and built these communities’. Moreover, he contrasted their strength and kindness with ‘the state of dissolution’ that afflicted the Britain they arrived in during the 1960s. He declared that he had received only kindness from the heritage Muslim community and that he could not possibly criticise it.

### 8.5 History, Race, and Class

One participant spoke from the perspective and particular history of West Indian migrants, for whom Islam contributed both to the recovery of a historical authenticity and to the pursuit of social justice. Islam provided a ‘muscular option’ and an alternative to what was seen as ‘decadent and effete Christianisation’. In his early Muslim experience in a poor part of London, ‘trying to get a community on its feet’, Islam was a voice that articulated the need for a fairer society. Yet though he was ‘authentic’ in his being and his appearance as a Caribbean man, his background was somewhat more privileged and he was seen by some in London as a ‘plant’, as an agent of White

privilege in disguise. This was partly an instance of old-fashioned racism—he paraphrased the feeling as ‘here come the whites to take charge, and they’re sending this guy’—yet he would not deny the reality of white middle-class and upper-middle-class privilege. The way such privileged people took to Sufism, he declared, had made it seem exclusive and stained it with class and racial resentments—though this was presumably the kind of snobbery they were trying to escape by embracing Islam in the first place.

The Chair drew attention to the sociological element of such comments as a necessary complement to the spiritual aspect of much of the earlier session. He asked, in a deliberately provocative manner, whether it was out of alienation that converts found in Islam an ‘underdog’ on which to project their own disaffectedness and marginalisation. In response, one participant jokingly pointed out the significant proportion of ginger converts in the gathering, suggesting that as they were already outcasts, they found it natural to make common cause with Islam. He personally did not feel alienated, nor had he come to Islam at the end of a search; it had simply been present in the background of his life. Yet he felt that this would vary from person to person, and he described another participant as someone who, clearly disaffected with his social surroundings, had searched for and found in Islam a cultural alternative. The presenter added that he personally longed to be part of ‘the mainstream’; in the 1960s, he had been a member of marginal movements which now constituted the mainstream, whereas he had converted and now felt marginalised afresh.

One participant asserted that the prospect of righting a historical wrong—the Crusades—had influenced his decision to convert. Believing that the destiny of Islam had been interrupted, it was easier for him to join the side of the badly treated. Another attendee, however, hoped that the ‘manufactured’ clash of civilisations was reaching its end, since around him he saw society self-dividing like never before. He admitted that because Islam was attracting so many new people, it could also attract psychopaths—those who were drawn to conflict. But these were ‘an absolute minority’. It was more important to bear in mind ‘the great diversity of paths to Islam’. Although much had been made of spiritual inspiration during the symposium, others were drawn to Islam purely out of social motivation, such as marriage or the example of one’s friends. Though he cited one willing convert who had mixed up the Prophet Muhammad with Muhammad Ali, he did not mean to discount such avenues to Islam—indeed, he had seen how they could lead to great piety—but he felt that difficulty of incorporating them all was a great contemporary challenge.

There were surprising resources for converts in British history itself, two participants revealed. One spoke of the striking difference in public attitudes to Islamic conversion now and in the Victorian period. Then, he suggested, conversion was not as fraught an issue, partly because the Muslim community was more upper class than today. (The phrase ‘turning Turk’ has its contemporary equivalent in ‘white Paki’, he added.) This was a useful heritage to deploy in countering the pervasive ‘media narrative’ suggesting that only those at the bottom of society would convert to ‘this lowly religion’. A second participant added that other unexpectedly deep Muslim heritages, such as that of the black community, should be brought to the surface. It would be an advantage to converts, he asserted, to know that heritage Muslims were not the only ones with Islamic heritage.

### **8.6 White Privilege**

Another speaker addressed the recurring subject of White privilege from a white working-class background. He questioned whether participants had fully apprehended the apparatus involved in the construction of White privilege. Privilege also denoted wealth, power, and the right kind of religion. The colour of one’s skin alone was insufficient, as ‘the Celtic narratives of marginalisation’ within Britain indicated. His working class roots gave him a strong sympathy for the underdog as well as a deep desire to educate his community. Islam would be a means to this education, he believed, if his community were not unfortunately embedded in far-right politics. Moreover, he felt that strictly ‘white’ privilege was something he had forfeited, to an extent, through his conversion and subsequent rejection by his own people. An older convert added that prejudice existed on both sides, recalling the reaction among his wife’s Pakistani family when he, a white man, married her in the 1970s. Prejudice existed in ignorance, he added, and so ignorance must be the target. But a third participant suggested that they needed to see themselves from the perspective of heritage Muslims. Of course there would be mistrust of white converts, he said, but that was a reaction to outsiders, not to converts or whites per se. As with many social situations, the tension related to ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’. He urged the gathering to be careful not to misread this dynamic.

### **8.7 Male vs. Female Perspectives**

A theme that emerged more strongly in this last session was the recurring comparison between male and female conversion experiences. At several points, the Chair recalled similar questions being raised during the symposia on female

perspectives and gave paraphrases of the answers the women had provided. A point of convergence lay in the role of class in a convert's social reception. For women of the upper and upper-middle classes, conversion was often accepted as eccentricity. Yet working-class women were frequently made to feel that Islam, as a religion of outsiders, was some way down the social hierarchy and that, by converting, a woman would be compounding her already significant social weaknesses and handicaps. One of the most significant differences, meanwhile, lay in the respective visibility of male and female converts: women were encouraged to wear their identity openly, in the form of the *hijab*. One participant recognised, with a certain embarrassment, that women were the ones who generally had to 'fly the flag' of Islam with their bodies. In this vein, the Chair pointed out, women in the first *Narratives of Conversion* project had commented on the great divergence between rural and urban living, a distinction that turned on comparative visibility and invisibility.

### 8.8 City vs. Country

The general consensus among the country-dwelling converts in attendance, however, was that they were subject to much less distrust, harassment, and basic attention in rural communities than in cities. One man revealed that in villages, people simply left him and his wife alone; whereas in bigger European cities, they had experienced clear mistrust on the part of the locals. Others agreed that people seemed to be more relaxed about both Islam and conversion in smaller communities. One participant lived in a Welsh village and drily declared that he was more likely to receive a brick through the window of his house for being English than for being a Muslim. It was certainly more difficult to get *halal* food and to go to prayers in the country—in fact, he missed the wider Muslim community available in cities—but he pointed out that he was free to get on with his day-to-day life untroubled. For one attendee who described himself as 'a man with ambitions for social change', the rural offered an opportunity to create and sustain an alternative social reality that cities simply did not have enough space to allow. Whereas constriction—both physical and ideological—was the condition of the city, he thought it was possible to 'colonise' more open spaces and build something visible to others, something that could stand as an example.

### 8.9. Public vs. Private: Spiritual Adolescence

The Chair then raised another dichotomy, the Western separation of public and private spheres, asking if Islam was a force that disrupted and destabilised

this cherished binary. The participants indicated that it was. In comparison to Islam and its clear signs of difference, it was felt, other religions were hardly visible in the U.K. To this end, dress was clearly the most visible sign of a Muslim's difference, although one speaker found it incredible that miniskirts should be accepted in British society while Islamic full-dress was frowned upon. Moreover, several participants revealed that they had defiantly, in some cases, and embarrassedly, in others, displayed their faith by praying in public. They now saw their assertiveness in claiming public space and proclaiming their identity as a kind of 'spiritual adolescence', another reformulation of the stage previously described as 'naïve sincerity', 'innocent sincerity', and 'zealotry'. Indeed, new Muslims in Britain not infrequently regarded Islam as a rebellious identity and their embrace of it as a rebellious act. One man remembered feeling 'like a punk rocker in a turban'.

That said, it was generally felt that as a convert matured spiritually, he became more comfortable and confident in his Muslim identity and less intent on recognition. One participant, however, insisted upon the anti-dualism of Islam itself. Whereas modernity had reordered human life by dividing it in myriad ways (work vs. leisure, for instance), there was no such separation in Islam, whether between the private and the public or the sacred and the secular. Modernity represented the triumph of the secular and the defeat of holistic life, he asserted, and most religions had capitulated. But Muslims maintained the advantage of 'an undivided core'. It was impossible, he declared, for Muslims to reconcile themselves to modernity.

The debate over the appropriate level of public visibility for converts remained unresolved. One speaker described the anxiety he felt while praying at work. Though his colleagues knew he was Muslim, he still found himself wondering and worrying about who might knock at his door. He suggested that new Muslims perhaps gave in to embarrassment too easily and were therefore not ostentatious enough. It might even be considered part of their duty to attain a certain visibility, he reflected, for it was very powerful to see piety in public—merely the sight of prayer could 'melt' the hearts of others. Yet a second voice maintained that such considerations varied wildly according to the individual case. He knew fellow converts who did not disclose their conversion and prayed in secret (a feat, he admitted, that was easier for men than women). Yet he himself had occasionally advised a new Muslim to keep his conversion quiet and would, depending on the delicacy of the situation, do so again.

## CONCLUSION

The two-day discussion of 'Journeys to Islam' had been, in the words of the Chair, 'open, warm, and thoughtful'. So open, in fact, that the gathered converts had ranged well beyond the suggested limits of the 'Guiding Questions' (see Appendix II) and left little time for summation. The only immediately available and incontrovertible conclusion was that there was no single model for becoming a Muslim. Rather, the participants in Symposium I of *Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Male Perspectives* had shared their diverse journeys through hip-hop, art, spiritual hunger, activism, food, friends, and dreams to Islam.

Takbeers (Allah is Great) for shahadahs (declaration of faith) to honour us  
Welcomed to the club with a humongous rush  
First thirty minutes they circled me, a constant fuss  
Promised us fraternity for eternity, oh how sonorous!  
Wanted just some comrades with a common touch  
What I got: monstrous admonishment  
Persona brushed aside, ordered alter my moniker  
For faith efface the face of the baby my momma clutched  
In an instant, I'm an infant again then the bonds were cut  
The brotherhood's pseudo, they soon go, I'm anonymous  
Contemplating if I ever belonged as such  
Naive sincerity got me thinking I was in the wrong; I'm crushed to dust  
But isolation made him strong and tough  
Plus being Caucasian gave him benefits, sponsored up  
Hajj and Umrah (smaller pilgrimage), for her marriage if she's blond enough  
This dude you see usually described as white all his life  
Is now English like the two terms are synonymous, right!  
(And I'm more Welsh to be precise)  
Born believers expecting an instant connection  
Between coreligionists of the same complexion  
When my culture's more complex than PG Tips  
Fish and chips, cricket and Queen Elizabeth, well isn't it?  
Product of my environment, the past revisited  
Since boyhood benefitted from white privilege  
Few privy, most oblivious 'cause they're living it  
This lyricist slash empiricist examines appearances  
With my skin, hair, nose, lips I can go unnoticed on road trips  
Islam almost invisible on my physical, yeah you know this  
So any boneheads with bones to pick with me: its minimal  
But if the thobe fits, the assumption is I'm liberal  
Not literal, a decade deep in Deen (faith, religion) but little still  
Iman (belief) on my heart, tongue, limbs but I still feel liminal  
Outsider staring in clinging to the windowsill  
A plinth was built for me because my skin is milk

A token, a trophy, a novelty  
Man minus melanin, selling him as a model minority  
Plus he has follicles too; it's a folly to follow me  
Forestry on my chin don't make me an authority  
A foreign breed to some, salaams they don't return them  
Others prefer him as a spokesperson  
"Woe is me!" Is this what they call the white man's burden?  
One thing's for certain it's a consequence of conversion  
Or is it reversion? I guess it's all semantics  
Benny Blanco here granted an advantage  
Anger and anguish inside me left me damaged, let it go expressed in flows;  
I'm just being candid

## *Appendix Two*

### **SYMPOSIUM I: GUIDING QUESTIONS**

#### **1.1: First Interest and Taking the *Shahadah***

- When did participants first become interested in Islam and what were their initial impressions?
- What guidance and information is available from individuals ('mentors'), institutions or other sources to develop an initial curiosity about Islam?
- What is the role of Islamic art, poetry and music in generating an interest in Islam?
- Is the decision to convert sudden or part of a much longer process of change? Did converts change anything about their lifestyle or identity prior to taking the *shahadah*?
- What is the significance of taking the *shahadah* in participants' narratives of conversion?
- How far are the experiences of children and teenagers converting to Islam different to adults?
- How do the experiences of individuals who are born Muslim but 'convert' later in life differ to converts from a non-Muslim background?

#### **1.2: Learning Islam**

- What knowledge(s) are converts looking for when they begin to learn about Islam? Are there differences between learning before and after conversion?
- Which sources of knowledge do converts approach to learn Islam?
- How able are converts to distinguish between information from different dominations of Islam and is this significant?
- Do participants learn Islam without a 'cultural inflection'? Is this unique among Muslims?
- How far do the core values learnt by converts sustain or disrupt values from pre-conversion?

#### **1.3: 'Becoming Muslim' and the Responses of Friends and Family**

- What changes does conversion lead to in a convert's lifestyle? How does this change over time? What was most easy and difficult to change?

- How do converts present their identity as Muslims? Do outward changes in appearance reflect inward changes?
- Is there pressure on converts to shed aspects of their non-Muslim identity?
- Is conversion to Islam a process of change or continuity?
- What is the impact of conversion on the work of artists?
- At what stage do converts present their conversion to family and friends? How do family and friends react? What is the impact of changes in identity and behaviour on their reaction?
- How do converts respond to the reactions of family and friends?

#### 1.4: Spirituality

- What is the significance of spirituality in the decision to convert?
- Is conversion to Islam a result of a 'spiritual journey'?
- What are the different conceptions of spirituality and how are these conceptions shaped by denomination of Islam, location and the time since conversion?

**Symposium II**  
**Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Male Perspectives**  
**Conversion and Un/Belonging • 21st – 22nd March 2015**

**PARTICIPANTS**

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## Contents

Introduction • 62

1. Relations with Heritage Muslims, Mosques and Muslim Associations • 63
2. *Discussion* • 69
3. Relations with Wider British Society, Civic Engagement, Media & Representation • 78
4. *Discussion* • 80
5. Convert Community/Ties and Support Organisations • 89
6. *Discussion* • 94
7. 'Becoming Muslim' and the Responses of Family & Friends • 105
8. *Discussion* • 109

Conclusion • 115

*Appendix I: 'Beard Is Beautiful'* • 116

*Appendix II: Symposium II Guiding Questions* • 119

*Endnotes* • 173

## Introduction

The second symposium addressed issues of ‘Conversion and Un/Belonging’.

The subjects of presentation were ‘Relations with Heritage Muslims, Mosques and Muslim Associations’; ‘Relations with Wider British Society, Civic Engagement, Media & Representation’; ‘Convert Community/ties and Support Organisations’; and “‘Becoming Muslim” and the Responses of Family & Friends’. Each presentation entered the same general territory—life after conversion—and asked the same underlying question. How can converts, caught between integration into the Muslim community and integration into wider society, make a civic virtue of their in-between position while maintaining personal integrity? The prisms through which this question was posed included a data-driven exploration of the relation between converts and heritage Muslims, a historical attempt to recover a particularly British Islamic heritage, a discussion of the work of convert support groups, and the narrative of an older convert’s life.

The discussion that followed each presentation, always civil but often passionate, ranged far beyond these initial frames of reference. Certain subjects recurred and deepened over the course of the symposium, often forming balanced contrasts: tension and harmony between converts and Muslim communities, the invitation and alienation of mosques, the importance and dangers of funding for Muslim organisations, the acceptance and rejection of converts within families. Important conversations coalesced around particular topics, phrases, and images: Islamic architecture, the metaphor of converts as a social ‘bridge’, a perceived media bias against Muslims, the definition of community. Above all, participants explored the meanings, and competing claims, of integration.

Twenty-five converts attended the symposium. Several had attended the previous symposium and provided continuity, while others were new and offered fresh perspectives. They ranged in age from their early twenties to their seventies; they came from England, Wales, and Scotland; and they spoke under Chatham House rules.

# 1. RELATIONS WITH HERITAGE MUSLIMS, MOSQUES AND MUSLIM ASSOCIATIONS

## 1.1 Themes

This presentation introduced one of the overarching themes of the symposium: the complex and sometimes strained relations between converts and so-called ‘heritage Muslims’. Employing a foundation of rigorous research topped off by more anecdotal and personal evidence, the presenter sketched three views of this relationship—those of heritage Muslims, of converts, and his own—while focusing on six points of concern: the importance converts placed on being among heritage Muslims, the ways in which heritage Muslims conceived of converts, the debt converts owed to heritage Muslims, the place of converts in the wider Muslim community, the significance of the *ummah* (the pan-Islamic collective), and the roles of mosques and Muslim Associations. He addressed these topics with precisely defined terms and a data-centred sense of social context. In the course of his research and his presentation, he uncovered a wealth of views from converts, a paucity of written perspectives from heritage Muslims, and several mistaken assumptions—about the experiences of men versus women, the monolithic character of the heritage Muslim community, and the pre-eminence of the *ummah*. The presenter promised and delivered ‘not answers, but useful views’.

## 1.2 Definitions

A social scientist currently working on his doctorate, the presenter took an academic approach to his subject and began by defining his terms—most notably, those of ‘heritage Muslim’ and ‘convert’. He was not particularly comfortable with ‘heritage Muslim,’ but justified its use because the term encompassed the sense of a wider Muslim heritage as well as referring to a particular population. Two commonly used alternatives were also addressed: ‘born Muslims’ and ‘Muslim-born’. The first he had himself used before taking up the more established ‘heritage Muslim’. Yet the presenter urged caution in terminology on the grounds of precision and tact. On the one hand, the alternative terms stood in some contradiction to the belief that, held by Muslims, we are all born as Muslims (some remain so, some return to this state, and others become something else). On the other, he urged his fellow Muslims to be careful about tone and audience in choosing their words (particularly when speaking to non-Muslims).

The presenter uncovered similar complexity in the use of ‘convert’, listing four other options: ‘reverts’, ‘born non-Muslims’, ‘new Muslims’, and ‘*Muallaf*’ (one who embraces Islam). At the time of his own conversion, he was very much of the ‘revert’ camp, though he had since come to see this term as betraying too much of the perspective of an ‘insider’. ‘New Muslims’ and ‘born non-Muslims’ were phrases he found rather offensive, and he suspected others in his position may feel similarly. Having been a Muslim for over twenty years now, why should he still consider himself ‘new’? When, moreover, would he and other converts stop being ‘new’? ‘*Muallaf*’, meanwhile, was not particularly useful for talking to non-Muslims. Thus, he concluded that for the largest audience and the most neutral tone, ‘heritage Muslim’ and ‘convert’, though imperfect, were best.

### 1.3 Social Context

The speaker concluded his introductory remarks by offering context to his terminology, drawing on data from the 2011 census and his own research to identify which populations in the United Kingdom were covered by the terms ‘heritage Muslim’ and ‘convert’. The Muslim population of the UK constituted 4.8% of the general population and 4% of the total adult population. Of this group, 60% were considered South Asian (that is to say, of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Indian origin)—this, the presenter added, was a factor to consider when speaking of convert relations with the Muslim community. He also pointed out that in Britain almost one third of Muslims were under the age of sixteen, a fact that fuelled the groundless but fear-based media narrative that Muslims were taking over the country. And while the census provided no information about converts, his personal research indicated that there were between 50,000 and 80,000 in the UK today, or roughly ‘4% of the 4%’. The position of converts as a minority group within a minority group, he pointed out, would of necessity influence the perspectives he then proceeded to expound.

### 1.4 Converts and the Community: The Heritage Muslim View

Two caveats prefaced the speaker’s discussion of the heritage Muslim view of converts. The first related to the possibility of giving offense—he maintained that while others had the right to be offended, he too had the right to offend—and the second to the basic difficulty of addressing this subject with certainty. It was hard to say what heritage Muslims thought of converts, the presenter declared. There was little written evidence expressing their opinions, even though one might have thought this was an important matter. So we must rely on anecdotal evidence and contradictory messages that were often relayed

through the accounts of converts themselves—supplemented, in this presentation, by academic study.

Five views of the convert in relation to the community were then outlined. The first was characterised by possessiveness, particularly the proprietorial attitude of the heritage community towards the white person who wishes to convert. In the second, the convert stood as manifest proof of the truth of Islam; the very existence of the convert refuted the notion of Islam as a ‘foreign religion’, while some in the community even saw conversion as the former coloniser’s acknowledgement of the superiority of the formerly colonised (the presenter attributed this last opinion to an academic source and admitted it was ‘tricky’ to label it a widespread attitude). In a similar vein, the third attitude saw converts as representing Islam perhaps better than the born Muslims themselves; they often knew more about it and, moreover, had the ability to decouple culture and religion. The fourth view conceived of the convert as one who was best avoided, being puritanical and unsavoury—‘more Muslim than the Muslims’. And the last considered converts as not ‘proper’ Muslims at all. The presenter recognised that these views involved both overlap and contradiction.

### **1.5 Converts and the Community: The Convert View**

In contrast to the scattered opinions of heritage Muslims, the presenter found an abundance of anecdotal evidence reflecting the converts’ views of their treatment by heritage Muslims, particularly on the Internet. Many of these opinions were negative, and the speaker cautioned that they should be dealt with carefully, as viewpoints developed at one remove from heritage Muslims and therefore vulnerable to bias. He would report on how converts ‘say they are seen’ by the community.

There was a wide variety of negative experience. Some converts felt they were seen as trophies and tokens, without an important place in the community. Others complained that they were seen as perpetually ‘new’ Muslims and therefore in constant need of advice no matter how long it had been since they had embraced Islam. Still others felt they were judged for their previous lives of drinking, eating pork, and other Western habits; or considered to be unreliable (‘what’s to stop them from converting again?’); or even suspected to be establishment spies—especially after 9/11. Neither ‘us’ nor ‘them’, many converts essentially felt they were excluded from the ranks of ‘real’ Muslims. The presenter acknowledged that there were more positive stories to tell, but

did not wish to gloss over the fact that so much of the available evidence told of unequal treatment and unhappy relations.

In 2010, the presenter had helped carry out one of the largest surveys of Muslim converts in the UK to date, and he was thus able to draw on data and to distinguish between male and female perspectives. He found there was a great difference between the experiences of men and women, one that often ran counter to his assumptions. For instance, male respondents were evenly split on the question of whether they felt part of the Muslim community; a greater proportion of women, meanwhile, considered themselves accepted by heritage Muslims (the speaker pointed out that he would have presumed the opposite to be true).

He then drew on the range of answers to a different question: who or what had provided help and advice to the convert during his conversion? Books, Muslim friends, and the Internet ranked highest—indeed, the presenter felt that the Internet would have been cited even more frequently, but that the conversion of some of those surveyed predated it. While written sources may seem impersonal, and reliance on them indicative of some isolation, he pointed out that the proportion of converts who felt that they had been helped by Muslim friends was more than those who cited mosques and Muslim Associations put together. The survey looked more closely at marriages and friendships between converts and heritage Muslims, finding that—again contrary to the presenter’s expectation—more men than women were married and that the proportion who were married to heritage Muslims was 52% in the first case and 54% in the second. Moreover, a majority of male converts reported that ‘some or most’ of their close friends were also Muslim. That said, the survey also revealed a substantial isolation from the larger community, in that 17% of respondents had ‘hardly any or no’ Muslim friends. The presenter concluded that individuals played a larger role for converts than organisations, and that relevance decreased in ‘concentric social circles’ moving outward from the family, to fellow converts, to friends, to heritage Muslims, and then finally to mosques.

The problems respondents experienced after conversion, meanwhile, were headed by the difficulty of learning Arabic but also included serious trouble in finding communal acceptance. This was, the presenter pointed out, in spite of the fact that making Muslim friends appeared to be a fairly straightforward process for most converts. A lack of acceptance in the community was, he added, a more pressing concern among men than women, for whom family concerns were relatively more important than social ones.

The final range of responses cited by the presenter concerned the question of whether converts could act as a 'bridge' between Muslims and non-Muslims. The vast majority of those surveyed believed, with varying strengths of conviction that they could. Their reasons centred on the unique advantages of the converts' 'bridging' position (this metaphor was much used, discussed, and questioned over the course of the symposium): their ability to understand problems from both sides, to help explain Muslims to non-Muslims and vice versa, to provide examples and proof that Islam need not be seen as foreign, and to make use of their ethnic and cultural ties to non-Muslims. But while many of these sentiments seemed both reasonable and widely shared, the presenter cautioned that not all of his respondents agreed that converts could function as a good 'bridge'.<sup>25</sup>

### 1.6 Converts and the Community: A Personal View<sup>26</sup>

The speaker then turned to his personal position on the relations between converts and heritage Muslims, a point of view he could only articulate through reference to his own experience of life after conversion. Though British, he had embraced Islam as a young man living in Indonesia and married a Muslim Indonesian woman (to the perpetual question of why he had converted, his answer was 'no, he had converted several years *before* marriage'). His understanding of Islam and of Islamic community was therefore heavily influenced by their Indonesian articulations. Though on the periphery of most people's ideas of Islam (despite constituting the largest Muslim population in the world), Indonesian Muslims are accommodating and adaptive—'Islam with a smiling face'. Within Indonesian society, converts were certainly prized as trophies, but they were not seen as tokens. He found it very easy to integrate as a convert and never had the sense of being part of a minority.

His experience upon returning to the UK was one of sharp and uncomfortable contrast. While he had come back once before and studied in a mosque, it had been 'a very definite Arab mosque,' and he was eventually to learn that the ethnic composition of British mosques could matter a great deal. His permanent move back led him and his wife to encounter South Asian Islam for the first time. Not only was he—a white convert—seen as an outsider, so was his wife, despite the fact that she was a born Muslim who could speak Arabic and held a degree from an Islamic university. Moreover, the defining attraction and trait of his own Islamic faith was rationality—he considered his choice to convert a rational decision, one he arrived at after careful, philosophical evaluation of other religions. He was particularly drawn to neo-Mu'tazilite

thought, a re-emergent strand of Islamic philosophy that embraced rationality. But though this was a source of difficulty with heritage Muslims in Britain, the presenter was at pains to emphasise that it was only a difference of approach, stemming from understandable contrasts in cultural background, and not cause for serious division. In fact, he believed that he had been treated as an outsider by British Muslim communities not because he was a convert, but simply, because he, like his wife, was not part of the ‘in-group’. Such separations between ‘us and them’ were, after all, ‘a basic human trait’.

He therefore asked himself and other converts to be generous, careful, and self-critical in their relations with heritage Muslims. They should remember that they were in fact ‘interlopers asking for acceptance’ from an already ‘embattled minority’. In requesting a share in the community, they should not make demands but rather ask themselves why they felt they should have a larger say. ‘Are we trying to take control?’ he asked. Did ‘the preferred converts’ in particular—white, educated, and middle-class—feel entitled to an unearned dominance? It was important that converts pay respect to the achievement of heritage Muslims, to whom the whole infrastructure of Islam in Britain, from mosques to *halal* shops, was due.

The presenter closed his talk on the subject of the *ummah*, questioning the notion of solidarity among Muslims and of its actual relevance to their lives. Was holding one thing in common really enough to bind together a worldwide community? He felt he had more in common with white Britons and with Indonesians than he had with British South Asians. On the other hand, ‘who has not cried real tears at the plight of the Palestinians?’ Yet he would maintain that this was a human reaction rather than a specifically Muslim one. Islamic values, like British values, were in their essence only human values. His feeling was the *ummah* started at home and was, in the first instance, synonymous with family. *Ummah* then extended outwards through the concentric social circles of a Muslim’s existence—but by the time it reached all Muslims across the world, it became almost meaningless or at least indistinguishable from a general fellow feeling for humanity.

Thus, he declared that he would continue to be a Muslim at one remove from immersion in the Muslim community, practising Islam with a distinctly Indonesian flavour and ‘believing without truly belonging’.

## 2. DISCUSSION

### 2.1 Themes

The presentation embraced a wide variety of views, expressing both convert and heritage perspectives, and it was unsurprising that the conversation that followed offered up a corresponding range of opinions. These related largely, though not exclusively, to the participants' experiences of mosques and the communities that surrounded them. The perspectives that generated the most discussion were those of students and of one South Asian man. The concepts that provoked the most concerted challenges were the notion of a 'monolithic' heritage Muslim community and the metaphor of converts acting as a 'bridge' between Muslims and non-Muslims. Out of a debate on mosque architecture, finally, the heart of the discussion emerged: how could converts help create a British Islam in which the two terms did not contradict each other?

### 2.2 The *Ummah*

The first questioner challenged what he felt was one gap and another error in the presenter's treatment of the topic of communal relations. He pointed out that little mention had been made of mentors or Islamic institutions. Such institutions required attention and care if families, both convert and heritage, wanted their children to grow up in an atmosphere of Islamic values—a difficult task in a Western country. Moreover, he had a clear and simple, though opposing, answer to the presenter's question about the relevance of the *umamah*. Was this one thing sufficient to bind the whole community together? Yes, he replied. The proof was here: all these participants, gathered to discuss the centrality of Islam to their lives.

The presenter answered the first concern by referring to his experience of the encompassing Islamic structure of life in Indonesia. Those who had lived in Muslim-majority countries but now found themselves in Western societies would, he suggested, always miss the Islamic taste of everyday life. But they had to accept that they lived in societies in which that Islamic atmosphere could only be private. He then clarified his point about the *umamah*, asking if he was not closer to those who share his everyday experience than Muslims who live half a world away. He maintained that there were levels of closeness and community, and that for him the global *umamah* was too distant to be sustained as a meaningful entity—talk about it often dissipated into platitudes. This was not to say that Islam was not at the heart of his existence; if Islam was not central to their lives, he declared, then they were only paying 'lip service' to it.

### 2.3 Mixed Mosque Experiences<sup>27</sup>

Another participant shared his own deeply bifurcated experience of mosques in Britain. When he first came to Islam, he attended a mosque in a small community, one that was polyglot and in which no one ethnic group dominated. The result was that members practiced a more open and non-traditional form of Islam, and that newcomers were accepted in a more relaxed spirit. When he moved to a larger town and began visiting mono-ethnic mosques, however, he was shocked at what he saw of South Asian Islam and what he took to be the dominance of culture over religion in those communities. In rebuttal to the view of converts as upstarts in established Muslim collectives, moreover, he would emphasise the deep convert heritage of Islam itself, a religion historically built on conversion.

In response, the presenter urged caution and generosity towards heritage Muslims. He did not want this discussion to descend into ‘bashing South Asians’. Though they constituted a majority of British Muslims, converts should be careful not to create an ‘us vs. them dynamic’. He acknowledged that, for the sake of debate, he had been deliberately provocative in referring to particular groups of heritage Muslims. But converts should also think about how they come across to the communities they were seeking to join, how domineering they might appear in doing so.

### 2.4 The Experience of Student Converts

At this point the Chair intervened to seek the views of several young converts, university students who might have different generational experiences of mosques and Muslim associations.

One young man described his first ‘alien’ experience of heritage Islam. Having grown up in a small, ethnically uniform town, his first interest in Islam had taken him to a mosque in another city, one populated by many South Asians. People were not unwelcoming, but their ceremonies were performed completely in Urdu and he felt utterly alienated, unable to ask for advice or to learn from the Muslims around him. He felt that their teachings were tailored for a community that did not include him.

Another student shared his own, diametrically opposed introduction to a heritage community. He attended an old mosque frequented by a large Pakistani community. There he felt warmly welcomed and able to ask for any help. That said, he recognised that this difference might stem from his

comparatively early initiation; he had been adopted by the community almost as a son. In contrast, he knew older converts who attended the mosque to pray, but who did not otherwise participate. Much depended on age, he suspected.

A third participant revealed that he attended a student mosque where his sense of shelter and belonging was unquestioned. To this, the first speaker added that his university experience of Islam had also been warm and welcoming, but that the sense of belonging he felt there threw his home experience into even sharper relief. A different young man recognised the feeling of acceptance at university that the others were articulating. He called it the ‘in-it-together feeling of educated young Muslims’. Yet in comparing this environment to the enduring bonds of his own local community, he warned that university life was temporary—‘the community you find there will not be your community forever’. What he felt young men needed was a stable environment in which they could practice the *din* in a manner compatible with their life aims. The first speaker replied that this was indeed a worry. Since he did not feel part of his home community, would he be left in limbo after university, without a supportive Islamic environment to drive him forward?

The presenter responded to all four sets of comments and experiences. He remarked that as a social scientist, he had often observed this difference between a welcoming university and alienating town mosques. There were many different kinds of mosque, he went on. Attending some felt like entering someone else’s house, a potentially daunting prospect if that house was associated with a particular ethnic group or language which were not our own. But he again urged caution: ‘we should not be saying mosques are awful’. He insisted, as at the beginning of his presentation, that there were a multitude of views on the relations of converts and heritage Muslims, but no definitive answers.

## 2.5 Is the Heritage Muslim Community Monolithic?

This warning against generalisation prefaced a turn in the discussion towards the related danger of speaking about the heritage Muslim community as if it constituted a monolithic bloc. One participant rejected the singular noun, suggesting that they refer to heritage Muslim ‘communities’ rather than ‘the community’. He further noted that the conversation thus far had slipped into delineating those communities by ethnicity or nationality, when there were other aspects of identity and affinity to consider. He himself would stress the importance of individual first contact in influencing a convert’s understanding of Islam and the path he subsequently takes. Another participant pinpointed

the particular group that many converts appeared to be having difficulties with: South Asian Muslims. He thought it would be more accurate and appreciative to think of their practice as ‘immigrant Islam’: they deserved respect for establishing the foundation upon which British Islam was based and understanding for the social difficulties they faced. In his own city, he was engaged in trying to bridge the divide between converts and heritage Muslims, a project of which a large part consisted simply in eliciting perspectives from heritage Muslims themselves, rather than relying on second-hand anecdotes.

The presenter addressed the question of influence and suggested that converts were often the recipients of a whole range of influences. His own first contact with Indonesian Islam had certainly influenced him, particularly the manner in which he then viewed other forms of Islam. However, ‘we are not growing up as children influenced by a consistent Islam around us’, but as converts surrounded by a number of people who affect us in complex ways. Converts were often married to heritage Muslims, for example, or connected to a variety of communities. It was in the nature of converts to be searchers; what had attracted the presenter to Islam was the encouragement he felt to look around, think carefully, and then choose. So in addition to the undoubted influence of first contact, he would emphasise the unpredictable personal journey that follows that introduction. His own path, for instance, had taken him from a certain literalism to a more relaxed interpretation of Islam.

## **2.6 Mosques, Architecture, and Emotional Responses**

The Chair then directed the discussion to a different, though still mosque-related, subject. What effect did the beauty of mosque architecture have on converts? Did the outer allure stand in some tension to the activities within? After all, he pointed out, ‘we worship with our eyes as well as with our hearts’. These questions elicited a range of responses exploring the complicated resonances of invitation, unfamiliarity, and belonging that a building can express.

Several participants, however, felt that practical and ethical concerns outweighed the aesthetic. One offered the anecdote of an acquaintance who simply wanted to go to ‘the mosque with the clean toilets’. Another attendee admitted that, after many years involved in the management of a mosque, he was ‘a bit bored’ of visitors commenting on its appearance and atmosphere; nevertheless, the importance of ‘a nice well-lit space’ could not be denied. A third attendee was resolutely unimpressed by ‘ostentatious’ edifices, feeling that they betrayed too much concentration on outward show rather than inward

religious life. Moreover, the exclusion or marginalisation of women in such buildings troubled him. The truth was that he felt more comfortable in a living room converted for prayer than in a large mosque. This participant did acknowledge that his narrative differed from many converts: he had grown up in a Muslim community; personal reasons, rather than any attraction to the collective aspect of Muslim life, accounted for his conversion (in fact, like several others, he had experienced unwanted pressure from South Asian Muslims who expected him to adapt to their culture).

Two younger participants further developed this emerging distinction between culture and religion, revealing that Christian, rather than Islamic, architecture had first claim on their emotional response and sense of belonging. This preference was an expression of culture and did not contradict their religion. One articulated his feeling in a series of propositions: language was culture; his culture was British; churches therefore had significance for him. He also found Islamic buildings beautiful, but he did not feel that they were his, or that he belonged to them, in the same way. The second participant added his voice to this sentiment, declaring that even though he had an aesthetic preference for Islamic architecture, his instinctive emotional connection was to the cathedral. The first speaker agreed and refined the point further: it was not a matter of choice between two styles, but a recognition of the culture and history that had a native claim on its citizens.

The presenter closed this first period of discussion by affirming that it helped converts, both before and after their conversion, to have a comfortable and inviting space in which to develop as Muslims. Taking up the contrast of Christian and Islamic architecture, he referred once more to his experience of relaxed coexistence in Indonesia, citing the example of a Christian architect who had designed the great mosque of Jakarta which stands next to the Catholic cathedral.

## **2.7 A British Mosque, a British Islam?<sup>28</sup>**

After a short break, the symposium reconvened and took up again the question of architecture and spiritual space, a subject that, as the Chair declared, brought together ‘the eye, the heart, and the mind’.

A few early remarks explored the possibility of a native Islamic architecture in Britain, an intertwining of traditions that might reconcile the divisions between a convert’s cultural and religious self. One participant cited Christopher Wren on the debt church architecture owed to Islamic influence. The Chair revealed

his own desire to build ‘the first truly British mosque’, one that did not merely imitate Arab models of design. Another man, who lived in the country and had never had much connection with mosques, broadened this focus to the ‘sacred architecture of the natural world’. After all, he noted, much of geometric aesthetic of Islamic art derived from observation of the natural world, and the Qur’an continually reminded Muslims to walk in nature and pay attention to it. Here, he thought, was an opportunity for converts to draw heritage communities into the British tradition of aesthetic and spiritual immersion in nature (not to mention that of gardening). More expansive human faculties, of the mind and the soul, could be developed in that larger environment, yet he had the impression that heritage Muslims were largely disconnected from it.

Others developed the idea that mosques could be a space of integration rather than segregation, not a site of cultural friction but a meeting point at which a more harmonious British Islam could emerge. One participant cited the Prophet’s description of the whole world as a mosque and referred to the example of Islamic history, in which the spread of Islam was synonymous with the acceptance and incorporation of ‘diverse cultural identities and idiosyncratic inheritances’. The ‘genetic memory’ and ‘cultural imprint’ that marked converts and shaped their emotional responses to architecture should be respected. The task, therefore, was to find expressions of Islam that were ‘sensitive to our tribe’. This point was taken further by another participant who warned against the overly casual use of the adjective ‘British’, as in the earlier evocations of ‘British Islam’ and a ‘British mosque’. Each part of these islands had its own spiritual tradition, he reminded the gathering, with its own historical and visual cues for reading sacred spaces. One should instead speak with greater cultural precision of creating an ‘English mosque’ or a ‘Scottish mosque’, he suggested.

The discussion thus expanded from a particular focus on architecture to the general question of how mosques—the physical manifestations of Islam—should fit into the social fabric of the United Kingdom. The presenter referred to the easy mingling of ‘indigenous-style’ and ‘Arab-style’ mosques in Indonesia, while adding on a purely practical note that the main concern should be clean carpets. One participant spoke of his local mosque as a model of how to blend into the physical and social environment: it did not match the mental image of a mosque in most people’s minds, and so visitors often had trouble finding it. Another attendee regretted the not infrequent tendency of Muslim groups to select spaces purely out of convenience and with little consideration for their

surroundings; an ‘unattractive patchwork’ of mosques was the result and tension with the local community the consequence. It was agreed that a general challenge for Muslims was to establish Islam wherever they happened to be, and that the particular task, therefore, was to adapt to already existing British spaces.

## 2.8 The Metaphor of the ‘Bridge’

The Chair then directed the gathering towards another aspect of the presentation: the question of whether converts had a particular role to play in linking heritage Muslim communities to society at large. He revealed that he was constantly thinking of points of contact between the current discussion and that of the female project previously published by the Centre of Islamic Studies. Both groups had repeatedly used two metaphors: those of the convert as ‘trophy’ and as ‘bridge’. While the first image was unquestionably negative, he wondered if the second was as self-evidently positive as outsiders seemed to assume. The female converts had pointed out that bridges were walked over or, in war, blown up. Did the men really want to be seen as bridges and, if so, what did it mean to act as one?

Several participants responded by challenging, refining, and problematizing the metaphor. One suggested that their focus should be less on the bridge than on the gap it was supposed to cross. He did not believe that there was a great distance between him and the community he grew up with; in fact, he thought that they would make wonderful Muslims. The extent to which he wanted to act as a bridge, therefore, was to supply them with a more sympathetic understanding of Islam. Another participant echoed the sentiment and pursued the logic of the metaphor: ‘a bridge between what?’ One might assume that the convert was uniquely, and helpfully, situated between Muslims and non-Muslims, but this easy equation did not address the real complexities of identity. The ‘heritage Muslim community’ contained many ethnicities and social strands, just as ‘non-Muslim’ was shorthand for even greater diversity.

Others questioned the accuracy of the image. A younger participant felt that far from linking the communities to which he was connected, his new identity as a convert had further divided them. His decision to convert had revealed the ‘one-mindedness’ of his ‘ordinary, working-class English family’: they felt that he had gone against their beliefs and, instead of seeking overlap, they had simply become stronger in their own convictions. A different attendee identified the danger in conceiving of oneself always as a bridge between two communities: in trying to please both of them, ‘you lose track of yourself’. And

since a convert could not, by nature, fit entirely within one of the established communities—living as a convert was to be ‘constantly travelling’—it was more important to be comfortable with yourself than stuck in the middle ground. You could then meet others on your own terms, he believed.

Some participants tweaked the metaphor, asking what kind of bridge was being imagined. One speaker suggested that the work of a convert was more a case of establishing a bridgehead than a bridge—a secure purchase on your identity so that others, following the same path, would have something to hold onto and emulate. Another asked in which direction the traffic on the bridge was moving. He felt that converts should be bringing ‘people across the bridge with you’ and finding or creating an inclusive space on the other side. In more strictly Islamic terms, ‘we are called upon to be successors to Medina’: mosques should be places in which ‘we can expect to do the work’ of spiritual ‘guarding and gardening’. A third attendee then queried the length of the bridge, pointing out that every conversion was necessarily a bridge, in that it moved from one point to another; the more interesting question was ‘how far you go along that bridge’.

The presenter drew on his survey data and asserted that most respondents had agreed that converts could serve as a bridge. But the details of the data revealed that they often conceived of it as a ‘one-way bridge’, a means of explaining Islam to non-Muslims without necessarily opening up Muslim communities to wider society. A bridge was certainly better than a trophy, he reasoned, since trophies existed only to be looked at, whereas bridges were at least used. The use of converts, however, should not be limited to demonstrating ‘that Islam isn’t so bad’. That said, he also acknowledged the sense of entitlement among certain converts and warned against the tendency to *impose* opinion—converts should not forget that they were ‘a minority among a minority’. Other participants suggested a historical and political context for this domineering propensity and for the corresponding reaction of many heritage Muslims when they encountered it. One described this behaviour as ‘replicating an imperial model’, while another suggested that ‘a white man stepping into the mosque’ reminded many heritage Muslims of ‘colonial domination’.

## 2.9 The Experience of South Asian Converts

Encouraging another comparison with the report on female perspectives, the Chair revealed that the most difficult experiences they had recounted were not those of white or black converts, but of South Asian converts. Already assumed to be Muslim by many, they had to fight for basic visibility. The Chair directed

this discussion towards the one South Asian member of the gathering, a man of Indian descent, born Hindu and a convert from the age of nineteen.

His post-conversion experience was, simply, ‘horrendous’. He entirely understood why it was difficult to find former Hindus and former Sikhs to take part in surveys or in symposia; they were afraid of their families finding out that they had turned to Islam. He himself had come under great, even violent, pressure from his family to reconvert. And while the community he had left applied coercion, he found himself expected to conform to a Pakistani community to which he was connected only by religion and marriage. After twenty-two years as a Muslim, moreover, he had not stopped hearing similar stories from those who shared his background. The stigma of being a South Asian convert was not going away, he believed, and the situation of ‘brown converts’ deserved a study of its own. (For context, both he and another participant explained that Muslims had historically been seen as oppressors by Hindus—the memory of forced conversion under Mughal rule still lingered.)

The presenter confessed that the case of South Asian converts was not measured in either census or survey data. The tempting generalisation that ‘if you’re Pakistani, you’re also Muslim’ was also the working assumption. Thus this group of converts—from whom they could otherwise learn so much, he added, given that the familiar stories and stereotypes regarding black and white converts did not apply to them—had been obscured and neglected. The Chair pointed out that conversion rendered those of South Asian background ‘visibly invisible, or perhaps the other way round’. The previous meetings of female converts had indicated that even for Jewish converts it was easier to find a comfortable social position in the heritage community.

The convert who had spoken of his sense of being outcast amplified his case. He claimed that organisations that had sent counsellors to help ex-Hindus and ex-Sikhs had found the counsellors themselves in need of counselling, the stories they uncovered were so awful. In answer to the question of whether such converts accrued any privilege to balance the persecution, he replied that they did not. Rather, they were thrown out of their own communities and left without family support or networks. While other converts lacked an Islamic upbringing, they could at least hope for some support from their family and friends to ease the transition. To this, one young white participant replied that while he was not exactly an outcast at home, he could certainly qualify as a misfit; his friends had not rejected him following his conversion, but they did not act the way they used to, and he was made to feel his difference.

Asked how the experience of becoming a pariah had shaped his Muslim identity—whether it had made him a better, more determined Muslim—the ex-Hindu participant declared that he had at first taken comfort in the belief that though he had lost his family, he had gained the *ummah*. But this sense of solidarity and community had also deteriorated over time. A second participant asked him if it was not in fact easier for South Asian converts to assimilate into the heritage community, particularly if they married into it. He replied that this was only possible in some cases; for others, integration was made even more difficult. The Chair pointed out that conversion in this case was not a relatively straightforward case of leaving one set of beliefs for another; rather, the man who had left his Hindu family had left an entire, dense social world. Those he had grown up with considered him ‘the ultimate traitor’.

The particularly gruelling circumstances of this man’s conversion elicited sympathy and some understanding from the gathering. One participant had been accused by an in-law of being a ‘rebel’; the rest of his family considered him merely eccentric. Listing the three terms which had been used thus far—‘outcast’, ‘misfit’, and ‘traitor’—he asked the man which of these labels applied to him best. An answer came from elsewhere in the room: ‘Muslim’. Another attendee cited a similar pattern of rejection and trauma in white working-class families. He told the story of an acquaintance who had married a Pakistani woman and converted; this man’s mother, who was involved in far-right politics, ‘put out a hit on him’ in retaliation. Another participant reassured the man that he had aligned himself with God and with God’s intentions for him; he had replaced his previous life with something more positive; those gathered in the room understood him and, furthermore, understood the need to provide more support to people in his position.

The ex-Hindu participant replied that while the emergence of associations created for and by converts was welcome, there was perhaps a need for organisations that would specifically support ex-Hindus and Sikhs.

### 3. RELATIONS WITH WIDER BRITISH SOCIETY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, MEDIA & REPRESENTATION

#### 3.1 Themes

The next presenter engaged with the symposium’s overarching themes of

belonging and unbelonging by asking a question and problematizing a distinction. He wanted to know if there was a ‘native heritage’ of Islam in the UK, however obscure, that British converts could draw upon to strengthen and contextualise their identity. And if, as he claimed, this heritage did exist, then he believed the relatively clear division upon which discussion had thus far rested—between converts and heritage Muslims—would be less easy to uphold. He made a case for the historical compatibility of British backgrounds and Muslim identities, and in doing so hoped that this neglected depth of tradition would give converts new and old a ‘psychological advantage’ in establishing their claim to community.

### 3.2 The Question of Heritage

The presenter began by admitting sympathy for the common distinction made between converts and heritage Muslims. After all, it was not difficult to observe the difference that often kept converts at a remove from larger Muslim communities. But he would challenge the apparent simplicity of this division on two grounds. First, he believed that converts as a category were no different than any other group of Muslims with a specific cultural inheritance; the diversity of heritage Muslims should not be forgotten. Second, he wanted to reject the notion, implied by the very formulation of ‘heritage Muslim’, that converts in contrast had no Islamic heritage. This was not the case.

For proof, he pointed to the demonstrable communal awareness among black Muslims worldwide. Black British converts could lay claim to a genuine Islamic heritage through the African-American tradition. And while he felt somewhat out of his depth in speaking about the black experience, he could see what this heritage offered: a depth of precedent and a sense of inheritance, the belief that one was not so much converting as returning. A confidence in belonging then followed. That said, he acknowledged that this straightforward kind of heritage was less evidently available to white converts.

### 3.3 The Celto-Saxon Muslim Heritage

Nevertheless, he would attempt to uncover a native heritage for all British converts to share—one that entwined ‘archaeological, historical, and speculative’ elements—though it would not, of course, approach the visibility of other Islamic lineages. This patrimony he called the ‘Celto-Saxon Muslim heritage’. It was a phrase he coined to describe ‘our indigenous Islamic heritage’ in terms that were sensitive to the diversity of history in these islands and to the complexity of ‘whiteness’. Placing the Celts first denoted ‘the right, respectful

chronological order’, while breaking down the ‘catch-all’ adjective ‘white’ might assist in dismantling both ‘the apparatus of White privilege’ (a topic that had received much attention in the previous symposium) and the racist premise of far-right political ideology.

His thesis rested heavily on examples and artefacts from the 8th and 9th centuries AD—and on conjecture. He cited the Ballycotton cross, a Celtic artefact held in the British Museum and inscribed with the words, ‘*In the name of Allah*’. How did such a thing arrive in our islands? He mentioned the gold coin minted by Offa, King of Mercia, proclaiming ‘there is no God but Allah alone’. Was this coin meant for trade, ‘to thumb his [Offa’s] nose at the Pope’, or to signal his faith as a Muslim? He added that the 700s were a formative period in British history, referring to the preservation of literacy by monks on the Isle of Iona and wondering, in a ‘poetic’ sense, if this was linked to the contemporary emergence of the Prophet in Arabia. The case for a historical invalidation of antagonism between Islam and wider British society was filled out with references to the legacy of Victorian converts; to a Liverpoolian tradition of mixing Muslim hymns with old English, Scots, and Irish melodies; and to the purported descent of the Queen from the Prophet (a connection endorsed by *Burke’s Peerage*).

### 3.4 Heritage Converts

The use of this ‘native heritage’, the presenter concluded, was that it would allow converts to understand and to present their conversion as a particularly British kind of ‘renewal’. It would give them historical purchase and psychological security in occupying a ‘liminal space’ between more established Muslim communities and non-Muslim society at large. This would be particularly helpful, he believed, in destabilizing right-wing discourse on the ‘foreignness’ of Islam and in educating the families of converts—bringing Islam closer to home in a literal sense.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Themes

Though the presentation was immediately challenged by several participants as narrow, abstract, and containing questionable renditions of facts, a common question emerged in the ensuing debate: how can converts, insiders and outsiders at once, confront and discredit the media-established narrative that

presents Islam as a foreign and threatening force within the UK? The answers then led to a discussion of the double burden of integration for converts: the extent to which they should integrate with the Muslim community themselves and the different, clashing extent to which they should lead other Muslims in integrating with wider British society. This dilemma was explored but not resolved.

#### 4.2 The Relevance of History

The concept and terminology of ‘Celto-Saxon Muslim heritage’ was disputed on historical and practical grounds. One participant criticised the reduction of post-Roman Britain to a merely ‘Celto-Saxon’ framework; another criticised the presentation for excluding all those of black Islamic heritage. Several attendees felt that the focus on establishing a historical toehold for British Islam was misplaced in any case and would not resonate with the general public for whom religion was an ‘irrelevance’. They instead urged a broader perspective that would privilege universal values, rather than narrow precedent, and foster a more accessible dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims.

One of the young converts disagreed with the critical response to the presentation, insisting on the importance of history in uncovering surprising continuities between peoples and periods, and thereby changing perspectives. He had found the historical possibilities entertained in the talk fascinating, and though he admitted that outlining such a past was unlikely to make others convert, he believed it could provide an important sense of ancestry and belonging to those who had. The presenter himself felt that his premise had been misunderstood. He defended himself against the charge of excluding black history; he had raised its importance but felt himself unqualified to discuss it further. Furthermore, the point of excavating an indigenous heritage, however tenuous, was precisely to find a more accessible way for converts to talk about Islam to their families and to society. ‘Big trees can come from small seeds,’ he insisted.

#### 4.3 Changing the Narrative about Islam

The Chair urged participants not to ‘get lost in history’, however, but to confront the more pressing problem: Muslims are constantly told that they do not quite fit into British society; faced with a narrative of estrangement, how do converts respond? He acknowledged that one kind of response was to point out this unexpected heritage, but he did not feel that this approach ‘will get [the converts] very far’. Acting as a self-described ‘agent provocateur’, he even

suggested that a non-Muslim might find such talk ‘a bit ridiculous’.

Other participants insisted that an overly religious focus was no more likely to make headway with the public. Citing a survey that suggested 95% of the British people were uninterested in learning about Islam, one participant asserted that Muslims needed a different way of speaking to the rest of society. He claimed that *da‘wah* and other proselytizing organisations were now realizing that their methods were ‘fifty years out of date’: finding and discussing common values was the way forward. Another speaker echoed this sentiment, declaring that the effort should be to emphasise ‘the commonality of strangers’. A third rephrased the challenge as ‘culturally advertising Islam to Britain’ and also acknowledged the difficult fact that ‘faith is very much a minority occupation here’. A fourth attendee put it more pointedly: ‘in this room, we’re weird’. People outside this room did not care about religion, he asserted, nor did they care about unsuspected heritage. To them, ‘Islam now means backward countries and violence’. This was the heritage, however artificial, that needed to be addressed.

One participant suggested that the work of both ‘making and revealing a place for Islam in Britain’ might be achieved by talking about the wider history of Islamic achievement. The great scientific and philosophical contributions of Islamic civilisation, prior to the Crusades, deserved ‘all our rhetorical effort’. And as they were examples of the intellectual leadership that Islam had once provided, this kind of discourse might inspire civic engagement on the part of Muslims and offer a true picture of Islam to counter the ‘Islamophobic media narrative’.

#### 4.4 Muslim Integration<sup>29</sup>

Various participants appeared to be proposing greater Muslim integration with British norms of identity and discourse, a suggestion which necessarily involved a fresh reckoning with earlier subjects of discussion: the distinction between religion and culture, and the extent to which converts themselves needed to integrate with Muslim communities. One contributor to the discussion felt that it was wrong to conflate Islam with culture and heritage in the first place. Returning to the relation of the convert to the heritage community, he pointed out that some converts felt the need to segregate themselves from wider society, to renounce their cultural bearings and assimilate to stricter Islamic codes. The ‘most poisonous part’ of post-conversion life was, he felt, this ‘self-renunciation’.

Yet another, older attendee resisted the emphasis on integration. He began by

pointing out that he had never heard the term ‘heritage Muslim’ before and felt that it did all Muslims a disservice by splitting the *ummah*. Given that its meaning was predicated on division in the Muslim community, why did they use it? Moreover, he felt that the others were asking the wrong question in relation to belonging and society. ‘It’s not about whether we belong or not [to British society]’, he maintained, ‘but about whether we’re allowed to belong’. He came from this country; why then should he be expected to integrate? Furthermore, his religion would always set him apart to some extent, and so he *could not* integrate. ‘Why can’t I be allowed to be an individual?’

The Chair directed this question to the other participants. Why should Muslims have to justify themselves as British? One speaker replied that whether it was justified or not, converts could not avoid the public perception of ‘a Muslim problem’. He himself had only encountered Islam through the news coverage it received after 9/11. Another attendee pointed out that he knew Muslims who thought that the British were ‘drunken, violent, racist savages’ and did not want to integrate with them, just as he knew non-Muslims whose attitude could be summed up as ‘we drink and eat pork, and if you don’t like it, get lost’. Not talking to each other made for an unhealthy society, he observed. A third contributor argued that history should be a part of this wider conversation. Becoming Muslim had in fact given him a valuable exposure to history—a sense of ‘how we have arrived at the situation we are in’. Yet this was something converts should not keep to themselves but share with the rest of the world. What they learned about the difficulty of being Muslim was also knowledge about the difficulty of being human, and this could perhaps be applied to other people’s frustration and lack of freedom in contemporary society. Moreover, knowledge of history should remind converts that they had the opportunity to *make* history: the extraordinary chance to ‘insert Islam in the West’ and embark on a ‘new chapter of Islamic history’.

Another participant argued that he faced no problems at all in practising Islam in the UK. The burden of dialogue lay more on Muslims than on the rest of society: they should discover what others found threatening about their behaviour and then stop doing it. He had no time for *da‘wah* organisations; they were smug and self-indulgent. They did not speak to non-Muslims and their vaunted Muslim Awareness Weeks at universities were therefore ‘a complete waste of time’. He believed instead that personal encounters were the means by which to increase awareness of Islam. Such meetings should not be forced, nor should ‘religion be shoved down people’s throats’; rather, a person’s interest in Islam should be allowed to arise naturally.

Prior to a break in discussion, the presenter offered his thoughts on the developing conversation. Paraphrasing Gauguin's questions—'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?'—he suggested that these were the guiding queries of the symposium. That said, he reiterated his presentation's focus on providing specific, concrete references to an indigenous Islamic presence that might then facilitate dialogue within families and with the British political right. To a certain extent, he continued, integration would be an abdication of the convert's ability, as an insider-outsider, to critique power structures. Citing Cornel West, he declared that the imperative to 'speak truth to power' outranked, though it did not exclude, that of integration.

#### 4.5 The Social Role of the Convert

Following the break, the Chair summarised the previous points of discussion and suggested that the essence of the debate thus far concerned the difficult distinction between culture and faith, on the one hand, and the social role of the convert, on the other. The interest of history and culture, he suggested, did not necessarily translate into persuasive power. He could point to the Islamic references contained within 'The Physician's Tale' (one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*), but 'others may say, 'who cares?'" Or he could refer to important work being done by classicists on the links in late antiquity between Greek and Arab civilisations, arguing that Islam was part of the European heritage, but 'again some would say, 'who cares?'" Meanwhile, they had to acknowledge that in British society now, 'Islam is in the dock'. This trial, they would agree, was of some urgency. Was it the place of the convert to explain the two sides to each other, to encourage integration among Muslims and raise awareness among non-Muslims? In other words, did converts want to be bridges in the effort to show that Islam could be fully at home in Britain, or did they feel that they should not have to take up that defensive position and responsibility?

The general consensus among those gathered favoured this mediating role for converts; the details of how to go about fulfilling it, beyond embodying certain values in their behaviour, were left vague. The presenter replied to the Chair's questions by further refining the metaphor of the bridge. Simply by virtue of their unique middle position, converts might be likened to the river rolling between two banks. The bridge, however, was a construct, something that must be built. It required the construction of a dialogue to rebut those who believed that religion was simply blind faith, and to inform them that Islam was in fact a 'dissenting tradition' that explicitly prohibits blind faith. The bridge, therefore, was 'discourse'.

Another participant declared that genetic, archaeological, and historical lineages did not much matter to him. 'We have to engage on the human level', he believed, and that required dealing with others on the level of general human values. In the case of the UK, this meant, in part, recognising 'the dissolution of Britishness' as a composite identity and addressing the political ideology that falsely asserted 'the superiority of British values.' After all, what were sometimes taken to be specifically religious or national attitudes were often only the reflections of universally held values. The presenter added that social justice was a universal value with a particular purchase in Islamic history. It was by manifesting these values in behaviour, he continued, that 'you win the hearts of people'.

#### 4.6 Personal Change after Conversion

The Chair seized upon the notion that 'how you project yourself in action matters more than words' and asked the younger members of the gathering whether their parents had noticed any change in them post-conversion: did they display more respect for their family? Had they become better children?

One student answered that he was certainly respectful towards his family, but added that this stemmed more from his upbringing than from Islam. He would perhaps describe himself as more considerate now than before his conversion; overall, though, he felt that the change in him 'had not yet manifested itself fully'. A second replied that he had grown even closer and more caring towards his family: 'I believe that I know the truth, and so I want to share it with them'. That said, he had seen other young converts become estranged from their families instead. The third student present declared that his family relationships had grown deeper and his family conversation more profound; he now brought Islam up frequently in discussion and spoke about fulfilling his duties as a son. His family, he added, had commented on the change in his behaviour.

#### 4.7 Integration Revisited

The presenter suggested that 'what we're ultimately talking about is *da'wah*', the ways of inviting others to Islam. The question of how to reach out to non-Muslims involved, for him, a necessary reckoning with 'social power' and 'authority'. In response to this point, the Chair repeated an earlier question to the gathering: why should they have to justify themselves as good citizens? Why should they defend themselves in the media's terms? The contested notion of integration resurfaced in the answers, on a less conciliatory note than before. It was felt that forces in society were imposing an idea of integration as an

absolute and one-way process, whereas, in practice, integration could only be a partial and continual negotiation.

To some extent, Muslims would need to be distinct if they were to be Muslim at all. One participant described ‘the media narrative’ as one that continually pushed ‘the need for integration’ among Muslims. But converts were a ‘strange group’, he claimed, and as such revealed flaws in the media’s assertion. They were already trying to fit into Muslim communities; were they then ‘supposed to convert back in order to integrate into wider society?’ There were points on which converts could not compromise and could not integrate, he decided. The degree to which integration was compatible with Islamic observance was the sticking point.

One of the students revealed his mother’s occasional wish for him to be ‘normal’, to ‘roll in drunk’ like the other boys. But his own idea of integration was ‘going halfway’: he would meet his mates at the pub but not have an alcoholic drink. Another attendee felt that the terminology of integration was unclear and that it failed to account for different levels of integration. To some extent, converts and other Muslims would naturally stand apart from the rest of society; equally, they would also converge with others on values that were universally held. But if they broke down the word ‘integration’, he pointed out, they would realise that to be ‘integral’ was first of all to be comfortable and ‘integrated with oneself’.

Yet he and two other participants disagreed over where the balance between integration with Islam and integration with society lay. The second man claimed that ‘a lot of Islam is separating yourself’—he cited *halal* food, festivals, and fasting. Though Muslims should seek engagement rather than segregation, there was a ‘real limit to how much we can converge’. The previous speaker replied that there was also ‘a limit to how much we can Islamise everything’. For instance, a female friend had once asked his advice on how ‘to walk Islamically’ in the country—this, he felt, was an example of the trend towards ‘false Islamisation of activity’. A third participant interjected to point out that caution in the country, on the part of a single Muslim woman, was ‘a natural reaction to a society in which Muslims are demonised’. There were places where Muslims and minorities did not feel safe in Britain, he declared, where wearing a *hijab* could make a woman a target.

The extent to which converts, in particular, should adopt and project an alternative social identity was debated next. One speaker described conversion plainly as ‘a drastic step’. ‘We have stepped away from what was expected of us’,

with the not unreasonable result that people would wonder why and ask whether, having taken that step, ‘you’re now going somewhere else’. It was imperative not to disavow ‘our alternative course’, once charted, but to make it visible to others. ‘You have to produce an alternative, a rationale, a proof that you’ve gone somewhere new and that other people can follow you.’ Along these lines, a second participant added that far more important than altered dietary habits or other superficial alterations was ‘the fruit of the changes we make in ourselves’, the deeper transformations that both lead to and follow conversion, and that are manifested in the world as action. Another speaker again accused the mainstream media of using inevitable differences in habit—the everyday requirements of Islam and, ‘to an extent’, of *sharia* law—against Muslims. The alternatives, he suggested, were either to carry on silently or to raise a voice to combat the media’s narrative.

One participant felt that this voice of protest was emerging, though the right balance of integration was still elusive. As a convert and therefore ‘something of an outsider’, he had observed an increasing confidence and media savvy among Muslim spokespeople, an assertiveness and a willingness to challenge hostile questioners. He came from a background in hip-hop and had studied the civil rights era in the United States: a similar awakening and self-assertion was encouraging Muslims to insist upon their own narrative, he believed. The social accommodation to be aimed for, and his own approach, was therefore to be ‘different but not divisive’.

Both the Chair and another speaker lamented the paradox of the demand to integrate: by insisting that Muslims conform to social norms, the media often only isolated them further. After the murder of Lee Rigby, for instance, the Chair had been approached by certain media outlets and asked to condemn the killing ‘as a British Muslim’. No, he replied. He would condemn it wholeheartedly ‘as a British person’, but he would not in the same breath apologise on behalf of all British Muslims. He believed that ‘we should speak less as Muslims and more as Brits and as human beings’, but acknowledged the catch: if they did so, the media would then lose interest. A participant added that speaking about levels of integration was misleading; what the media discourse really implied was ‘levels of citizenship’, with Muslims relegated to the lower tiers. Moreover, in the context of a society in which religion was continually pushed to the private margins and stripped of its visible signs, ‘integrating’ meant ‘playing into the hands’ of anti-Muslim, secular forces. One black observer wryly noted that white converts were thus undergoing ‘the immigrant’s experience’—the struggle between identity and assimilation—for the first time.

#### 4.8 The *Ummah*

The conversation thus far had moved fairly seamlessly, and inconspicuously, between talk of the specific situation of converts and the general one of Muslims. The Chair then threw the dual nature of the discussion into relief by asking a question that had been posed in the symposia on Female Perspectives: what was the *umamah*? It was familiar as a concept of pan-Islamic solidarity and fellow feeling, but what did it actually mean to individual lives?

Several participants voiced scepticism on the subject of the *umamah*. It was a good idea, but frankly unworkable. One flatly declared that ‘the *umamah* doesn’t exist’. He asked rhetorically, and bitterly, whether the *umamah* came together to help Muslims in Afghanistan. Another attendee compared the idea of the worldwide fellowship of Muslims to a whole body in which each limb was intimately aware of the others, but admitted that ‘it can’t really be like that: how can we know what it’s like for Muslims in Iraq or Syria?’ One speaker who had moved from country to country as a child and now considered himself always an outsider, experiencing racism from all quarters, did not feel part of any larger social body, nor was this a condition he sought. Yes, all Muslims prayed, but he did not necessarily have anything more in common with his co-religionists; rather, he had different friends for different purposes, and thought that this was preferable: for one thing, it gave him an appreciation for diversity.

Others attempted to give the *umamah* a more manageable definition. One participant declared that the *umamah* he really related to was his family; moving outward from this central unit were concentric circles binding him, in some degree of sympathy, to the rest of humanity. But the notion that he was closer to any Muslim in the world than he was to his non-Muslim neighbour was absurd. He certainly did not accept the Islamic State as part of his *umamah*, although he acknowledged that it was not for him to decide the *umamah* of others. The *umamah*, he concluded, was in its largest sense ‘a bit meaningless’. Another attendee at first cited the reach and interconnectedness of the Internet as engines of ‘a virtual *umamah*’, before admitting that the Internet so often provided only ‘the illusion of closeness’ and an excuse for forgetting our actual neighbours. Ultimately, he stood by the old saying, ‘charity starts at home’. A third contributor to the discussion believed that the *umamah* had changed radically in our time. ‘Postmodernity, super-diversity, globalisation, and transnational relations’ had all combined to attenuate human ties, making connections both broader and looser. As a middle-class white man, he was less reliant on community than others; as a one-time musician, however, he had

felt more brotherhood (misguidedly, it turned out) in ‘the music industry than in the Muslim industry’. Yet others might need the *ummah* more than him, he acknowledged, and he still had a responsibility to them.

This last recognition was pursued by other speakers who felt that the *ummah* did exist, self-evidently, and believed that the wrong question had been asked. The existential question was counter-productive and confusing, whereas the more pressing matter concerned how each Muslim could best help the *ummah*. Yet the answers to this question resembled their predecessors—help also began at home. One participant pointed out that though he had brothers in both London and the Central African Republic, he could only help the ones closest to him. Another added that each Muslim had to focus on his sphere of influence: if ‘you do well in that, then maybe Allah will elevate you and expand your sphere to do good’. A third attendee echoed this sentiment, with some frustration. Help always started close to home and then moved outward—why should they waste time talking about this matter, when Islam, the *ummah*, and their responsibilities had all been defined for them? The presenter closed this conversation by citing the three questions a mentor had taught him to ask before offering his help: ‘Is there a need? Do you have ability? And can you expect to get good results?’

#### 4.9 Conclusion

At the close of the first day’s discussion, the Chair pointed the participants to the basic lessons contained within words. The root of *ummah* was *umm*, the Arabic for ‘mother’. It also implied ‘womb’—where we come from—and ‘relations of mercy’. From this derived the dictionary definition of *ummah* as a group of people with a common descent/heritage and a common destination. (The presenter described this etymological excursion, warmly, as a display of ‘Islamic literacy’.) The Chair then thanked the speakers and asked forgiveness for ‘being provocative in the aim of illumination’.

## 5. CONVERT COMMUNITY/TIES AND SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS

### 5.1 Themes

The second day of the symposium began with a presentation on the practical, but deeply resonant, work of convert support groups. The presenter, who had worked with two such organisations (the first in Scotland, the second in

England), spoke about the importance of community, the specific difficulties of converts and the corresponding need to deal with them specifically, the imperative for neutrality on the part of organisations, the areas of surprising overlap between converts and born Muslims (a term he preferred to ‘heritage Muslims’), and the persistent challenges that faced the people doing support work.

## 5.2 The Speaker’s Background

The presentation began with two confessions. The speaker first admitted that he considered himself unworthy to lecture, feeling that there were many people present who were more knowledgeable and asking forgiveness in advance for anything said wrongly. He then revealed that he knew what it was like to be isolated in a community. Describing himself as ‘an adolescent Muslim’, rather than a fresh convert, he indicated that for the first nine years of his life in Islam, he had been lonely. He had been forced to find his own way without any real organisational support or institutional understanding of the difficulties he faced. At last, he had decided that since no one around him was supplying what was needed, he would do it himself and founded a support group for new Muslims. It began with a bare handful of attendees; within weeks, twenty people were participating. This was in Scotland, and he eventually moved to England to continue the same work (though he found a very different social situation there—and promised to discuss this later if others were interested). The main thing he had learned was also the most basic: there are lots of Muslims who are looking for support.

## 5.3 Community

The presenter then went to the heart of the matter: what was the idea of community that support organisations worked to develop and maintain? In answer, he worked his way up from the etymological root. ‘Community’ derived from the Latin ‘cum’, meaning ‘together’, and ‘munus’, meaning ‘gift’. Taken literally, ‘community’ meant a group of people who came together to ‘give from themselves, amongst themselves’. The very purpose of community was giving—perhaps an obvious point, he acknowledged, but an important one nonetheless.

The quality of community derived, in turn, from its ties. He quoted *Surah Al Imran* 3:103, a chapter of the Qur’an that speaks of division in Medina and offers an answer: ‘Hold tightly, all together, to the Rope of Allah and do not be divided among yourselves’. Coming to Islam ‘makes us brothers’, he declared, and ‘requires us to hold tightly to each other and to ‘the Rope of Allah’. What,

after all, were the qualities of a rope? It was produced when strands were woven together, creating something stronger than each individual element—the proverbial sum that was greater than its constituent parts. A rope, moreover, had tensile strength rather than compressive strength: the lesson was that ‘you can’t push people, you have to bring them along’. The root Arabic word for division, on the other hand, had alarming connotations. *Faraq* meant ‘to separate’, ‘to discriminate’, and ‘to be frightened’. Whereas there was strength in unity, it was therefore dangerous to withhold oneself from the community: the rope would begin to unravel and the community would weaken.

The undoubted strength of community did not, however, depend on conformity. Rather, the Islamic tradition distinguished clearly between division (*tafaruq*) and difference (*ikhtilaf*), smiling upon the latter. The presenter quoted the Prophet as saying that ‘the difference in opinion amongst my nation is a mercy’. Whereas dispute would fail the community, he concluded, unity in diversity would succeed.

#### 5.4 The Mission of Convert Support Groups<sup>30</sup>

In the presenter’s telling, convert support groups should be accessible, practical, and able to address issues beyond the scope of the wider Muslim community. These qualities would allow them to address the full complement of converts’ spiritual, educational, emotional, and social needs.

An organisation of this kind should be for ‘people who are new to Islam’, but have no other restriction on attendance. He knew, for instance, that many people ‘get hung up’ on the self-drawn distinction between ‘converts’ and ‘reverts’, particularly born Muslims. He did not particularly care, and nor should a support group. Such an organisation should also provide instruction on some aspects of *fard ‘ayn*, the individual duty of Muslims to perform certain tasks such as daily prayer, in order to give new Muslims at least a basic working knowledge of Islamic practice. But most importantly, a convert support group should offer advice on topics that were particularly relevant to beginners and that the main body of the community would be unable to address. These included relations with non-Muslim family; Christmas, birthdays, and similar events; death and the funerals of relatives or friends; and the difference between culture and religion.

The first example the presenter gave was his own. When his Catholic father died, his family expected him to take part in the religious burial, in contravention of his adopted Islamic faith. What was he to do? The broader

Muslim community did not know how to deal with such a predicament, and so, in the end, he turned to an understanding Catholic priest who agreed to take care of the aspects of burial that he, the son, could not touch. He offered further examples. A female convert of his acquaintance had given birth to a stillborn baby; the Muslim community would only give the baby a burial, not a funeral; the convert's family could neither understand nor accept this. She came to him for help, and he and a few others arranged to pray for and then bury the baby together—a sensitive compromise. The convert's mother, who until then had been decidedly anti-Muslim, told her daughter, 'Now I understand why you're a Muslim'. Other illustrative situations requiring counsel, but for reasons largely inaccessible to born Muslims, involved one male convert who was told he needed to be circumcised and was understandably terrified, and another who had a close relationship with a non-Muslim ex-partner.

Yet it was equally important to acknowledge that the mission of a convert support group was not to work miracles or 'to make *haram halal* (what is forbidden into what is allowed), but simply to ease the transition for new Muslims. 'Islam is easy: we make it difficult', the presenter declared. His work was to give converts the good news, rather than allow them to be driven away by difficulty. Such sensitivity was never more necessary than in relation to a convert's non-Muslim family: 'it can break a new Muslim's heart to tell him his family 'will go to Hell''. Although he felt scared and unworthy in performing this service, he knew that it was 'Allah's work'. The Prophet was the Messenger of Allah, and those who support Muslims were 'the messengers of the Messenger of Allah'.

### 5.5 Convert Support Groups and the Wider Muslim Community

Of the dual purpose that propelled these organisations, he had, however, only covered one aspect: the need to introduce converts 'softly' into the community. The second aim was to prepare the community to accept the converts. Convert support groups applied themselves not only to the spiritual health of converts, but to the openness of communities.

To do this work properly, therefore, a support group had to be 'neutral' and 'rigorously independent'. It should refrain from taking sides 'in politics or along ethnic or sectarian divides', and it should avoid tying itself to any particular mosque. If a group became too closely associated with one faction, then other sections of the community might refuse to cooperate with it. In his own work, his inclusive approach had inspired a similar attitude in return, as mosques

that catered to different doctrines and communities all came to him for help in dealing with converts and learning how to make them welcome. The role of mosques was in fact crucial: they should not be discouraged from engaging with converts, but they should be ‘managed’. He would not simply send new Muslims to the mosque—where, unaccompanied and uninitiated, they might be damaged—but would rather take them there himself. Mosques were also uninitiated in the transition process that converts undergo. It was not their fault if they did not have the necessary knowledge and experience; they also needed to be able to consult the people who did know the answers, or where to get them, and who did have the proper training.

Moreover, in his experience, convert support groups had an additional and unexpected constituency: many born Muslims, in the later generations, were actually facing the same issues as converts. ‘They are also confused, they also don’t know where they belong, they also don’t know how to practise’. So perhaps ‘we need to revisit our perceptions of what a ‘new’ Muslim is’, and perhaps convert groups should broaden their mandate and their perspective to include all ‘beginners’. This, at any rate, was his personal verdict.

## 5.6 Persistent Challenges

The presentation concluded with an overview of the persistent challenges facing community workers like himself, the enduring difficulties that rendered integration—of converts into Muslim society—problematic. There were always differences of opinion, doctrinal and others, among various sections of the community; support groups simply could not afford to get involved in such disputes. He often came across apathy in both the wider community and among converts themselves; he did not know whether to blame social media, but people had ‘to get off their backsides’ if they wanted to engage and achieve greater social harmony. There were undoubted cultural barriers to the easy integration of converts; he again raised the problem of a South Asian conflation of culture and faith, but added that the solution came down to the basic imperative ‘not to drive people away’. He reported that there was a ‘stubbornness’ in the existing Muslim community (though he did not apportion any blame), a resistance to new ideas and to the notion that new challenges required different responses. He identified a ‘bitterness’ among first-generation converts (those who embraced Islam in the 1970s and 80s), a jaded negativity that discouraged ‘the new guys’. Marriage, meanwhile, was always a complicated issue: often the community was closed to the idea of converts marrying their daughters. He had thought this difficulty had been overcome

in his previous work in Scotland; he saw in his current employment in England that it had not. Lastly, the presenter recognised the ever-present problem of ‘a lack of support and awareness’ for both converts and the community—the very gap that convert support groups existed to fill.

## 6. DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Themes

The subsequent discussion ranged across topics involving the convert’s social position, between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the work of support groups in combating isolation and easing integration. A particular institutional focus concentrated the conversation, as the participants spoke about the space, the funding, and the political environment for Muslim organisations. Radicalisation and relations with the security services were also discussed at length, while a crucial conceptual distinction between conversion as continuity and conversion as rupture was introduced.

### 6.2 Scotland vs. England

The first question addressed the presenter’s divided working life, between Scotland and England, and asked for further comparisons. How were people in different places tackling the same issues?

The presenter answered that, in his experience, isolation was a greater problem in England than in Scotland. To be isolated was one thing; to isolate yourself was much worse—yet this was what he had witnessed Muslim communities doing, separating themselves both from the rest of British society and along their own ethnic lines. His support group focused on organising social events and engineering personal encounters. It was never easy to get people together (one solution was to broadcast classes online), but in Scotland social life had been more ‘compact’ and he had been able to arrange ‘good, comfortable meetings’. In England, he was having a much harder time. Nonetheless, a group could only advance by ‘baby steps’: ‘you have to start with the community you have’.

Somewhat later, this division re-emerged as a subject. One speaker recounted the experience of a female convert and acquaintance who felt more isolated in Scotland than in England. There had been an initial period of communal assistance in her case, but no continuity of support. Now, years after her

conversion, she felt more alone and more in need of support than ever before. This contrasted with the presenter's own characterisation of the two nations, and he was duly surprised. Another participant suggested that isolation might have less to do with conversion per se than with the general loneliness of city life. The distinction between initial and continuing support, meanwhile, was treated at greater length later in the discussion.

### 6.3 Language and Neutrality

The presenter had mentioned changing the name of his group to one that more directly reflected 'the idea of people witnessing change' in themselves and their communities. The Chair picked up on the nuance of language, connecting it to the previous day's discussion of etymology, Islamic literacy, and media relations. He wanted more information on why the group had changed its name: had the media given their original name a negative spin?

Replacing an English phrase, the new name was an Arabic word, layered in religious meaning. The presenter explained that they had wanted to 'take back' the language of faith from Islamic State and other such predators, for it was 'our word, a Muslim word'. In the context of the earlier debate, the Chair was intrigued by this notion of 'taking language back' and refusing to accept the acquired negative connotations of words.

One participant expressed his wish that such a support group had existed for him at the time of his conversion. He particularly responded to its forthright 'neutrality', a quality he believed would allow new converts to find their own paths in a less judgmental atmosphere—whereas he had been told from the start to align himself with certain groups in the Muslim community and to avoid others. A second speaker, however, identified a tension between the group's stated aims of 'neutrality', on the one hand, and teaching the basics of Islam, on the other. For different groups disagree on what the basics actually are, he pointed out. Was there not a danger of being accused 'of teaching Islam-lite' and of finding the group at odds with others in the community, if their basics were considered too basic?

The presenter replied that support groups should consult the local community on what to teach new Muslims. In 85% of cases, the various sections of the community would agree on a basic framework for instruction. However, his neutrality was not absolute. He had once warned a convert against following a man he considered extremist. Thus he refined his formulation to 'responsible neutrality'—that is, to be neutral where possible and to give answers that were not divisive.

## 6.4 Support for Support Work I

One participant recalled the bitterness and frustration he had encountered in those who undertook this work of relating different parts of the community to each other. He wanted to know who, if anyone, supported the people doing the support work. In his experience, the various activists only came together for monthly dinners—a pleasant enough pastime, but not an index of active assistance.

The presenter replied that this was a hard question without a particularly satisfying answer. He turned to his teachers when he needed help, or to specialists who could aid him with particular issues—and they, in turn and in need, went to their own teachers. The Chair interjected to point out the danger of infinite regress on this question. It might be sufficient here, he suggested, to assert that in the absence of formal networks, people do manage to take care of each other.

## 6.5 Space for Support

The issue of mosques then re-emerged. Asked for details on the kinds of spaces where his group gathered, the presenter indicated that the place he had previously used in Scotland was ideal. In England, his new group now met in restaurants or at his house for classes. In Scotland, his old organisation had been affiliated to a university mosque. This space had been ‘perfect’ in both setting and constitution. It had been central and close to various transport hubs, so that it was convenient for converts to visit; the group, drawing upon the student population, had been vibrant, diverse, interested, and not aligned with any one particular faction or doctrine.

His questioner, a student, replied that his own ‘home mosque’ was relatively welcoming and offered community classes, among other services. Yet he had found that many young, born Muslims did not attend; it was only older Muslims who made the mosque the centre of their social lives. This left him with a crucial stumbling block to integration: how was he supposed to make friends with born Muslims?

Social events were ‘key’ to his group’s work, the presenter answered. Most of the important interactions and discussions he had witnessed took place after class and over cake. He did not wish to understate the importance of cake: it ‘breaks down barriers’, relaxing people and drawing them out. Even those ‘who have a block when it comes to religion’ find themselves sociable and curious under the influence of cake.

## 6.6 Convert Expectations of Heritage Muslims

The Chair raised the problem of great, and unwieldy, expectations. New converts often felt that everything in life should be ordered according to Islam and expected born Muslims to be models for this behaviour. The disappointment, and occasional alienation, they suffered when Muslims failed to live up to these high standards was deep. Were convert expectations realistic? What were born Muslims really like?

The presenter confessed that he had experienced this same disappointment. His first knowledge of Islam had come from books; soon after, however, he was working in a takeaway with a born Muslim who offered to teach him more. His initial enthusiasm then soured when he saw the extent to which this would-be teacher fell short as a good Muslim. A period of dismay was, he believed, common to all converts, and it was a 'legitimate issue' that some endured and that others could not overcome. This was why, in his capacity as a support worker, he would stay in touch with the converts he knew and regularly send text messages asking if they were okay.

## 6.7 Support for Support Work II<sup>31</sup>

The Chair's next question referred to financial, rather than moral, support. Who backed these groups, and what kinds of pressure did outside funding involve? The query provoked a stream of responses—addressing the issues of independence, integrity, and compromise—from the participants, many of whom had been or were currently involved in organisations or projects for which funding was a necessity. At one point, the Chair sought to move onto another topic, only to be rebuffed: this subject was of particular importance to the participants.

The presenter's answer was an extension of his previous remarks on neutrality and independence. His group had never taken money from the British government, since such funds always carried conditions. While some money had come from the local mosque, there was a crucial distinction to be made: the mosque had not simply given them money; rather, it had raised funds from the community on their behalf. And when the mosque asked for a report on how this money had been spent, he refused to provide one. In general, he believed it was desirable, though difficult, for Muslim organisations to aim for funding that came without conditions.

One participant pointed out that 'perfect neutrality' was particularly hard to

achieve for start-up organisations. He revealed that the money for his group did come from the local mosque. However, the only conditions imposed were for the mosque's name to be attached to their work and for a report to be produced. This was not a perfect situation, he acknowledged, but his group was not sectarian and, after all, they wanted to do the work and needed funds to do it—'you have to start somewhere'. In response, another attendee warned against close association with particular mosques. Muslim communities were full of 'rival groups all doing similar things'. So while funding was important, tying oneself to a certain mosque meant cutting oneself off from the various people who would not attend that mosque—and certain mosques, he declared, were simply 'built around a cult of personality'. A third participant added that groups enmeshed in seemingly 'compromised positions' could in fact maintain their integrity in surprising ways. He himself had been part of a project to produce and distribute an edition of the Qur'an to those who wanted it. This project had been funded, in part, by a Middle Eastern government; yet when the book was finally published, it was banned in that country for doctrinal reasons.

The need for investment and the dangers of compromised independence were thus equally clear; the ideal solution was identified as 'an angel investor'. One participant revealed that he had set up his own organisation as a social enterprise, so wary was he of surrendering his integrity for the sake of funding. Another man, who had worked at a production studio, put the same dilemma in terms of 'creative control'. What was needed was 'an angel investor', a source of hands-off funding which would allow the enterprise to get off the ground while maintaining its independence. He suggested that businesses in the process of rebranding, and seeking 'feel-good' sponsorships, were a good place to begin looking for 'angel opportunities'. The presenter located another potential source of uncompromised funding: the Muslim community itself. It was, he reminded the gathering, both rich and generous. In his experience, individuals would simply offer his group money for the good work they were doing, with no strings attached. Alms-giving had also been a fruitful source of funds, provided people were given tangible, targeted options for where their contributions would be directed.

Beyond the internal question of control, participants agreed that it was crucial for organisations to have the appearance of integrity and to earn the trust of the community. There was some debate over scale—one speaker felt that convert support groups, being small by nature, needed 'hardworking brothers with a shared vision' much more than funding; another attendee pointed out that such groups also needed to pay their workers if they wanted to fulfil their

mission of 'being active for the inactive'. Moreover, they needed to be clear about their funding arrangements if they wanted the people they worked with to trust them. The community would otherwise wonder where their money came from; such a situation would result in fear, suspicion, and failure. A third speaker agreed that clarity was key: if a group's professionalism and track record were made visible, funding would follow.

The presenter closed this section of the debate by summing up his own point of view. It was possible to secure neutral funding 'if you show what you are and what the money is for'. But, above all, any funding arrangement must be made on the recipient's terms rather than the donor's.

## 6.8 The Utility and Political Environment of Support Work

Several participants thanked the presenter for the work his group was doing, expressing their recognition of the challenges he had helped other converts overcome and their regret that such a service had not been available to them. One speaker had faced some of the very situations alluded to in the presentation, dealing alone with the emotionally draining complications arising from his father's death, his brother's sexuality, the question of how to spend Christmas with his family. Another speaker asked whether the presenter's group offered a training programme for those who wanted to do similar work with converts and the community. He answered that they offered some instruction for volunteers, but could not provide real training, given the constraints of time and money on their small organisation. The question of training had in fact troubled him: he had often felt that he was not the person to do this work, that its demands and pressures were beyond him. If he could find someone better suited to the job, he declared, then he would hand it over.

At this point, the Chair inquired into the utility of support groups and their political environment: were there too many such organisations, or not enough? Did rivalry exist between various groups in the community? How careful did a group have to be to avoid 'stepping on toes'? Were organisations of this kind not vulnerable to 'cults of personality' emerging around their founders or directors?

The presenter replied that his work had only thrown up two real difficulties with other groups: imitation and a 'protectionist' attitude to influence. The success of his organisation had caused others to set up their own groups with the intent of 'doing the same thing and stealing a bit of our fire'. Moreover, these new groups expected his help but did not return it. While he mainly 'didn't

mind' and would aid them anyway, their reluctance to do the same indicated a deeper problem—what he termed the 'protectionism of spheres of influence'. He had come across fewer cults of personality than 'cults of institution', organisations in which influence was jealously guarded and rarely shared.

This, other participants agreed, was the too-frequent reality of Muslim associations that failed to live up to the presenter's aim of responsible neutrality. One speaker had encountered inertia and possessiveness alongside good intentions—certain groups were 'set in their ways' and 'don't want you to take their converts away'. Another attendee felt that 'supporting new Muslims' was often only 'a box to tick' for certain organisations. A convert was merely a 'token' to them, and they wanted to 'claim' the support work without actually doing it. One particular umbrella group was cited as a cautionary example. Several speakers recognised both its expertise and the need for an 'overarching framework' to draw groups together, but felt that it had fallen prey to organisational failure: an over-powerful centre and a consequently weak regional body.

Imbalance was therefore the enemy of enduring support work. One participant pointed out that certain groups refused to work with converts or provide space for women. Another man was exhausted by the factionalism of Muslim communities. After ten years of trying to respect divisions, he had rejected Shia-Sunni separation and declared himself 'just a Muslim' (after all, 'the whole point of becoming a Muslim is to become a Muslim'). Though he was now lonelier than he had ever been, and though there was bitter irony in the loneliness of refusing division, he took pride in holding this 'necessary position'. A third speaker, responding to the question of a 'cult of personality', asserted that the burden of activism always fell on a small number of people (most Muslims, converts included, 'aren't actually full of zeal'). But when the one person on whom an organisation depended gave up, the project would collapse. To do lasting work, he declared, it was necessary to 'build a proper network'.

The presenter added that solidarity was indispensable and returned to his metaphor of the rope: the strands would only be woven together, and the community would only be strong, if each member did his or her part.

## 6.9 Conversion as Rupture or Continuity

The Chair returned to a point previously raised. Were converts only supported at the start of their lives as Muslims? Did the community's care last, or did new Muslims suffer isolation and neglect once the 'new' tag wore off? Two

competing ideas of a convert's welfare arose in response: one emphasised the necessity of communal engagement, the other insisted on the individual's need to follow his or her own path. Quickly, however, the participants identified a deeper tension in post-conversion experience and in relations with the Muslim community—between those who felt that conversion required a break with a person's past and those who believed that the transformation must be transitional, entailing more continuity than rupture.

The presenter acknowledged that his group directed their efforts at those who had recently converted, but defended this focus. Some converts continued to attend their social events even after thoroughly familiarising themselves with Islam; he could refer those who wanted more support than his group provided to other organisations. But, he concluded, 'a point comes when birds want to leave the nest'.

One participant wanted to know more about the Islamic instruction the presenter's group offered, and the emphasis it betrayed. He referred to the superficial, 'fancy dress' Islam he had witnessed at a large mosque that catered to many converts; indeed, thousands had converted there over the course of seven years, he declared—a suspiciously high rate. However well-intended the officials were, they seemed to focus largely on the importance of clothes and of the *hijab*. It was unfortunate, the participant felt, that this had been made the first priority of so many converts. What was the presenter's first priority when acclimatizing converts to Islam? The answer was brief: 'prayer'. The presenter recounted the story of the potential convert who came to the Prophet with doubts. The man wanted to become a Muslim, but he liked drink; the Prophet replied that he should embrace Islam and then see if he could change. The man added that he also liked women; the Prophet had the same answer. But when he revealed that he had no time for prayer, the Prophet said there was no place for him in Islam. The participant who had asked the question agreed on the primacy of prayer, but he also recalled a Sheikh of his acquaintance who had pressed converts to begin praying five times a day immediately. This, he said, was 'madness'; it was more reasonable to give converts thirty days to learn how to pray first. The people who received converts into Islam should have 'the empathy and the mercy' to make it easier for them.

The Chair interjected to identify the deeper point that had arisen. The perspective that wanted to give converts more time to pray was one that emphasised the continuity linking the convert's new identity to his previous one. The perspective that insisted on instant prayer was one that viewed

conversion as a rupture with an older self. This was a tension that had been articulated in the report on female perspectives: ‘continuity vs. rupture’. The Chair added that while it was fairly evident that the participants preferred continuity to rupture, that choice was not nearly so obvious in the heritage Muslim community.

The first response to this observation was to note that the division between continuity and rupture seemed to be yet another incarnation of the general divide between faith and culture—a distinction that heritage Muslims, brought up in the culture, were less likely to recognise. One participant observed that the idea of a transition to Islam, both spiritual and emotional, had a pedigree stretching back to the time of the Prophet—some around him had converted right away, while others had taken more time. His own belief was that a transition of some degree was simply ‘common sense’: ‘you can’t tell people who have a dependency on cigarettes or drink to just quit now that they’re Muslim’. Another speaker observed that heritage Muslims were often ‘abrupt’ in their judgments and ‘black and white’ in their perspective. Yet ‘reality consists of shades of grey’ and requires a more nuanced negotiation. Perhaps providing this nuance was one role that converts were uniquely placed to play in the Muslim community.

One participant went into greater detail about the cultural clash of his post-conversion experience. Rupture had practically been thrust upon him. He had found himself among ‘a very cultural community’, where the emphasis was ‘all about beards, clothes, and circumcision’ rather than religion. Whereas he had been brought up to believe that ‘you learned through questioning’, the beliefs of the heritage Muslims around him were not open to question. ‘They were blinkered’. At last, he went elsewhere to find a more relaxed, ‘multicultural’ environment in which he could flourish as a Muslim. This experience, he noted drily, had taught him ‘how not to deal with converts’. A second participant added that while he was neither proud nor ashamed of his past, the expectation that he should shed it and instantly become a new person was false. Rather, he was, post-conversion, ‘a better version of the same person’. Drawing upon the previous day’s discussion of architecture, the Chair compared this gradual transformation of character to the conversion of a church into a mosque. A third speaker revealed that the most significant rupture he had undergone came from culling his CD collection after conversion. He added, ‘we have so many pasts after all . . . it would be impossible to break with each of them’.

Others warned against generalising about the Muslim community; therein lay

the danger of setting converts and heritage Muslims in opposition to each other. One participant thought greater care should be taken with terminology and distinguished between community, as the sum of human relationships, and communitarianism, which encompassed the doctrines that had ‘an oppressive impact on the individual’. Converts as well as heritage Muslims contributed to communitarianism, he added. The presenter, meanwhile, voiced his concern that converts as a group ‘may be becoming exclusive’. He reminded the participants that they also had to be part of the larger Muslim community, that they had a duty of integration in this regard. Yet he felt that ‘the desire to impose norms’ was ‘increasingly coming from converts themselves’. This was inconsiderate and reckless: they were setting themselves up for ‘backlash’ from heritage Muslims and, ultimately, for ‘schism’. The concern was thus raised, though another participant introduced a positive note: the identity crisis among later-generation Muslims would perhaps lead to a balance of converts and born Muslims facing the same challenges, a harmony of questioning.

The conversation then returned to more practical matters regarding the convert’s transition towards a comfortable Muslim identity. An older participant agreed that prayer was very important. He had known one man who learned to pray in a week, and another who took three months. The difference between them was rather mundane, however. The first had an Arabic-speaking wife; the second was much more isolated from the community. He then refined the symposium’s essential question: how did one practise Islam after saying *shahadah*? He replied that one practised it to the furthest extent of one’s knowledge while yet continuing to learn. After all, he reminded the gathering, it took the Prophet twenty-three years to reveal Islam. As for where the process of learning ended, he answered simply that the process did not end. The presenter joined his voice to this sentiment, suggesting (in reference to the Mecca and Medina phases of the development of Islam) that ‘we are now in a post-Medina phase’, in which it was necessary to introduce Islam to everyone: born Muslims, converts, and non-Muslims. He ended on a pragmatic note: it was important to give converts ‘at least some Arabic to pray with’.

## 6.10 Radicalisation and the Security Services<sup>32</sup>

The question of radicalisation, and the suspicion attending to converts in the wake of the Woolwich murder, was raised by the Chair. He wanted to know whether new Muslims were approached on this matter, how often, and by whom. The answers revealed that more than one participant had been approached by the security services, while others had met with low-level

suspicion from ordinary citizens. Nevertheless, the general feeling among the gathering was that security was important, government agencies were doing a necessary job, and that they remained largely undisturbed in their daily lives.

The first respondent revealed that he knew someone who felt particularly anxious around converts due to their not infrequent association in the news with fundamentalism and terrorism. This kind of suspicion, he added, was entirely new to him. Another participant interjected, insisting that ‘there has to be law and order in a country’ and that the intelligence services needed to know what was going on. ‘So what if the authorities are looking at me with suspicion?’ He would not work for them, but they were welcome to question him. The important thing, he declared, was to be ‘content within yourself’. The first speaker replied that he was not bothered by MI5, but he would feel uncomfortable with the general accusation of disloyalty or subversive activity. A third participant added that the police simply did not have the knowledge or training to deal sensitively with converts; they had in fact admitted as much and thanked him for his help when he spoke to them on this matter.

This attitude of acceptance was echoed by another speaker, though it was questioned by the presenter. One participant assumed that he and his acquaintances were, to some extent, being observed by the intelligence services. All you could do was ‘stick to what you know, be sincere, and don’t dwell too much’ on the fact of surveillance—for that way lay paranoia. The presenter, however, addressed the issue of suspicion from a different perspective and then criticised the manner in which the British security services operated. There were some converts, he claimed, who were only pretending to be Muslims and were in fact employed by the government to infiltrate various groups. He therefore understood the suspicion of converts that some in the heritage community had. And while he realised that security must be taken care of, he did not like the way the job was being done in this country. For instance, he himself had been questioned by the authorities on returning from a holiday. They had wanted him, firstly, to report to them in future and, secondly, to provide details on the converts he worked with. (Meanwhile, they demonstrated that they had ample details on him, including his Internet use.) But he refused: he said that he would inform them if he saw something suspicious, but he would not compromise his integrity by working for them. Then, in his account, ‘they turned nasty’ and only stopped harassing him when he held a press conference to complain. The security services had lost his goodwill.

Another participant revealed that he had been approached only that week by

MI5. He described their methods of recruiting a source, moving from flattery—and the invitation to work together—to veiled intimidation. He had been nervous and overwhelmed by the feeling that such contact ‘does not end well’. Yet when he replied that he would not work for them, but was willing ‘to meet them half way’ and discuss certain matters, the agent was fairly conciliatory. One attendee remarked on how ‘seedy’ this approach appeared, and declared that his problem with the new methods of the security services was that they operated from ‘a bird’s-eye view of society’ rather than from ‘a ground-level view’ that took into account ‘how people live’. No one wants terrorism, he lamented, so ‘why can’t they approach you more openly?’ The first speaker replied that the security services had been more or less straightforward with him. But he could not work for them and maintain the integrity and transparency he needed in his everyday life. Had he stayed in contact with them, he declared, he would have been second-guessing every situation and displaying ‘paranoia right here in this room’.

The Chair acknowledged that the nexus of radicalisation, terrorism, and surveillance was ‘the elephant in the room’. Nevertheless, he felt, and concluded on this note, that while everyone was concerned with security and in agreement that government agencies had ‘a job to do’, this ‘should not interfere with the existence [of converts] as Muslims’.

## 7. ‘BECOMING MUSLIM’ AND THE RESPONSES OF FAMILY & FRIENDS

### 7.1 Themes

Joining together the theme of the previous symposium, ‘Journeys to Islam’, with that of the current, ‘Un/Belonging’, an older participant presented the narrative of his life before and after conversion. He spoke about his early loss of faith as a Christian, his discovery and embrace of Islam, the reaction of his family, the difficulties he faced as a convert in both Britain and Saudi Arabia, his marriage to a born Muslim, and his *da‘wah* work in later years. He offered a perspective that encompassed the second half of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first, touching on the challenges both large and small that mark a convert’s life.

### 7.2 Leaving Organised Religion

Like many men of his generation, the presenter was brought up in the Church

of England and was a regular attendee at Holy Communion and Evensong until early adulthood. Then ‘doubts entered my mind’ and grew there over a period of two years. He spoke to the Vicar only to be ignored; he asked himself whether he was a hypocrite to continue attending services. Finally, he decided that he would not find God in the church and stopped going. This was in the 1960s, when alternative belief systems were more readily available than before. Searching for spiritual meaning, he discussed different religions with various contacts and read a great deal, but ‘nothing stuck’. In the absence of anything else, he adopted a personal code—with particular commitments to be truthful, to help others, and to take no undue advantage—and carried on with his professional life in computer engineering. Yet in retrospect, he saw that his ‘first step to Islam was leaving organised religion’.

### 7.3 Discovering Islam

While working in a research lab, he would often meet with the younger set after hours to discuss politics and religion. Among them were men from Iran, India, and Pakistan. One evening, someone described *al-Fatiha* (the first chapter of the Qur’an) and the *Hadith Qudsi* (the sacred sayings of the Prophet that convey speech from Allah). The words ‘brought tears to my eyes’. He immediately wanted to learn more but—‘and this is a big point’—it was hard to find information on Islam in those days. He went to the Information Bureau and asked if there was a local mosque (they did not know of one). Nevertheless, he was given the name of a man who might be able to help, an Englishman who had embraced Islam twenty years earlier and was willing to impart what he knew. He began visiting this man twice a week to learn Islam; within six weeks, he was practising. He accepted the teachings, for they seemed entirely logical to him. Whereas previously he had had ‘dimension without direction’, he now felt that he was ‘gaining in both dimension and direction’. After eighteen months, he was asked if he had said the *shahadah*. He replied that he had not, that he did not know enough yet. The response decided him: ‘Don’t you think it’s time?’

### 7.4 Family Responses

The presenter had known both acceptance and rejection at the hands of his family. When he first told them that he had embraced Islam, they answered: ‘You do what you believe in; we won’t stop you or follow you’. And, indeed, none of them ever became Muslim. However, they did help him cope with his dietary difficulties—no mean feat for a Brit in those days. Before the UK joined the Common Market, for instance, all British bread contained pig fat; so he ate

Ryvita, and his mother made him soda bread. The family would also cook the meat he brought them, and accommodate themselves to his schedule during Ramadan (this was the only time his boss allowed him to take vacation). Thus they cooperated without complaint in his new life.

But after twenty-two years, eighteen of which were spent in Saudi Arabia, he was cut off by his eldest brother. He received a letter which stated that ‘it is clear religion has taken over your life’ and he then severed contact. He had been particularly close to this brother when they were young and had looked up to him like a father. But when he showed the letter to a Muslim, he was gently told ‘Never mind, we’re all your brothers’.

### 7.5 Issues with Scholars

From time to time, he had found the advice of Islamic scholars remote from the lived experience of the convert. For instance, ‘we are told not to attend Christian services’. Yet he had attended the funeral of his twin brother’s partner—at his brother’s request—and ‘recited *al-Fatiha* all the way through the service’. He had since attended four cremations and two funerals for Christians. Moreover, at one point he had found himself in disagreement with a professor whose adult discussion group he had joined. The professor claimed that it was not necessary for the Qur’an to be taught by Muslims, to which the presenter replied that an understanding of the Qur’an should come from the heart. This, he felt, was one of the fundamental differences between studying the Qur’an in an Islamic country, where one was steeped in a religious atmosphere, and a Western country, where a religious text could be studied at a distance. The one had ‘application’, while the other had ‘understanding’. But he wanted both.

### 7.6 Life as a Convert

At the mosque and at work, he was equally conspicuous as a convert. His was usually the only white face at the mosque, but though he was often ‘surrounded’, he was not necessarily enlightened. While he was at the stage of asking questions, the two most common responses he received were the reprimand to be silent (and listen to the Sheikh) and the regretful refusal (‘we don’t want to be responsible for giving you the wrong answer’). In the workplace, he placed a card on the noticeboard informing everyone that he had changed his name to reflect his Islamic beliefs. Several of his more thoughtful and educated colleagues responded by offering him their offices as quiet places where he could pray.

## 7.7 Marriage

In the meantime, he proposed to a Pakistani woman, a step which came with certain complications for a convert. He received a rude and threatening letter from her brother, suggesting that there was a ‘graveyard’ in Pakistan for people like him. Well, ‘you either accept the challenge or you give up’. He wrote back, accepting the challenge but insisting on his terms: they would duel with water pistols. When, after a year, he went to Pakistan and was met by the family at the airport, he brought out the water pistols and requested that the brother take his pick. ‘He embraced me, and that was the beginning of a beautiful friendship’. The presenter was married three weeks later.

## 7.8 Faith and Doubt

Now settled, he realised that he wanted to work in and contribute to a Muslim country. He had become more focused on Islam. His interests, priorities, and friends had changed. He now wanted to raise his children in an Islamic atmosphere. He was, nevertheless, paralysed by doubt. He had left religion once before; what if he came to that point of disillusionment again? Would his faith be strong enough?

He asked his Imam, who replied that a convert first gained a little knowledge and then began to practise it: ‘If you continue to practice, it is because you believe in it. In this way your faith develops’. This answer, however, did not satisfy him.

But then, one night, he could not sleep. Into his wakeful mind came the words, ‘O you who believe, go not astray from the right path, the path that leads to Allah’. He sat up, switched on the light, and wrote down those words. He lay down again, and the prayer continued: ‘The One God, Lord of all Creation’. He wrote that down as well, and then fell asleep.

When he woke up, he saw that the prayer was his answer. He was happy, and his doubts evaporated.

## 7.9 Later Years: Saudi Arabia and *Da‘wah*

The presenter passed over the latter half of his life. After some initial difficulty, he secured a job as an IT manager in a university computing centre in Saudi Arabia and spent the next twenty-three years in the Kingdom. While there and upon his (enforced) return to the UK, he became involved in *da‘wah* work,

speaking on the lecture circuit and developing a course manual for students. Summing up many years, he explained that he had channelled his remaining energies towards helping youth.

## 8. DISCUSSION

### 8.1 Themes

The Chair thanked the presenter for the wide-ranging narrative of his personal journey and the expression of a perspective that extended more than half a century into the past, but asked that the discussion hew more closely to the 'reactions of family and friends'. 'People who are interested in converts', he declared, 'are interested in this'. Accordingly, participants spoke about guilt, division, rejection, support, and reconciliation in their family relations. The damage caused by conversion to such relationships appeared universal, but so did their reparation over time and with efforts of understanding.

### 8.2 Guilt

Several participants described the reluctant sense and lingering guilt of 'turning their backs' on family and community with the act of conversion. In 'turning your back on your family's beliefs', one attendee said, 'you almost feel like you're condemning them to Hell'. Another speaker described the feeling 'of letting down fellow Christians' by converting, pointing to 'the real ripple effect' such a choice could make in one's old community. A third attendee spoke of his mother's conviction that 'she had done something wrong' in raising him, his struggle to convince her that she had, in fact, 'done something right', and his guilt at causing her pain.

### 8.3 Reconciliation

In response to these comments, the presenter picked up one of the threads of his narrative and followed it to a happy ending. He recalled the long years during which Muslim friends would often ask him what he was doing about his estranged brother (in Islam, he reminded the gathering, it was forbidden to cut family ties). His answer was always the same: 'I'm waiting'. And his patience was at last rewarded. The brother's illness led to a 'get well' card, which led to a correspondence, which led to a phone call, which led to a visit one week before the brother died. Since then, he had been in contact with his widowed sister-in-law, who now believed that Islam prepared its believers for death better

than Christianity. The other side of estrangement, if one had patience and persistence, was reconciliation.

#### **8.4 Fascination and Apprehension**

It emerged collectively—each participant inspiring another to speak, so that a chain of personal histories developed—that families could exhibit both positive and negative attitudes towards the convert, and that the balance of pain and interest, rejection and reconciliation, misunderstanding and love could shift over time. A PhD student observing the symposium noted that the pain of parents, the sense that they had made a mistake with their child, was ‘common in all conversion cases, across all religions’. The Chair supplied the other side of this story: interest in what the child had converted to was also universal, though the parents were sometimes ‘more willing to learn around the convert than through him’. Fascination and apprehension, it seemed, could coexist as responses to conversion.

Nevertheless, the initial tone of these family anecdotes was largely negative. One attendee spoke about his ‘hugely supportive’ and curious mother, who had done a great deal of research on Islam. But his situation was an exception, and even he noted a slight familial withdrawal in the face of engagement—his mother had ‘learned more from Youtube’ than from him. Another participant described the ‘insensitive mentality’ of his uncle, who simply did not want to talk about Islam and made jokes, or ‘nastier comments’, to head off any possible conversation (the speaker wondered if this resistance did not, in fact, stem from his uncle’s insecurity, his fear that Islam might begin to appeal to him). A third participant related the continual arguments he had had with his brother over Islam, characterizing the brother’s position as one of relentless antagonism (‘Why does only one religion go around killing people?’ was one of his questions). The man supposed that his very existence as a convert ‘undermined’ and frustrated his brother’s viewpoint. He wanted to ‘defuse this tension’, but he did not really know how to respond and felt, moreover, like he ‘couldn’t get anywhere with this anyway’.

#### **8.5 Distance and Rejection**

Attempts were made to understand the frequent distance of family members post-conversion. One participant explained it in generous terms. The convert was often the last person his family approached to learn about Islam, but that might be precisely because they recognised that the convert was ‘going through a spiritual transformation’. They might not wish to confront this change in him,

but they did want to understand it and so they often went to other sources (the news more often than the Qur'an, he added sadly). It was important for the convert to acknowledge that his family was on a journey too. Another speaker offered a less sympathetic view. He believed that 'people who are comfortable and honest within themselves are also happy to talk about religion'. It was those who were uncertain and dishonest with themselves who then feared the revelation 'of their inner hypocrisy in conversation with you', and 'so they walk away'. Thus, his parents developed a hatred for him because his 'real spirituality' exposed their 'hippy' superficiality. A third participant identified a 'defensiveness' at the heart of the disdain that sometimes curdled 'complex relationships' when conversion entered the picture. The person who had not converted might suddenly feel condescended to by the one who had and might respond angrily to the convert's air of 'moral superiority'.

In certain cases, an unbridgeable ideological divide separated the convert from his family. The one South Asian participant reported that he had little connection with his relatives because they feared he would 'corrupt their children with Islam'—a phenomenon the Chair identified as 'conversion contagion'. While his ex-wife (a born Muslim) had tried to isolate him, his family wanted to forget him; this was, he noted with considerable understatement, 'difficult'. Another attendee described himself as 'embattled' in the midst of his 'right-wing, working-class, military family'. His brother and mother had 'disowned him completely' upon his conversion, despite the fact that they were 'Forces brats' and had been born in Iraq and Yemen, respectively. One man recounted a similar narrative of ideological intolerance hardening into emotional estrangement—but from the opposite side of the political spectrum. After his conversion, his 'liberal' wife came to 'hate Islam with an incredible vengeance'. While he could not see how he had changed and insisted that he was the same man as before, 'she wouldn't have it'. He took to praying in the attic, and eventually the atmosphere grew so poisonous that he attempted suicide. They divorced, 'thank God'; he 'just had to walk away'. Yet he had never expected her intolerance, nor had he ever understood it.

Some felt that liberalism itself explained his wife's rejection of Islam. The Chair suggested that her reaction had emerged from a social context in which 'religion is unfashionable' and 'faith is maligned'. Moreover, she might have noted the changes in her husband more closely than he did himself—for though he claimed not to have changed, he had after all adopted a new belief system. A different participant pointed out that the man had been shocked by his wife's reaction precisely because of his instinctive association of liberalism with

tolerance. Perhaps it should not be such a surprise that tolerance of this kind was only ‘skin deep’. His own definition of liberalism defined the attitude not by its depth of tolerance but by its refusal to accept traditional social structures. Yet this speaker then stepped back from the attempt to rationalise rejection. He pointed to the example of the Prophet, born into the tribe of the Quraysh and then spurned by them. It did not make sense ‘that people could love him so much and then reject him’, but this was the point: rejection was not rational.

Two revealing oxymorons were introduced during the course of this discussion. The phrase ‘bigoted liberals’ was used, while that of ‘intimate strangers’ arose to describe the change in relations that could occur after conversion—from familiarity to disconnection—as well as the coexistence of seeming contradictions in the lives of many converts.

## 8.6 Communication

If breaking off contact altogether was one end of the range of family responses, and ‘the ultimate success story’ of shared conversion was the other, then the happiest relationships the participants had to relate fell somewhere in the middle. These stronger family ties were sustained by persistent communication and the discovery of a shared emotional language.

The position of one participant was unusual in that he was ‘the converting parent’ rather than ‘the converting child’. His family relationships encompassed three widely different responses to his conversion. With one in-law who accused him of being a ‘traitor’, communication had broken down. With his siblings, communication was maintained because the subject simply was not mentioned. But with his daughter, a deeper and more sustainable communication was possible. They did not speak in the ‘language of Islam’, because that would frighten her; rather, they spoke ‘in her language or in the language of universal human values’, discussing grief and spiritual enquiry and the daughter’s own journey in terms that included but were not exclusive to Islam.

In another participant’s family, shared religious feeling provided them with the means to speak comfortably about different religions, and even gave his conversion a sense of continuity rather than rupture. Thus when a dying relative momentarily forgot that he had become a Muslim and asked him to read to her from her Bible, she recollected herself with the gentle words, ‘You’ve got a different book now; well, keep on believing’. A different speaker, whose Islam had grown out of his contact with Malaysians, also traced a stabilising

narrative of continuity from his conversion back to his grandfather, happily stationed in Malaysia during the War.

Maintaining a presence in a difficult family situation could also prove worthwhile, and one speaker identified 'giving a good example' as one thing 'we can do as converts'. His parents, an atheist and an agnostic, 'may not understand or respect my choices'. Nevertheless, 'I respect them as my parents'. And he would continue to take his family to visit them after Eid, in the hope that over time 'a softening of the heart' would occur. On the one hand, it was important to project 'the better person you've become' so as to validate conversion in their eyes. But on the other, it was equally necessary to frame the conversion narrative in a way that did not shut parents out: 'not 'I'm better now that I've changed from how you raised me', but 'You gave me the start that led me here''. In response to this advice, one of the younger participants revealed that his father felt 'slighted' by his conversion and asked the gathering for further counsel. He was reminded that Islam was not everything: 'give your father a role in the rest of your life', one attendee suggested; another added that the young participant still had much in the way of 'general life experience' to learn from his father. This speaker offered his own wedding as an example—it had been Islamic, 'but in a way that included all the non-Muslims'. 'You have to find ways to accommodate your family and friends', he concluded.

### **8.7 Fathers, Sons and Forgiveness**

Others related stories of surprise, family relations which had seemed irremediably harmed by the speaker's conversion only for mutual understanding to emerge, over time and against expectation. The evening he converted, in one participant's telling, he had encounters with his grandmother, his mother, and his father, none of whom had been aware that this was a step he had even contemplated: the first said 'whatever makes you happy'; the second was disappointed, not by the conversion but by the fact that he 'hadn't shared this profound journey' with her; the third did not speak to him for two weeks. Yet, he added, 'as converts we underestimate the extent to which people hold more positive things unsaid in their hearts'. Only later did he learn that his father had then defended Islam to his own, more bigoted friends. The realisation that 'he was not where I thought he was' had affected the speaker deeply.

For these male converts, the most difficult relationship was often with their fathers. Another participant recalled his father saying, post-conversion, that he would feel unsafe with his son sleeping in the same house. He was cold and

angry towards Islam. Yet the speaker did not respond to insults in kind, though he wanted to (he consulted an older Muslim, who advised him that in Islam, 'we don't abuse in return'). And when, some time later, his father was in hospital, the speaker went to see him and, almost unspoken, a reconciliation took place. 'Things normalised', and his father became increasingly warm towards Islam, to the extent that when he met other Muslims now he told them about his son.

The next speaker offered a third variation on this theme. If he had not converted, would he be a different person? The participant answered himself: 'not really'. Although he had converted young, he considered himself to be already fully formed as a teenager. But in one respect he had changed. Before conversion, he had had a terrible relationship with his stepfather—'two rams butting heads' and 'always on the verge of blows'. After conversion, however, his aggression dissipated and this allowed him to see and understand his stepfather more clearly: 'a responsible, hardworking working-class man,' for whom he had been a reminder of his mother's first marriage. The speaker forgave him. And now his stepfather and his mother lived with him; the former was an invalid, and so he 'cares for him, respects him, loves him'. He owed that transformed relationship to Islam, he believed, although the thought had only occurred to him now, 'reflecting and listening to the conversation'.

The Chair remarked on the Islamic concept of filial duty, pointing out that while the Qur'an said nothing about parents looking after children, it did say that children should look after their parents. Yet he was continually shocked by lack of respect shown to older people in Britain—the term 'natural wastage' particularly repulsed him. To general consent, he asked whether a greater sense of responsibility had been the biggest change in the converts' behaviour towards their parents.

There was, moreover, one purely happy tale of a father and son to be told. The speaker began by declaring that 'we should never lose hope that our parents will also convert'. Although his mother had died by the time of his conversion, he then experienced a reversal of roles with his father that was also a supreme coming together. The speaker had been named after his father: when he converted and changed his name, his father asked if he too could take the same name. He did so, converted, and then remarried—to a woman with the same name as his son's wife. The gathering had discussed at length the ways in which conversion could divide a family; at the end of the symposium, the participants were reminded of the extent to which it could also bring people together.

## CONCLUSION

The second symposium of *Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Male Perspectives* came to a close with two Islam-inflected raps, delivered by hip-hop artists present among the participants. One was a ‘tongue-in-cheek celebration of all things facial hair-inclined’ (see Appendix I), the other an invitation to ‘walk on a path to *Jannah*’—the Islamic paradise. The final presenter of the symposium, who had embraced Islam well before some of the other participants were even born, offered his last thought: what had struck him most in the conversation was how much easier it was now to encounter Islam, to learn about it, to convert. The Chair then thanked the presenters for leading the discussion and all the participants for filling it ‘frankly and openly’. He felt that the symposium had been ‘a safe environment for baring souls’, and he hoped that the souls in question had found their meeting interesting.

*Appendix One* • ‘BEARD IS BEAUTIFUL’

Let's go for a ramble . . .  
Through my facial forest  
It's a tangle of branches and brambles  
That grows at perpendicular angles  
I'm thankful my thicket's substantial

My beard forms vines  
They grow in a short time  
They crawl and climb all over my jaw line  
My ginger jungle  
My bushy bundle  
Vulnerable without it:  
My would-be wood is wonderful!

So I composed this ode to commemorate  
The place on my face where sunlight doesn't penetrate  
You could spend hours studying me but couldn't see  
Much skin underneath all the shrubbery!

My lovely jubberly chin canopy  
Father to son it runs in the family!  
As a boy my beard was coy  
Now he's in your face, making noise, shouting "O!!"

You're annoyed  
You can't avoid bristles  
It's official:  
They're everywhere from Bradford to Bristol!

Mine started out little  
Grew thicker and thicker  
Whiskers on the face now a permanent fixture

From lamb chops  
To looking like Van Gogh  
Barbers beware of my hair  
Keep your hands off!

My follicles are obstacles  
I'm putting a fence up  
Without this dense bush  
My cheeks are defenceless  
My strength sucked like Samson  
I'm serious, no send ups  
Some say: "No hair's horrendous;  
This ain't the way men look!"

Some ladies are frightened  
There are others who like men  
With faces we liken  
To walls covered in lichen

Beards brighten the face up  
Make us shine brilliant:  
Each hair compared to a light bulb filament  
A fashion accessory worn by millions  
Not just militants  
But all sorts of civilians

Every bloke's bespoke garment  
A garden held in high regard  
For guarding our chins  
So ask him:  
Are you a Xerxes or Spartan?  
A nerd or a hard man?  
A clerk or a sergeant?  
Jane or Tarzan?

Why are you laughing?  
Do I look like I'm a Martian?  
A marsh man living out on the margins!  
When Musicians like Marvin Gaye to Chris Martin  
Were marching to the beat of the beard that was blasting!

Even Brad Pitt had it  
And some of the ladies think he's Prince Charming!  
So think twice  
Before you pull out your knife and start carving

This isn't shaving!  
It's deforestation of the Amazon Basin – blatant!  
Don't be blaze about beard conservation  
Be you a Bajan or a brother in Beijing

Patrick Petitjean staring down at the paving  
His beard on a billboard  
Looking amazing!  
Sebastian Chabal they call him "The Caveman!"  
I'm calling my laymen:  
Let's all of us change things!

I'm dedicating this anthem to the man'dem  
Beards make you more handsome  
Wear yours with abandon!

## *Appendix Two*

### **SYMPOSIUM II: GUIDING QUESTIONS**

Conversion can often involve changes in relationships, a sometimes rough and tumble process of loss and gain producing new forms of ‘belonging’ and ‘unbelonging’. This symposium explores changes in converts’ relationships to ‘communities’. It will begin by looking at the interaction between converts and heritage Muslim communities, exploring the common perceptions of converts among heritage Muslims and how this is shaped by factors such as class and ethnicity. Discussions will explore the extent to which converts are included in positions of authority in spaces such as mosques, Islamic societies and community centres, and how far these spaces articulate the concerns and priorities of converts. It will consider whether converts play a role as an interface between heritage Muslims and wider British society, and whether they should. This will be followed by discussion of the extent to which there exists a convert community, and whether forming such a community is something converts in the UK should aspire to do. It will explore the ‘unique’ case of a well-established Muslim community and the role of convert support organisations in creating connections and a sense of belonging between converts. The symposium will conclude with a look at the experiences of converts in relation to wider British society. Here participants will discuss issues around conversion and civic engagement, the achievements of converts in British society and the representation of converts in public, politics and the media.

#### **2.1: Relations with Heritage Muslims**

- How important is being among heritage Muslims for maintaining an interest in, and practice of, Islam?
- What are common conceptions of converts held among heritage Muslims? How is this dynamic shaped by converts’ class, ethnicity and cultural background?
- What do converts owe heritage Muslims for shaping the environment of Islam in the UK today?
- Do converts play a unique role as an interface between heritage Muslim communities and wider British society? What role do converts play in interfaith relations?

- What is the significance of the *ummah*? When is the *ummah* ‘realised’? Does the notion of the *ummah* create an interest in what is going on in the ‘Muslim world’?

## 2.2: Mosques and Muslim Associations

- Do converts join mosques, community centres or Islamic societies? How far do converts ‘believe without belonging’ (Davie, 1994)?
- Do these spaces reflect the concerns and priorities of converts to Islam? Are converts empowered to influence decisions and take leadership positions?
- How far do Muslim spokespersons or institutions in the UK and Europe articulate values and practices that are suited to the British environment?

## 2.3: Convert Community/ties and Support Organisations

- What is a community? Do converts in the UK constitute a community, or communities, or no community at all? Are conceptions of community shaped by the location of converts?
- Is it correct, or even an obligation, to create a ‘convert community’? What advantages and disadvantages would this bring converts?
- What is the ‘phenomenon of [a well-established Muslim community in England]’ and how far does this present a model for converts in other parts of the UK to replicate?
- Do convert support organisations help to foster a sense of community among converts to Islam?

## 2.3: Relations with wider British Society

- What is the heritage of converts to Islam in the UK and how important is this heritage for converts’ conception of their place in British society today?
- Are having a British cultural identity and being Muslim compatible? Is the act of conversion a critique of aspects of mainstream British culture and society?
- How has the context for conversion to Islam in the UK changed over time?
- Do aspects of converts’ identity and practices change in relation to non-Muslims in wider British society? Which aspects?

## 2.4: Civic Engagement

- How far does conversion to Islam lead to a reassessment of interactions with the state and civic responsibilities?

- Does being Muslim raise any difficulties in taking positions of leadership in local community affairs or national politics?

## **2.5: Media & Representation**

- What is the representation of converts and conversion in the media in the UK? What effect does this have on converts' self-perception?
- Is Islamophobia widespread in the UK?
- What was the impact of the Woolwich murder in May 2013 in influencing perceptions of converts to Islam?
- Do converts suffer prejudice from wider British society and is this similar or different to the experiences of heritage Muslims in the UK?
- What is the impact of the increasing visibility and outspokenness of far-right political parties on converts in the UK?

**Symposium III**  
**Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Male Perspectives**  
**Marriage, Gender, Radicalisation, and Exiting Islam**  
**2nd – 3rd May 2015**

**PARTICIPANTS**

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## Contents

Introduction • 124

1. Struggles with the Faith and Exiting Islam • 125

2. *Discussion* • 127

3. Gender and Sexuality • 137

4. *Discussion* • 141

5. Conversion in Prison and Radicalisation • 148

6. *Discussion* • 152

7. Marriage and the Second Generation • 159

8. *Discussion* • 163

Postscript • 169

*Appendix I: Symposium III Guiding Questions* • 170

*Endnotes* • 173

## Introduction

The third, and final, symposium centred on the diverse themes of ‘Marriage, Gender, Radicalisation, and Exiting Islam’.

Introductory topics of presentation included ‘Struggles with the Faith and Exiting Islam’, ‘Gender and Sexuality’, ‘Conversion in Prison and Radicalisation’, and ‘Marriage and the Second Generation’. In its own way, every talk attempted to come to terms with two dilemmas that, together, divide the convert’s conscience. How can converts reconcile their frequently liberal backgrounds with conservative interpretations of Islam? And how can they accommodate their ideal of Islam to the reality of the Muslim community?

The discussions that followed each presentation offered especially passionate and robust debates on the particular topic that best crystallised participants’ inner divisions: sectarianism, homosexuality, Muslim hypocrisy, and marriage. Other important themes were aired and other thoughts shared—the temptation to leave Islam, the tensions regarding Muslim masculinity, the condition of converts in prison, and the imperfections of Islamic schools—but the participants returned, again and again, to the heart of their situation. Between two cultures and communities, converts could either bridge the divide or fall between the cracks. This was their struggle and their strength. In the participants’ telling, two developments were already evident: converts were gaining a sense of themselves as their own community within the other communities of Islam and the United Kingdom; as such, and for the sake of future newcomers, they required their own professional support networks.

Thirty-three converts attended the symposium. Some had been present at every symposium, some were returning from the first, and some were new to the project. They blended continuity and freshness, drawing parallels across the symposia and striking off in untried directions. A few had expertise especially relevant to the subjects under discussion; all spoke from personal experience that was also, in the deepest respects, shared.

## 1. STRUGGLES WITH THE FAITH AND EXITING ISLAM

### 1.1 Themes

The first presenter shared the narrative of his spiritual journey towards Islam, his subsequent struggles with its sectarian divisions and demands, and his eventual attainment of an inner peace. The moment of conversion was not, in his telling, the end of the story; rather, it was the beginning of deeper, more painful complications—even as it also remained the foundation of a healthy spiritual life. After describing his own experience, often pausing for composure, the presenter offered a series of principles for living well as a convert, lessons derived from his own attempt to be ‘just a Muslim’, above sect and other worldly interference with his relationship to God.

### 1.2 Searching for Spiritual Structure

The presenter had always believed in God. His earliest memories were of faith in a creator. The struggle of the first part of his life, however, was to find a structure that could complement and direct his belief. He ‘wanted a relationship with God, to communicate with God’. In this, he was both helped and hindered by his parents. Protestants, they believed but were disillusioned; they had ‘disenfranchised’ themselves. But though they could not provide him with a ‘mechanism’ for religious understanding, they did enter into extensive dialogues with him on the subject of spirituality. He remembered discussing inter-dimensional reality—worlds within worlds—at the age of five. Their house, meanwhile, was a centre for interesting visitors from a variety of religious traditions. Yet this intense, early ‘intellectual input’ resulted in confusion and instability as well as spiritual hunger: it had no structure for development.

His long journey towards finding that structure in Islam began with a conscious rejection of Christianity. He was twelve at the time and had read different translations of the Bible for himself: throughout the text, he could see human interference with God’s message and work. Until the age of twenty-nine, he explored all the belief systems he could find: ‘mainstream faith, niche faith, esoteric philosophy’. The systems came with groups of adherents, some of whom were sincere and interesting but exacted standards of behaviour that were too high for him. He yearned for a personal relationship with God ordered by ‘external rules’, principles that would open a path from spiritual belief to ‘practical application’ and ‘constructive citizenship’. He wanted his existence to be ‘based on love’, conducted on the foundation of ‘honest relationships’ with others and his own body, which could act ‘as a spiritual reflector’. And so he

travelled extensively and met extraordinary people. But ‘at the end of every journey’, he reflected, ‘you come to the *shahadah*’—the conversion to Islam.

### 1.3 Doubt after the *Shahadah*

The presenter had longed for a structured spirituality undistorted by worldly ‘interference’. He thought he had found it in Islam. He was wrong—and the realisation that Islam too was steeped in division and strife shook him so deeply that he nearly rejected it outright. He had been unaware of the scale of the Sunni-Shia divide; the ‘horrendous’ reality hit him ‘very, very hard’. He was further discouraged by the general hypocrisy he found among Muslims, the chasm between their words and their deeds. Finally, he saw that the simple, pure faith of Islam had been riven and warped by human interpretation and turned into a ‘marketplace’ of competing creeds. What ‘saved’ him from giving up Islam as a ‘lost cause’ were the ‘inner spiritual values’ at its heart. From these, he derived the ‘rules’ that had since guided him to a position of comparative peace—with himself and with Islam.

### 1.4 Spiritual Principles<sup>33</sup>

The presenter declared that he had gone ‘to the root of faith’ and emerged with a set of principles, shaped by his experience but also touching on Islamic concepts of *jihad* and polygyny. He laid out the ‘fundamentals’: Islam meant complete submission of oneself to God, a natural state of affairs since ‘faith is an instinct of the human soul’; one should strive to understand the Prophet’s revelations and interpretations; one should rely on God’s plan—a trust in the divine for which the Arabic term is *tawakkul*. To these, the presenter added further rules: ‘know your enemy’ and how worldly ‘interference’ in religion works; remember that ‘charity’ should be for yourself first and that ‘voluntary work can be harmful’ if it takes over one’s life to the exclusion of all other duties; centre yourself in ‘the middle part’ of Islam, where it will be difficult to lose your balance.

He added that *jihad* was a concept with which he had struggled. His body had never given him ‘the instinct to answer the call’ to *jihad*, a fact that did not sit well with him. He believed that his family was descended from a warring clan, and it disturbed him that he was not similarly disposed to becoming one of the *mujahideen*. Nevertheless, after praying to Allah for a taste of this vocation, he watched a clip of Algerian *mujahideen* online and believed that he had understood what they felt, ‘the peace of sacrificing your life’.

Finally, he described polygyny—the form of polygamy in which a man marries more than one woman—as an important part of a fully spiritual life. The presenter recalled the Prophet’s words that ‘marriage is half of religion’, but added that the rules and mechanisms for Islamic marriage had not been clear to him on conversion. Having spent years trying to understand polygyny, he had come to the conclusion that it offered a spiritual depth beyond the grasp of a monogamous relationship. This, he believed, was especially true for women. Spiritual development and questioning had to continue even after marriage, yet he felt that women were too secure in a single marriage to keep this up. Stimulation and competition would be better maintained within a polygynous marriage—for men too, though they received more ‘stimulus’ from the outside world. Thus he presented polygyny as a ‘selfless mechanism for bringing Islam into your life’. And although he was not yet married, he declared his desire ‘to be polygynous, to have more than one wife, to have that stimulus’.

### 1.5 Just a Muslim

‘I am neither Sunni nor Shia, I am simply a Muslim’, the presenter asserted. He had outlasted his doubt and found stability in his spiritual principles. Describing the ‘great change within yourself’ that occurs after conversion, he suggested that a similar shift in ‘being’ happens when one rejects the sects that splinter a unified Islam. Having found ‘my God, my path, my place’, he felt love for all Muslims and all humanity. It was not always possible to embody this consciousness in his actions, but he had had a taste of what it meant to do so and would continue to pursue this inner peacefulness. He concluded with the fervent hope that Muslims would learn to love themselves, others, and ‘creation in its diversity’—to be at peace and to disagree in peace. ‘We are all going to Allah’.

## 2. DISCUSSION

### 2.1 Themes

A pervasive irony coloured the discussion following this presentation, so much of which had focused on the second half of the convert’s ‘journey’—after saying *shahadah*—and on its particular challenge of disillusion. But for their religious conviction, many participants affirmed, they could not have remained Muslim during the difficult years after their conversion. Their doubts were not spiritual but social, stemming from the struggle to accommodate themselves to the

Muslim community, and their admissions compensated to some extent for the absent testimony of genuine ex-converts at the symposium. In addition to the shock of hypocrisy among heritage Muslims, converts often had to contend with pressure to conform to the community they wished to join and ostracisation from the community in which they had grown up. Addressing such issues as apostasy and sectarianism, participants returned again and again to the crux of a convert's life: faith, what it demands of the believer and what it gives to him.

## 2.2 Struggles with Members of the Faith

The first participant to respond focussed on the term 'struggles', present in the title of the talk and in its depiction of life after conversion. He suggested that it was more appropriate to speak of 'struggles with members of the faith' than 'struggles with the faith' itself. While some converts of his acquaintance had laboured under the actual tenets of Islamic belief, their difficulties more commonly arose from social problems within the Muslim community. This view, generally endorsed, had also been expressed in the previous project on female perspectives. The Chair explained that those symposia had faced the same problem: the ex-converts who had agreed to take part did not, in the end, attend. In their absence, the female participants had extrapolated from their own experiences of disillusion and unease: what would have driven them away, and might still, was not Islam but Muslims themselves. Two troubling characteristics of the Muslim community subsequently emerged in the male discussion: hypocrisy and the conflation of religious belief with cultural practice.

## 2.3 Apostasy I<sup>34</sup>

One attendee focused less on the terminology than on the concept of 'apostasy': the abandonment of Islam. It was, he stressed, a condition defined by others and too often applied to personal, idiosyncratic expressions of faith. The supposed 'apostate' might consider his faith perfectly legitimate, though falling outside a certain community's expectations. In fact, 'many of us here would probably be called apostates outside this room'. Converts come to Islam at the end of an intensely individual search, a process that is both spiritual and rational: 'We have a personal relationship with Allah; it's for us to understand and not for others to define'.

The discussion returned, at several points, to such questions of identity and authority. Who were the people who left Islam? Who were those who

determined both the acceptance and the repudiation of converts? The same participant later cited survey data demonstrating that, from 2001 to 2011, the numbers of Muslim converts as opposed to apostates in British society had shifted only slightly—the positive net growth in conversion in 2001 had become marginally negative by 2011. On the one hand, these findings countered ‘the scare story of Islamification’ in Britain, given some currency after the September 11th attacks. On the other hand, the numbers of those exiting Islam were dwarfed by ‘the huge outflow from Christianity’. It was important, furthermore, to note that apostates also included people who had grown up in the heritage community and then left it. ‘Our situations—our difficulty in finding acceptance—are not new’, he pointed out. ‘We as converts should be particularly sensitive and understanding’ to born Muslims at odds with their community. And ‘at every turn’, in addressing the issue of apostasy and Islam, ‘we have to counter the narrative that Islam kills people who disagree with it’.

Other participants further emphasised the fact that the stigma of apostasy was also applied to heritage Muslims considered, by some, to have veered from the right path. The symposium took place one week before the 2015 General Election, and one participant reflected on his recent Twitter exchanges with self-appointed authorities on proper conduct. These ‘fairly extreme types’ claimed that voting was blasphemous since it constituted ‘worshipping someone other than God’.

## 2.4 Gatekeepers

One speaker laid the blame squarely on those he termed ‘gatekeepers’ to the Muslim community, clerics and others who had a ‘conveyor-belt approach’ to converts and covered up injustices beneath ‘a fake shield of piety’. ‘They give you a sort of understanding, and like a baby you imitate what you’re learning—that milk is what you continue to drink’. Meanwhile, social problems in the community fester. ‘Muslims today do not challenge social injustices properly; they sweep them under the rug’. In this, they are abetted by their authorities, for ‘there are no real clerics who have the courage to deal with it’. Hypocrisy and racial prejudice were the primary targets of his outrage, the gulf between the actions of the community and the example of the Prophet, who had helped disenfranchised people.

## 2.5 What Saves You is Faith

Speaking deliberately and with some difficulty, the next speaker revealed that it had been fifteen years since his conversion and that in that time there had

been moments when he did not know whether he could carry on. The previous Christmas, for instance, had been hard. Nostalgic for his family and their traditional celebration, he also felt isolated—fellow Muslims would not understand his yearning. Recalling the previous symposia's discussions of converts' varying degrees of privilege within society and the Muslim community, he declared that 'there is White privilege, yes, but there is also Asian privilege'. He resented having to suffer rifts both with his family and with their working-class community—being called 'Paki' in the street—only to be accused of White privilege from the other side. If not for faith, he concluded, Islam would lose its appeal after fifteen years: 'there are so many problems in the community'. 'If it wasn't for Allah, I couldn't be a Muslim'.

## 2.6 Perspective

Others cautioned against demonizing the heritage Muslim community and urged a wider perspective on the problems converts faced. Several attendees took the longer view that the problems of hypocrisy, discrimination, and division—while undeniable—were 'human difficulties, not just Muslim ones'. The challenge lay in managing the convert's inevitable descent from an idealised picture of Islam to the realities of lived experience.

One participant shared his emotion at hearing these issues discussed openly: he had only ever spoken about them with his wife. Nevertheless, he believed that an advantage of Islam had been neglected thus far. 'The whole world is struggling', facing crises 'that are human, not just Muslim'. Against this, he had a Muslim understanding of the world and his place in it; this gave him balance and prevented him from becoming hopeless. It was 'beautiful' to see other Muslims, to recognise their solidarity, and to know 'that they will stand next to me to pray'. The Chair restated what he took to be the double point: 'Muslims are inside the trajectory of history', neither uniquely plagued nor uniquely virtuous, but 'they have an advantage in the example of the Prophet, the perfect person'.

Another attendee identified what he saw as the root of the difficulty: expectation, high, narrow, and unrealistic. 'We tend to be encouraged to take an idealised view of the early years of Islam', but current problems are 'nothing new'. 'There were real believers and hypocrites' among the first Muslims, and zealots too.

## 2.7 Pragmatism

A few attendees worried, however, that the broad perspective was also

unfocussed and prone to overlooking specific problems. One participant acknowledged that there may be ‘a global crisis’, but asserted that only by ‘focusing on our problems’ and fixing them ‘can we be part of the global solution’. He too blamed ‘the gatekeepers’ for not making Islam more hospitable and tolerant. Having come to Islam through the classical literature rather than *da‘wah*—the proselytizing of Islam—he believed that ‘we live a time of ignorance’, without great Muslim thinkers and scholars. ‘Sometimes I simply do not acknowledge the extremists, the keyboard warriors, the hypocrites—they are missing the basics of compassion.’ Another speaker pleaded for greater understanding and forbearance of doubt and diversity. ‘Faith goes up and down’; it should be continually reaffirmed. The specific pressing question, meanwhile, was ‘what is it about British society that makes it so difficult to embrace Islam and not be forced either to cultural conformity or to apostasy?’ Was it easier for converts elsewhere?

One participant warned of the dangers and pressures of global connectedness via the Internet. Bad news, ‘if you spend too much time in those channels’ and are deeply invested in the worldwide community of the *ummah*, could leave you ‘overwhelmed and defeated’. ‘It can so affect the heart’, he declared, remembering a Palestinian friend who, during the 2014 war in Gaza, could hardly speak and yet could not stop checking the news. The proximity of events thousands of miles away was a peculiarly ‘modern burden’, for which there was no precedent in the *hadith*. Without a solid social and religious structure at home, the outside pressure and temptation to militancy or despair could be too much to bear. He could well imagine exiting Islam in response to ‘this burden of feeling’: some might believe that it was simply ‘easier as a non-Muslim, only having to think about yourself’. He suggested that everyone would benefit from ‘de-connecting’ and ‘taking a day off’.

Greater tolerance was required, in the community generally and for converts from a liberal background in particular. One attendee spoke of the common reaction of Muslims to suffering and atrocities in the news—that ‘this is because of a lack of spirituality and closeness to Allah’. It was especially ‘unnerving’, therefore, to ‘witness these things in our community’. And while the greater solution lay in returning to the teachings of the Prophet, converts also needed external sensitivity to their situation. Liberal converts often found their introduction to Islam ‘like four walls placed around you: “don’t do this, don’t do that”’. Imams in the UK ‘need to understand where we’re coming from, our British society’; instead, ‘they’re importing a Middle Eastern Islam’ without regard for the actual culture in which they find themselves.

Indeed, the mixture of culture and faith in the Muslim community, often seemingly inextricable, had struck many of the participants. One recounted how, after converting, he had been told ‘now you’re Muslim, you have to eat curry’. Hearing this sort of thing from heritage Muslims, he went on, ‘you start to doubt’ how much knowledge they really have of Islam. The first condition of conversion was knowledge: ‘the people who give new Muslims knowledge are supposed to be leaders, but too often they are misleaders’.

## 2.8 Apostasy II

The discussion of apostasy concluded with a flurry of contributions, all claiming, from anecdotal evidence, that few converts in fact leave Islam. One participant insisted on the difference between leaving the community and leaving the religion—the first was more common, and perhaps understandable, than the second. The varying attitudes among Muslims to so-called apostates illustrated why. To a born Muslim leaving Islam, the reaction was “‘we hope he’ll come back’”; to a convert doing the same, the feeling was “‘oh, he’s gone back to his old ways’”. Nevertheless, in his experience, nearly all converts still considered themselves Muslims even if they had quit the community. He had thus been shaken by a recent American survey suggesting that 75% of converts abandoned Islam. All other evidence seemed to suggest that only a very small percentage of converts really did leave the faith. He asked the gathering whether they knew anyone who had in fact exited Islam and, if so, what they knew of his or her situation.

One participant knew of two who had left. One had found the tenets too strict, but had since embraced a more Sufi-influenced strain of Islam, while the other was an American Christian who had converted and then returned to Christianity. The wife of another speaker knew someone who had moved away from Islam, though she had still given her daughter an Islamic name. Yet the strongest convert one attendee had ever met—the man who gave him his first Qur’an—had since become only ‘a booze and pork Muslim’, keeping to the diet and little else. He had grown tired of arguing, of futile inter-faith dialogues, the participant explained. A fourth man argued that the focus on converts was obscuring the larger picture: most apostates were heritage Muslims, he maintained, not converts. The young Muslims he knew were open and connected to wider society. Born into cultural isolation, they lived double lives at home: was it any great surprise that some were tempted to leave the restrictions behind altogether?

Yet a born Muslim who ‘eats pork or smokes a spliff’ was still considered a

Muslim, the first speaker pointed out. A convert who did the same was an apostate. It was crucial, therefore, to make allowances and to be careful: ‘unless someone is explicit in his rejection of Islam, we don’t have the right to take him out of the fold’. The Chair echoed the point that ‘loose talk about apostasy and converts can be very harmful’. By being vocal, converts themselves could combat assumptions like that which equated conversion to Islam with marriage to a Muslim. A slogan had emerged in the report on female perspectives, for instance, subverting the stereotype and expressing the attitude of women who married into Islam and then stayed after the marriage itself ended: ‘ditch the man and keep your *iman*’.<sup>35</sup>

## 2.9 Sectarianism

The Chair then directed participants from general, at times vague, discussion of ‘problems’ in the Muslim community to the specific subject of sectarianism. He acknowledged that sectarianism was perhaps not so omnipresent a concern in Britain; in Muslim-majority countries, however, one ‘can’t talk about faith without being caught up in it’. A convert reads about the religion, comes to it, and then finds a diversity of schools of Islam. This diversity ‘impinges on your life at the moment when you are struggling with the transition’ to being Muslim: how did it present itself, and how did attendees deal with it?

The presenter elaborated on his own experience. He had known that there were different sects of Islam before converting, but he had also expected there to be a general unity among them. The degree of mutual animosity that actually existed shocked him. The disappointment was draining: ‘at last, I’ve found my faith, and then I get caught up in this’. He well understood how converts could get tired of the struggle for a more individual Islam and simply give in to one sect or the other. But once absorbed by one particular strain of Islam, whether Sunni or Shia, he believed a convert would ‘lose his spiritual, questing drive’.

Some asserted that sectarianism, or at least its more vicious aspects, found more fertile ground among heritage Muslims than among converts. Most converts came to Islam from a background in critical inquiry, one participant claimed. They were thus less likely to be tempted by sectarian conflict and less likely even to understand it. He himself had been shocked by the prejudice against Jews and Christians—not to mention other Muslims—he found in the community. Another speaker emphasised the irony: ‘and yet a person who enters Islam from Judaism or Christianity does so with double blessing!’ His own Protestant background had given him spiritual experiences which, in physical expression, were no different to what he now experienced in a mosque. Moreover, he called

himself a Sunni because he hoped he followed the *sunnah*—the example of the Prophet—but he was nevertheless open to other influences and teachings. However, he added, ‘this is a perspective, an openness not readily available to heritage Muslims’, whose faith was more entwined with culture.

One attendee identified ‘a gang mentality’ among the various sects. He too considered himself a flexible Sunni, ‘still finding his foothold’, but had found schisms even within Sunni Islam and often been told ‘don’t take knowledge from that person’. Attitudes could be territorial and aggressive. There was—in his city—a too-frequent subordination of spirituality and character to politics and petty conflicts. He divided the blame between group members who came from a gang background—‘some of these communities have a high intake of converts’—and gatekeepers who thrived on the divisions.

## 2.10 Division vs. Diversity in Muslim Communities

Discussion continued to revolve around the question of whether, in general terms, British Muslim communities tended towards diversity (and peace) or division (and strife). The Chair, a heritage Muslim himself, claimed to have been unaware of the depth of Islamic discord until his academic activity brought it to his attention. Now and suddenly, or so it seemed to him, a much larger sectarianism had re-emerged, ‘rearing its head’. The Sunni-Shia dichotomy: was this not the essence of Islamic sectarianism now?<sup>36</sup>

No, was the general answer—there were other schisms. Discussion revealed greater nuance, and a picture of a splintered British Islam took shape. All of those present supported, to varying degrees, the free expression of faith, but many had encountered conflict and bitterness among the various groups that were often lumped together as ‘the Muslim community’. As converts, they had experienced sectarianism as an imposition on their burgeoning Islamic identity. And while some hope was expressed that converts could act as ‘bridges’ between groups, the larger fear was that many converts functioned instead as ‘sponges’, soaking up, reflecting, and perpetuating the friction that surrounded them.

There was initial debate over the meaning of sectarianism. One participant preferred the term ‘tribalism’, explaining that his own embrace of Islam was strengthened when he learned that the Qur’an had been revealed precisely to do away with tribalism. Such infighting was a distraction from ‘the spiritual journey to consciousness of God’. Another speaker used ‘sectarianism’ almost synonymously with diversity of belief. He pointed out that various strands of Islam existed worldwide and had migrated to the UK along with people who

believed in them. A convert's understanding of sectarianism was therefore 'dependent on the group you find yourself in', which could be a product as much of chance as of rational choice. Converts 'may not even be aware of the diversity of Islam until they come to a big city' and witness the variety of mosques. The Chair intervened to remark that, in academic discourse, sectarianism had a political meaning; the more concretely descriptive use to which this participant was putting it could be better covered by the term 'inflectionism'. A fourth speaker offered a plain definition: 'diversity becomes sectarianism when different groups come into conflict'.

A small minority of attendees spoke of sectarianism in less disparaging tones, questioning its importance both as a problem and as a phenomenon. One asserted that the division of sects had been a feature of Islam 'from the second generation', a product of the need 'to guard against that which is deviant' in belief and practice. He spoke of the understandable process by which diverse cultures adapted Islam in diverse ways; nevertheless, converts should 'look to the majority views' (i.e. Sunni Islam), next to which Shia Islam represented 'disparity', 'saying things contrary to what the majority thinks'. Another speaker claimed that Shia and Sunni were closer than generally portrayed: 'isn't the difference that counts the degree of piety?' It was 'the work of our enemies' to sow division in the *ummah*; 'diversity' was a 'political' gambit akin to divide-and-rule.

Nevertheless, experience of divided Muslim communities was common among the participants. Early in their lives as converts, many had been warned against talking to certain Muslims and visiting certain mosques. The communal mistrust was particularly rife in big cities. One attendee spoke about leaving a small, close-knit mosque in a small, close-knit town and arriving in a bigger city, where he was told "don't go to that mosque, they eat babies!"<sup>37</sup> A more recent convert had announced the news of his conversion to his Muslim supervisor at work. He was told, 'it's great you're a Muslim, but now you have to pick a sect'. At this point, he did not even know how to pray, yet he was already being asked to choose sides. Another participant had moved from Singapore, where his sense of community had never been stronger, back to an English city. There, the big divide was between Salafism and Sufism, and the debate tended towards accusations of 'innovation' being lobbed from either side. Kids from different mosques would fight each other, and their parents would try to prevent schools from mixing the children of different traditions.

## 2.11 Sponges and Structures: Sectarianism and Converts

Although, as several participants observed, such tensions often had their origin outside the UK, converts could be especially vulnerable to them. ‘Most converts are like sponges’, one participant said, ‘soaking up the available information’. Sectarian influences were impressed on converts not just by the heritage community but by other converts too. One attendee spoke of the convert’s susceptibility to his first influence—a contact with Islam that often involves pressure to conform. He mentioned a famous, unnamed convert ‘who says a convert has to choose a particular school of thought, has to align himself’. This, he claimed, was what converts were often told: that ‘they to have to make a choice, pick a team’. The confidence to challenge such pressure only came with time and study. Another speaker asserted that converts should be informed that sectarian divisions ‘have nothing to do with them’, as they emerge from historical contexts that are foreign to the UK. ‘These are issues outside the UK, where they should stay and be resolved’. Converts, meanwhile, should concentrate solely on ‘the overall tenets’ of Islamic belief. A third participant added that although ‘your spiritual journey from the edge to the centre can be hijacked’, the fundamentals of religion remained easy: ‘pray, fast, know what is *halal* and what is *haram*’.

But this separation of wheat from chaff, essential religious knowledge from dangerous cultural distraction, was not simple for many. Converts required both space for self-expression and structure for self-development; the balance was elusive—and contested. One participant declared that the sight of sectarian discord was preventing more Afro-Caribbeans—his own community—from embracing Islam. He felt suffocated by the conflict: some of the nicest people he knew were Shia, whereas his Sunni mosque had been the site of ‘several brutal encounters’. ‘Pulled this way and that’, Afro-Caribbeans had ‘no voice’ of their own in the Muslim community, despite their rich history. A second speaker articulated the attraction and limitation of the Sufi interpretation of Islam: ‘formless and empty’. The expression of form—of religious practice—was necessarily cultural and political, yet structure could hardly be avoided if one wanted to develop as a Muslim. He felt that diversity should be a strength of Islam; he feared that ‘the signposting’ for newcomers simply was not good enough, leaving them ‘confused and overwhelmed’.

Following this remark, another participant recommended the establishment of a ‘framework for teaching new Muslims and training their teachers’ in order to ‘stop the immediate recruitment of converts to sects’. This suggestion was

later echoed in slightly different terms. ‘Some people come to Islam with a support network and flourish’, one attendee observed, but others were unsupported and lost their way. In other words, a network for converts was sorely lacking: ‘it should be easy to come to Islam and hard to leave, but it’s actually the other way round’.

Despite the generally downbeat assessment of communal suspicion and friction, a few participants argued that converts could articulate, and embody, a case for unity in diversity. Nominally free of the cultural inheritance that often segregated and blinkered the heritage community, converts were well-suited to the role of bridge-building. An attendee argued that one can ‘override sectarian thought’ if one looks beyond it to behaviour and ‘sees another embodying Islam in action’. His own teacher, for instance, was sympathetic to the Salafist Muslim Brotherhood; that did not prevent him from learning a great deal. Another participant reminded the gathering that Islam had advanced by conversion and ‘always had room for differences’. Who better than converts to remind other Muslims of this part of their tradition? The presenter, speaking again as this discussion came to a close, suggested that, not ‘having historical baggage with Islam’, ‘we can celebrate diversity’ and ‘make a difference in a time when the *ummah* is extraordinarily divided’. He emphasised the point: ‘our convert responsibility is to take heritage Muslims by the hand and say, “let’s come together in unity, let the past be past, let’s agree to disagree”’.

The final contribution of this session, however, was less idealistic. This participant faulted the discussion for failing to address the reasons why some Muslims were so tempted by sectarianism and for overstating the power of converts to address the problem. ‘I’m so sorry to say this, but we have to be realistic: backward mullahs and strict sects have a lot more to offer their young followers than we do’. What could converts really do? They could help to ‘relieve the tension between sects, that’s all’.

### 3. GENDER AND SEXUALITY

#### 3.1 Themes

The symposium’s next presentation offered thoughts on gender and sexuality—with an understandable emphasis on masculinity—through the prism of one man’s journey from spiritual dissatisfaction, through marriage, to fulfilment in Islam. The presenter spoke about equality, gender roles, and family structure,

developing a contrast between Singapore and Britain, the well-ordered and well-knit society in which he rose to Muslim maturity versus the materialistic, fragmented society to which he then returned. He argued that men should follow the Prophetic model more closely and that converts could challenge general assumptions about the patriarchal and sexist nature of Islam.

### 3.2 Finding Fulfilment

The presenter began with an account of his life, describing his slow journey towards Islam and the changes it had wrought in him—the meaning it had instilled. The product of good parents, an ordinary childhood, and a mildly—ineffectually—Christian upbringing, he arrived at adulthood dissatisfied and restless. His cultural staples were the pub and the skateboard; his divorced parents had both been fond of drinking and parties, and the rebellious aspect of skateboarding appealed to him. He became a PR man and rode the booming games industry to early prosperity. ‘But I didn’t feel right or satisfied, even though I had what many people aspire to have’.

He began reading books about spirituality and became aware of ‘another plane of existence’, beyond the mundanity in which his life was immersed. The idea that he should go on a journey seized him. He left, quitting his job and selling all his possessions. He then travelled through South Asia, attempting to commune with nature and staring at sunsets—he felt the urge to be doing something when the sun went down every day. He visited temples on meditation retreats, but the experience ‘ultimately proved quite empty’. At last, he found himself in Australia and began working again—his drinking and his partying picked up too, worse than before. He began to ask himself if this was it, if his spiritual journey had already come to an end.

Throughout, he had hardly been aware of the Muslims around him. He would walk past mosques, note the shoes outside with muted curiosity, and occasionally eat *halal* curry. Then, however, he met his wife; a born Muslim from Singapore, she introduced him properly to Islam. With her, however, he wanted ‘to have his cake and eat it too’, to keep both his wife and his unreformed life. He did not yet have the strength, or the urgent impetus, to change.

‘But fate intervened’. The presenter paused, reflecting that ‘God brings you low before giving you hope again’ and thus placing his own story in line with a pattern stitched by the previous symposia—trauma preceded enlightenment. He picked up the thread of narrative again: he suffered a car accident and, injured in hospital, gave himself to prayer for the first time, ‘God, let me out of

this place'. This was the turning point. Afterwards, he began reading the Qur'an seriously and found that 'everything made sense'. The realisation dawned: 'this is what you were looking for'.

And so he moved to Singapore to be with his wife, and there found 'a beautiful thing for a man from a broken family': a large, supportive family, embedded in a cohesive society. He experienced only 'a touch of the patriarchal' in the ceremonial signing of the marriage contract; meanwhile, he gained a new masculine role model—his father-in-law. He sought to emulate this man, whose way of praying was, in the presenter's eyes, more meaningful than meditation had ever been. Three years passed before he returned to the UK with his wife. On the way home, they stopped at Mecca, where he was uplifted by 'the rainbow of colours', the sight of 'people from everywhere' coming together in shared belief. He settled in an English city with a strong Muslim community, where he had lived happily ever since.

### 3.3 Gender Equality

The presenter had gone to his Islamic instructor for advice on preparing this talk and was directed to a verse from the Qur'an which, for him, expressed the true Muslim attitude to gender equality. It was verse 13 of the *Surat al-Hujurat*: 'O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted'. He explained the *surah*: It was in their 'diversity', their differences that men and women were attracted to each other; 'piety levelled' the ground between them; any superiority or inferiority did not belong to gender but to '*iman* alone', the quality of a believer's faith.

### 3.4 Gender Roles

His remarks on masculinity emphasised the tension in Muslim men between pride and duty, between macho individualism and family responsibility. 'This is our battle', he declared, but added that Muslim men had one, incomparable resource: the model of a balanced life established by the Prophet Muhammad, who was 'effectively at the service of his family', doing housework and taking care of the children. Thus 'the Prophetic example elevates us' above egotism and instils greater sensitivity.

Regarding women, the presenter spoke of the conflict between family structure and what he termed 'gender competition'. He observed that modern men and

women had increasingly overlapping roles. ‘Maybe that’s a good thing’, but he regretted the ‘societal pressure on women to earn and work in the service of materialism’. The time and energy women invested in those pursuits would be lost on loving their children, he explained. That was why the presenter ‘looked East for family structure’, for an alignment of ‘equal but different gender attributes’.

In a coda, he began to pivot from issues of concern to Muslims generally to the situation of converts in particular. Conversion could have negative effects on a relationship, he acknowledged. Two common stories often ended in breakup: first, when one partner converted and the other did not; second, when they both embraced Islam, but one partner became more pious than the other. He repeated the slogan from the report on female perspectives—‘ditch the man, keep your *iman*’—and took its point: religion had priority over relationships.

### 3.5 The Role of Converts: Challenging Assumptions

In matters of gender and sexuality, the presenter argued, converts were uniquely well-placed to play the role of counterweight to skewed public perceptions and prejudices. They could challenge ‘media stereotypes’ of a backward, sexist, and patriarchal Islam. Having made the considered, adult choice to become Muslim, they might be listened to more readily than those for whom Islam was an inheritance. Unencumbered by the heritage community’s ‘baggage with women’s equality’, ‘we can offer the other side to “the *hijab* is oppressive” narrative’, he declared. ‘Ignorance is the barrier’ and could be overcome not only through argument, but through action: converts were the living proof of Islam’s power to bring out the best in men and women.

This thought had come to him with great clarity a few days before the symposium. Driving with his kids, he had passed a pub and seen a group of men standing outside drinking. ‘I could have been there, but I’m here, in this car, with my children’, he realised. ‘Conversion can make better men; we can be the living examples of another lifestyle’.

### 3.6 Counsel for Converts

The presenter concluded his remarks with words of advice for other converts. The resource of the Prophet as role model could not be understated. He quoted a Hindu philosopher on the Prophet’s huge concern ‘for both large and small things, the whole world and the smallest detail’. The convert should mind his ‘sphere of influence’, focussing on ‘the good you can do’ and not getting ‘bogged

down with things you can't change'. The last thing, and 'the big thing', was knowledge: it 'destroys ignorance and delivers equality'. Knowledge was what converts needed to obtain and spread beyond themselves.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Themes

The discussion that followed delved into the subject of Muslim masculinity and its discontents. Participants spoke about marriage, gender roles, and homosexuality through the prism of the convert's divided sensibility—the liberal social background from which he sprang and the conservative religious doctrine to which he was bound. Speakers were frequently torn between defending Islam from perceived stereotypes of sexism and criticizing the heritage Muslim community for its residual patriarchal attitudes. Most attempted to make the distinction between culture and religion, separating the requirements of faith from the ingrained habits of particular communities. This distinction, however, was neither simple nor uncontested.

### 4.2 Masculinity: Theory vs. Reality

To what extent did Muslim men follow the positive Prophetic example outlined by the presenter? In similar, but less generous, terms, how far did the reality of masculinity among converts and born Muslims fall short of that role model?

The first participant to speak declared the need 'to revive a positive model of masculine spirituality', one that would draw on 'traditional male virtues', such as generosity, and establish an alternative to the 'hyper-masculinity, masculinism, patriarchy' that characterised too many Muslim men. He had converted in middle age, when his son was twenty years old. He eventually learned that when his son got into arguments, he would warn his antagonist, "watch out, my dad's a Muslim". Although the anecdote raised a chuckle among the gathering, the participant 'didn't like this at all', the assumption of aggression and violence in men who chose Islam. It was less amusing when one considered the 'desperate' stories of grooming and abuse involving gangs of Muslims in the north of England. 'Something must be done'. One might start, he added, by questioning whether men and women were really so different, or whether masculine and feminine principles did not coexist within every individual.

Others spoke of the difficulty of following the Prophetic example when it did not align with the expectations of many, particularly among the heritage community. It was, in fact, the cultural conditioning of born Muslims that was targeted for criticism and considered to have distorted the image of Islam. The presenter spoke of one Arab acquaintance who tried to live up to the Prophet's precedent of masculine responsibility: his mother 'didn't want his behaviour mentioned outside the house', fearing it would affect his standing as a man. Another participant recalled that in the community in which he first found his feet as a Muslim, 'men and women simply didn't interact'. It 'was confusing and disheartening' to see how 'one could become a pariah' for treating women with respect. It was even more depressing to acknowledge how many could 'conflate this with how Islam should be'. A third speaker described the sight, in large English cities, of wives walking behind their husbands, and told the story of a neighbour whose wife neither left the house nor made eye contact with men. 'We have to challenge this, we have to be clear: this is not Islamic, this is cultural'.

Two attendees even spoke of the phenomenon of 'convert hunters' (discussed later at greater length): heritage women who sought out converts to marry. 'The idea is that converts are less patriarchal, less conservative, and more chilled out' than heritage men. Often raised in the UK, such women 'connect better with people who share their British culture'. Converts offered them both a means of staying in Islam and a release from the constricting environment of many Muslim communities.

### 4.3 Self-Criticism

Certain participants felt that this portrait—of culture divisible from faith, of backward heritage communities and enlightened converts—was too easy, too closely aligned with 'Islamophobic' opinion, and too complacent in its view of British society. 'Watch out', one speaker warned, 'our conversation could be seen as feeding the narrative of "Islam is patriarchal and awful"'. And what was British culture, if not patriarchal? 'Go to the rugby club, consider the problems with sexual consent at our universities: there is only a veneer of equality in the UK'. The presenter remonstrated with him, clarifying that 'we're saying that patriarchy is not within Islam but among heritage Muslims'. The speaker replied that 'the dichotomy between Islam and heritage Muslims' should not be confused with a license to 'bash heritage Muslims and exculpate ourselves'. A second speaker agreed. 'We shouldn't idealise Western ideas of gender', he said, nor should we forget that 'more women than men are converting to Islam; they're sick of being objectified'.<sup>38</sup>

Another attendee questioned the presumed liberalism of converts. His brothers had also embraced Islam. The youngest of them was the most ‘traditional man’s man’, but had married a spirited, progressive woman. Now he was ‘using religion to bully her and to establish his “rights” over her’. The speaker called upon the gathering to admit that ‘there are converts who rather like what we disapprove of in traditional Muslim culture’. They want ‘to be pampered’ and treat their wives like ‘maids with benefits’. Meanwhile, there are ‘heritage guys who have to take their wives out of town for a meal’, in order to avoid the disapproval of the community and the admonition, “‘she should be cooking for you’”.

But while some participants believed that Islam received disproportionate criticism, others felt that British liberal values should be defended with equal vigour. One speaker claimed that ‘there are patriarchal cultures everywhere, but only Islam gets criticised’. He pointed to the fact that ‘Jewish women used to have to cover their heads’ and went on to warn of the ‘danger’ of gender equality. While women are working and not ‘bonding with their children’, ‘society is being destroyed everywhere’. On the other hand, one attendee contrasted ‘the way non-Muslims are seen by some as not having human values’ with the actual state of affairs in Britain: ‘women are safe going to work and coming home’. Meanwhile, he was aware of ‘hundreds’ of lesbian and gay Muslims whose situation was ‘completely taboo’. ‘I hate to say it’, he concluded, ‘but a lot of work needs to be done with the heritage community’. ‘The blueprint of Islam is fine’, but its reality did not bear the same scrutiny.

#### 4.4 A British Islam

The answer to such fraught negotiations along the border of culture and faith was, according to one participant, to cultivate a distinctive brand of British Islam, one both faithful to religious precepts and sensitive to social standards. The gender roles embodied by many heritage Muslims were ‘Islamic, yes, but as determined in Pakistan or Saudi Arabia’. There *fiqh*, or Islamic law, developed in a way particular to its context. But ‘we need to theorise from our own context’. He pointed out that gender roles among Muslims vary widely in Bosnia, Turkey, and Malaysia. However, ‘it’s the Muslims of other parts of the world’—referring to the Middle East and Pakistan—‘that are coming here and not working’. His sentiment was seconded by another participant, who referred to the history of ‘*urf*, or Islamic custom, ‘being flexible with the traditions of different places’. The resolution ‘to develop our own Islam’ was uncontested, if also unelaborated.

#### 4.5 Sex and Homosexuality<sup>39</sup>

Homosexuality stirred the fiercest debate of the symposium. There was little disagreement on its doctrinal prohibition,<sup>40</sup> but the latitude of Islamic tolerance was laid open to intense dispute. A few participants pointed out the fact of homosexual practice in Muslim communities, some declared it irreligious and dangerous, others attempted to minimise the problem it presented in everyday life, and one participant challenged what he considered to be Muslim hypocrisy on homophobia.

The Chair introduced the subject by returning to the title of the presentation, 'Gender and Sexuality'. The first topic had been addressed thoroughly, if not exhaustively. The second had scarcely been broached. For the women who had participated in the previous project, 'sexuality had meant same-sex relationships'. The Chair would not limit discussion to this aspect of sexuality—premarital and marital sex were also of interest—but he would direct the participants' attention its way.

Given the chance to expand on his remarks, the presenter declared himself reluctant to address the topic. 'Nothing from my experience jumped out as relevant', though he had spoken with his teacher who was, perhaps unexpectedly, 'more comfortable talking about sex'. The presenter did share one anecdote, however, that intimated a divided conscience. When he converted in Singapore and began to read more about Islamic practice, he found himself being questioned on these sensitive matters by sceptical colleagues, foreigners like him. Lacking confidence as a newcomer to Islam, he responded by 'reciting conservative doctrine' and 'frightening them off'. This 'disturbed' him at the time, causing him to wonder at the intensity of his enthusiasm and ask if he 'needed to take a step back'.

#### 4.6 Homosexuality and Hypocrisy<sup>41</sup>

Several participants noted the gulf between religion and reality in Muslim countries and communities. One spoke of visiting Morocco when he was young and being propositioned for sex, almost immediately, by another man. This was his 'first experience of sexuality in a Muslim-majority country', and he could not help but be 'struck by the dichotomy' between what people proclaimed and how they behaved. What he considered most harmful was the taboo. Muslim homosexuality was simply denied: "it has to do with the West, not with us", or so the refrain went. The irony was that 'the more Islamic societies restrict people, the more they push them to commit *haram* acts'.

Another attendee reinforced the point, sharing the experience of friends who had gone to North Africa and been ‘immediately plagued by solicitation for gay sex, drugs, prostitution’.

Nor was this social hypocrisy exclusive to other countries—where sex was concerned, Muslim communities in Britain had their share of difficulties. One participant was shocked to hear that in his part of the country, ‘young Muslims are having anal sex to maintain their virginities’. Equally, he had heard of ‘heritage girls with *hijabs* and all the works pressuring each other to lose their virginities’. There was, moreover, undue pressure on the young to marry early and take on responsibility beyond their years. These varied problems, he concluded, were not easy to resolve within a society as suffused with sex as Britain’s. A second speaker replied that the practice of *nikah mut’ah*, or ‘temporary marriage’, was a solution for situations where unmarried sex would otherwise occur. It was ‘a way of dealing reasonably with beautiful human sexuality’, though he was quick to add that it did not apply to homosexuality.

Indeed, most participants acknowledged that homosexuality was singled out for particular condemnation in Muslim communities, despite being no more strictly forbidden than other activities, such as unmarried sex or drug dealing. One attendee spoke of his twofold difficulty with homosexuality, arising from ‘a homophobic white British background’ and his Muslim recognition that ‘it’s *haram*, prohibited in Islam’. Yet he could still see the ‘double standards’ that perceived ‘homosexual sex between men as so much worse than unmarried sex with a woman’. The Chair wondered if the emphasis on homosexuality was not another instance of the conflation between culture and religion, another product of the aggressive masculinity of traditional Muslim cultures. He cited the fact that Muslim men sometimes ‘brag about penetration, saying it is a sin to be penetrated, not to penetrate’. One attendee, who had spent time in Cairo, recalled an instance of ingrained chauvinism: he had used the masculine form of the Arabic word for adultery, only to be told by his listeners that he should only use the feminine to describe that act. Most participants, however, did not offer explanations to match their descriptions of the special homosexual stigma.

#### 4.7 The Divided Conscience of Converts

The Chair observed that many converts came from backgrounds ‘more socially accepting’ than the heritage Muslim community: was it not a struggle to adapt themselves to strict Islamic doctrine?

Some participants maintained that the difficulty was not so grave. Properly considered in terms of everyday life, the issue of unlawful sexuality was ‘a non-issue’. They pointed out that four eyewitnesses were required to convict someone of sodomy under Islamic law, that the necessary spying would be a larger problem than the sexual act, and that *sharia*-prescribed punishment for homosexuality was not applicable in non-Islamic countries anyway. The more pressing issue was that of ‘purification and repentance’: ‘what does someone who has homosexual sex have to do to purify himself?’ By dwelling on homosexuality as if it were more problematic, ‘we’re in danger of talking into the hands of the Islamophobes’.

Others admitted a greater sense of inner conflict. One even referred, half-jokingly, to his schizophrenia, distinguishing between his reactions as a typical Briton and as a committed Muslim, associating the first with his given, Christian name and the second with his adopted, Islamic name. But most felt that, despite doctrinal disapproval, it was possible to reach a compromise—to treat homosexuality less hysterically and homosexuals more tolerantly. One participant revealed that two of his uncles, and some of his friends, were ‘that way inclined’. Moreover, his father was a drinker. Yet though drinking is also *haram*, ‘I don’t say to my dad, you’re not welcome in my house’. ‘Homosexuality is *haram*, but so are other things we deal with [more sensibly]’. Two forms of respect were required and did not contradict each other: ‘tradition is conservative and should be respected, but these people should be respected too—they’ll be judged after death’. It was astonishing to another participant that ‘the Muslim community seems more accepting of selling drugs than of homosexual sex’. A third participant spoke directly of ‘the harm visited on LGBT people in Muslim communities’. The morality of sexuality was ‘between an individual and God’; ‘whatever you think of it, you shouldn’t support harm or exclusion’.

Still others voiced the same pragmatic sentiment, arguing that it was possible to make reasonable accommodations. One reflected that, although ‘the act itself is a major sin’, ‘we don’t need to treat homosexuals negatively’. Another suggested that Muslims ‘be smart’: ‘there’s no debate that it’s *haram*, but also no need to fetishise it’. Looking further afield, one attendee added that visible tolerance would improve the image of Islam. ‘What is commonly thought of Muslims’, he claimed, was that ‘they hate and want to kill homosexuals’. Discrimination against gay men and women only furthered ‘the media impression of Muslims as something about to erupt’. So ‘we should make sure people know we don’t see them as targets; we may disagree with homosexuality,

but that doesn't mean we're going to deny them their rights'. In the meantime, a third speaker suggested, Muslim communities ought to 'focus on drugs or child grooming'—on more pressing problems, in other words.

#### 4.8 Between Religious and Civic Responsibility

Homosexuality thus presented an unusually fraught case of the negotiations Muslims make between religious and civic responsibility. For the majority of participants, it was clear that British laws trumped Islamic precepts, that notions of what was acceptable in Islam must be adapted to a living context. The Chair presented the gathering with a hypothetical situation—although one with precedent in fact. 'Two men turn up at a B&B, reveal that they are homosexual, and ask for a room: what do you, as the hotelier, do?' Several attendees replied that, put thus, it was a legal rather than a moral issue. 'You must uphold the laws of the country you live in; we may disagree, but we cannot discriminate'.

Other scenarios evoked more complicated responses. One participant claimed that the more revealing question was whether 'you would allow gay friends to stay in your spare room'. He suggested, moreover, that 'thirty years ago we would have given very different [and less forbearing] answers'. Another speaker described a different situation: 'a man about to become a woman' had come to him for advice on converting to Islam. While 'I have faith that Allah will accept him/her as a Muslim', there was 'no chance' the Muslim community would do the same. Phrased in terms of personal conscience rather than civic obligation, the issues of homosexuality and LGBT rights provoked a more heated debate and raised a much starker contrast between two voices in particular, the most unabashedly liberal and the most strictly conservative men at the symposium.

The latter speaker strongly disagreed with what he considered to be the gathering's 'almost blasé' acceptance of homosexuality. 'Excuse me, this is a severe issue: put it into the context of what your creator said about it', he warned, referring to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. To this, another participant read out the various other sins for which Biblical towns were destroyed, asking why homosexuality and its punishment alone were remembered. The first speaker continued to press his point nonetheless. 'Satan tests us', he asserted, and 'homosexuality is Satan inside them [the sexual partners] making the act more pleasurable'. 'Education in the light of Allah' was the answer to 'this abomination'. At the school where he worked, however, an LGBT week had been held, 'promoting' homosexuality and furthering 'the massive agenda of the LGBT lobby'. 'They will go as far as they can, bashing us

over the head with it. ‘Muslims need to be proactive in stating the faith position’, he concluded, or ‘where will we be in thirty years’ time?’

Two other participants signalled their partial agreement. One declared that ‘I believe homosexuality is a lifestyle choice and not a question of genes’, suggesting that ‘it comes from broken, single-parent families’ and that ‘people can be rehabilitated’. He lamented that ‘morality in this country is all going’, asking ‘when are we going to stand for anything?’ The other speaker cited the example of Singapore, in which conservative Islam was the glue of ‘a close-knit community’. Homosexuality there was ‘taboo’ and the subject of ‘a lot of denial’, but ‘on the other hand’ he had known of ‘an effeminate man who was stopped on the path to homosexuality and turned around’.

Others were dismayed. ‘I’m replacing “LGBT” with “Muslim” and hearing all the arguments against us’, one man declared. Another participant pointed out that ‘under the Equality Act, we are protected against discrimination just as gay people are; if we want to discriminate against them on the basis of sexuality, then we have to accept that others will discriminate against us on the basis of religion’. A third speaker was the most passionate. At multiple points in the conversation, he advocated for greater tolerance, suggesting that ‘we’re very quick to condemn Islamophobia, but not other phobias’. Finally, he restated his position with vehemence: ‘how can we protest Islamophobia if we promote homophobia?’

## 5. CONVERSION IN PRISON AND RADICALISATION

### 5.1 Themes

The condition of Muslims within prison and after their release was the subject of two presentations in a row. The presenters were both black converts who worked with prisoners, and one spoke from his own history as a repeat offender. They concentrated on the process of conversion inside jail—the motivations that led imprisoned men to embrace Islam—and the alienated existence many were compelled to lead outside of it. Although there was strength of community among incarcerated Muslims, and great potential for individual transformation, these advantages were undermined by an institutional support system that did not reflect the convert population of prisons, the authorities’ fear of radicalisation, and a lack of assistance for ex-offenders among Muslims generally. Both presenters recommended that faith-based organisations and

teaching fill the support space vacated by the Muslim community, on the one hand, and the criminal justice system, on the other.

## 5.2 First Presentation: Third Space—Convert Muslims and the Criminal Justice System<sup>42</sup>

The first presenter declared that he was ‘not a Muslim practitioner’, working only with Muslim prisoners, but ‘a practitioner who is Muslim’ and worked with everyone. Nevertheless, he would speak about converts in prison, about the plight of black converts in particular, and most pointedly about the absence of adequate support structures both inside and outside prison walls.

Three ‘tipping points’ and one great example informed his understanding of the present situation of convert prisoners in the UK. The first clue that all was not as it should be came when he was sitting with inmates in their dining hall, being sung to by a Christian choir. This in itself was not a problem; Christian support groups should be free to undertake ‘their civic and spiritual work’. But ‘I asked myself, where is the Muslim community here?’ Were Muslims from outside the system making a comparable effort to establish their presence and offer their aid to interested prisoners?

The second warning shot arrived during a conference on prison work. Statistics were delivered on the number of Muslims in prison, to which a colleague—and a heritage Muslim—responded that ‘they need *tawhid* [the concept of the oneness of God] in their lives’. This seemed utterly out of touch to the presenter. Many prisoners were, in fact, devout; their problems called for more practical solutions.

The third tipping point came in considering the Social Return on Investment (SROI) method of calculating the extra-financial value of investments. Each shooting cost the taxpayer £1.4 million and every stabbing £300,000, he informed the gathering. What, he increasingly wondered, was the social return, or even ‘spiritual return’, on such investments for converts in the prison system?

Lastly, ‘you can’t talk about Muslims in prison without talking about Malcolm X’. Not only was Malcolm X a persistent offender, not only did he convert in prison, not only did he offer a model of dignity to desperate men, his example also demonstrated what was now severely lacking for those in similar situations. The presenter clarified that ‘I am not Nation of Islam’, but he insisted that ‘when Malcolm was released, there was a *structure* waiting for him’. In 2015, meanwhile, ‘an offender comes out of prison with £46 and a bin bag’.

‘Let’s talk about the black convert’, the presenter continued. The neglect he described applied especially to black men who had embraced Islam. Whereas heritage Muslims who leave prison ‘have a re-entry programme of a kind’—families and communities who would take them back and help them—black Muslims had ‘no infrastructure to return to’. ‘What about the black convert who comes out and goes to the local Bengali mosque?’ What understanding, let alone help, would he receive? Very little, the presenter implied, leaving the way free to recidivism and continued social alienation.

Within prison, too, the support system was inadequate, though perhaps to a lesser degree. It simply did not reflect the actual make-up of the prison population. The presenter estimated that 12-14% of prisoners in Britain were Muslim and argued that half of them were converts. Of the two hundred imams who worked in prisons—‘and not full time’, he added—80% were Pakistani/Bangladeshi, 15% Arab, and 5% white. ‘There is not one black convert imam in the whole prison system’. Meanwhile, those who wished to engage in social work, but did not share the brand of Islam endorsed by the authorities, were classified as ‘non-violent extremists’ and barred from helping.

He called for Muslim organisations to address this gap and fill ‘the third space between the faith community and the criminal justice system’. Such organisations excelled at sending charity abroad, ‘but we have some housekeeping to do first’. In providing for ‘the voiceless’ in prison, they could draw on the example of the Prophet and his care for the Bedouin, as well as on initiatives that, though small, had already delivered tangible benefits—he cited a project for managing Muslim halfway houses as ‘one of a small handful of efforts’. His vision of Muslim engagement in prisons encompassed the small-scale—‘mentoring and befriending’—and the systematic, ‘developing pathways to education, employment, and training’. ‘What we’re ultimately talking about is legacy’, he concluded. ‘On the Day of Judgement, will you be able to say that you helped the marginalised?’

### **5.3 Second Presentation: From Gang Leadership to Gang Prevention and Research**

The second presenter gave a visceral account of his own experience in prison as a repeat offender, as a convert whose embrace of Islam was gradual and disjointed, and finally as a leader and mentor of other inmates.

He grew up without a father, though that was not unusual for a child of his background. ‘I’m from where father deficit is a big issue’. As a youth, he hung

out on street corners with friends—‘now we would have been deemed a gang’. Violence shadowed his life early. In the absence of a father figure, he looked up to an older boy who was later killed. He himself fired his first gun young, and ‘after that experience, I didn’t have a care for education’. He took on ‘the persona of being a gangster, a bad man’; he stabbed another student with a screwdriver. Sent to Jamaica by his mother to be reformed, he learned worse behaviour and brought it home. He was in prison by the age of sixteen, back at seventeen, and there again at nineteen. At first, ‘it was like a holiday camp, to be honest’. All his friends were there, and the conflicts between their gang and other gangs simply continued in a confined environment. It was there, however, that the presenter took to Islam, immediately and then slowly.

By the time of his third stint of incarceration, he was ‘fed up’. ‘What else is there?’, he wondered. Another prisoner reassured him: ‘only Allah knows when the world ends’. He dropped to his knees that very night and prayed in his cell till morning. Then he went to the other man, asking ‘What Allah?’, and received from him a Qur’an and the desire ‘to become a Muslim’. He took *shahadah* in short order. Yet much time passed before he could fully and maturely embrace Islam. He left prison as a nominal Muslim, but lacked basic knowledge, not even knowing how to meet other Muslims on the outside. In their absence, he ‘just carried on with the old ways, the old gang’, though he continued to read—often walking around with both a Bible and a Qur’an—and still wondered where he could find the Muslim community. At last, he asked a taxi driver and was brought to a mosque.

But that encounter was only another waystation on his journey, not its end. His life of crime continued, and he went on the run from the police, eventually spending four years as a fugitive. He fled the country and travelled, imbibing the Islamic cultures of Yemen and Egypt and learning a bit of Arabic. It was Islam, finally, that ‘taught me how to be a citizen’, that ‘enabled me to desist from crime and learn to value others’. He slipped back into England, accepted his punishment, and entered prison—for the last time as a convict, for the first time as a committed Muslim. He saw his fellow prisoners with new eyes. The people he used to know were still there, but now he recognised ‘the Asian brothers’ as Muslims too and noticed that other prisoners were increasingly turning to Islam. They looked to him for religious instruction, and slowly but surely his ‘persona as a leader took shape’.

At the symposium, and looking back from the vantage point of five and a half free years, he could draw certain conclusions about life as a Muslim in prison.

It was different and, in some respects, easier than life as a Muslim on the outside. Inside, he did not encounter the sectarianism that pervaded wider society: ‘we were just Muslims in jail; some prayed and some didn’t’. Even as it curtailed physical space, prison provided temporal space for reflection: some men ‘are serving sentences longer than the years they’ve lived’. Islam offered them an explanation and a direction for their lives. It ‘kept them going’. Only in a few cases had he seen prisoners forced, for ‘protection’, to convert. The vast majority—even hardened criminals—did so willingly and with a sense of newfound purpose. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that leaving prison was easier for him than for many others. He had apologised to his family before going back for the last time, had already ‘turned it around’ to a significant extent. Thus he had accumulated ‘some social capital for when I got out’. Others did not have this social capital and were not receiving any assistance in developing it. ‘What are Muslim organisations doing for people in prison?’ He could not provide an answer.

The presenter concluded by reflecting on his current social work in prisons. He now spent five days a week with inmates, and each week he travelled to a different jail. He gave prisoners a louder voice, helping them to analyse their own situations and proposing solutions to management. Although he worked for all prisoners, he gave particular assistance to imams and special talks to Muslims. Nevertheless, ‘they need support and I need support’. The Muslim community had to engage with prisoners and ‘see what’s going on’; unfortunately, he admitted sadly, ‘people fear the stigma’ of association. There was also much work to be done on educating prison authorities about Islam. Too many Muslim prisoners were ‘mistakenly accused of being “extremists”’. This misunderstanding emerged from ‘ignorance’ and gave rise to a bitter irony: these so-called extremists ‘are actually trying to change their lives and behaviour’. ‘With understanding comes acceptance’, and both would make ‘prison a less hostile place’. A more relaxed and informed attitude on the part of the authorities would also serve to combat ‘media sensationalising of Muslim extremists’. Lastly, he emphasised the need to help Muslims leaving prison. ‘Without support, what are they going to do? Go back to the lives they know, but with a veneer of Islam. And where’s the faith in that?’

## 6. DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Themes

Through the prism of prison, participants deepened the discussion of themes

that had emerged over the course of the previous symposia and crystallised at this gathering: the attractions of Islam, the reality of radicalisation and its overblown representation in the media, the compromises of government funding for organisations, and the institutional neglect of converts. The hypocrisy of the heritage Muslim community was the target of their most sustained and vociferous criticism, but Islam itself was never deemed the problem; it could only be part of the solution.

## 6.2 Further Testimony on Prisons

There was another witness to the state of Islam in British prisons. One participant also worked in the prison system, as a prison chaplain, agreed with much of the portrait drawn by the presenters, emphasizing the lack of outside support for converts in particular. In one sense, however, the story of Islam in prison was a success. Whereas Muslim communities in general were expanding, they often had difficulty ‘bringing in people who are not Asian’. ‘In some parts of our country’, meanwhile, Islam was actually failing to put down roots. But ‘in prison, Islam attracts all kinds’.

Yet this success had a shadow. While heritage Muslims leaving prison ‘have families to take them back’, there was ‘nothing in the communities to welcome [other] Muslims back’. Especially in the heritage community, therefore, the resettlement of ex-offenders was a severely neglected issue. ‘Mosques have no appreciation of the problem and are not looking at it’. There were Christian organisations that offered to help, but no comparable Muslim effort. The participant urged others to get involved—he himself had begun working in prisons only as a volunteer.

## 6.3 The Attractions of Islam

The Chair repeated a crucial point: no other section of society was attracting Muslim converts with the same intensity and volume as the prison system. Why? Was it because Islam was seen as ‘a rebellious religion, a religion of outsiders, a religion of resistance’?

The second presenter answered that this was sometimes the case. Moreover, ‘guys in prison are more direct about calling others to faith’. For the most part, however, Islam attracted so many because it offered ‘focus and purpose’ to people with traumatic pasts, unanswered questions, nowhere to go, and a lot of time on their hands. Troubled men witnessed the peace of mind that possessed fellow prisoners and became curious as to how this self-transformation occurred.

The first presenter acknowledged the degree to which the Chair's question was unanswerable: there was a mystery at the heart of conversion. 'Allah takes people and changes their hearts; you see people you would never have expected to embrace Islam convert'. It was often not easy to say why. Yet speaking from a black perspective, he would suggest that Islam offered more to people like him than Christianity did. It provided more answers to the suffering of black history, to bondage and forced migration. It gave him a route to 'self-actualisation'. That said, 'spiritual reality doesn't necessarily change social reality'. Activism, with its focus on the economic structures of oppression, needed to be more than 'an afterthought' to religious faith. They ought to be entwined.

An attendee added that 'education and empowerment' were in evidence at various mosques he had visited in large English cities. Beyond prison, Islam offered 'lots of Afro-Caribbean and white converts' a means 'of bettering themselves'.

#### **6.4 Sex Offenders**

One participant was interested in imprisoned sex offenders, noting that their crime 'cuts across all demographic sectors': were they also receptive to Islam?

The second presenter replied that in prison there was 'attraction to Islam across the board', but 'sex offenders are often segregated to the bottom of the pile'. 'The worst crime in jail is troubling women and children'. They were neglected by most imams and ignored, or beaten up, by fellow prisoners.

The participant who worked in prisons clarified that their segregation depended on the particular penal institution. In his own work, 'I never go out of my way to find out what they've done—I just try to help'. He added, however, that this topic could be connected to the previous discussion of homosexuality. Sexual offences were 'seen as much worse than robbery or violence': there was a perceived hierarchy of offence in Muslim culture, as in others, and sex attracted the greatest attention and censure. The upshot was that sex offenders were the people who receive the least help, in spite of the fact that human and financial resources were directed by the state and third sector organisations at tackling the criminality of sex offenders.

#### **6.5 Radicalisation<sup>43</sup>**

Another participant engaged directly with the issue of radicalisation, arguing that religious extremism and its remedies were widely misunderstood. Religion was not the problem; disbelief was not the answer. On the contrary, there was

a ‘correlation between *lack* of a religious upbringing and vulnerability to radicalisation’. Extremism flourished in a climate of religious ignorance, or of half-knowledge. The solution was to ‘raise Islamic literacy’ through the work of ‘bottom-up, grassroots Islamic groups’. It was the failure to support responsible faith-based organisations and teaching that was ‘responsible for allowing radicalisation to thrive’.

The first presenter answered that ‘this has been tried’. Such groups, he continued, were ‘labelled “non-violent extremists”’ and then prevented from working in prisons. Nevertheless, he agreed that it was necessary to establish partnerships between Muslim organisations and the criminal justice system.

The second presenter attributed radicalisation in prisons to personal charisma and the absence of moderate models. To some extent, ‘exposure to a sense of the wars’ in the Middle East fed an extremist current. More important, however, was the variety of Islams on offer in any given prison. If prisoners could not relate to their imam, ‘if he doesn’t speak good English’, then they would gravitate to a fellow prisoner instead, one with some claim to knowledge, whether his sympathies were radical or moderate. The presenter rejected the notion, raised for discussion by the Chair, that ‘you feel you have been so badly kicked about that moderate iterations of Islam have nothing to say to you, and so you turn to a more radical version’.

The participant who raised the issue went further, arguing that radicalisation was also due to ‘the discriminatory attitude towards Islam’ held by prison authorities. He believed that, when it occurs, the undermining of Muslim chaplains by other faith chaplains in the system might be attributed to this attitude. A third speaker, however, felt this was overly exculpatory of Muslims themselves. In his part of the country, prison imams were ‘exclusively Salafi and linked to a mosque with an extremist reputation’. Formulating better policy for the prison system was the appropriate answer to his mind.

There was consensus, however, on two final points. Radicalisation as a phenomenon had been exaggerated by the media. The second presenter maintained that he had only come across one true extremist in all his years in prison; those labelled as such were often inmates who simply had ideological differences with their imams. So he had encountered many ‘orthodox’ prisoners, but just one with ‘a desire to commit atrocities’. Insisting on a sense of proportion was not to deny the reality of the problem. To the suggestion of one participant that money spent on surveillance was wasted, he replied that ‘I support what the government is doing: there are some people in this country

who would blow all of us up'. Participants also agreed that the only long-term remedy to radicalisation was faith-based education. It was crucial that a moderate, informed, and engaged iteration of Islam be available to prisoners. This ought to be the work of Muslim organisations.

## 6.6 Muslim Organisations and Government Funding

The proper means of financing such organisations was soon contested, however, as several participants argued against accepting government funding and the conditions that came with it. One participant spoke discouragingly of his experience competing for British government grants, funding that was often carved up between ethnic groups. He felt that mosques, in contrast, had resources that 'were underused for ex-offenders' and had 'lost the sense of what they were supposed to be: the hub of the community'.

The first presenter returned to the formula of a 'spiritual return on investment', of which the government, in his account of its dry quantitative methods, had little grasp. He felt that 'we shouldn't go down the government funding route', shaped as it was by 'a perspective that disregards spirituality'. Since 'the Qur'an cannot reside permanently in a heart that is ill', faith itself was the better model for assistance.

Another participant questioned the label of 'non-violent extremism'—applied in the presenter's account to many groups attempting to engage with prisoners—asking whether working with government programmes and investment was really 'a dead end'. Was it not possible to 'redirect government investment from surveillance to education', moving money from ineffective anti-radicalisation initiatives towards community-based programmes?

The first presenter answered that it was not 'a dead end', but it was a tall order. He asked the participant whether, other things being equal, he would choose to live in a democracy or under *sharia* law.<sup>44</sup> The participant struggled with his answer, before replying that for a Muslim country he would choose *sharia* (the UK being another matter). Holding that belief, the presenter stated, 'would [brand one as] a non-violent extremist' by the authorities and cause the person concerned to be prevented from working in prison. Some Muslim organisations were well placed to help, he concluded, but it was a better use of their time 'to start shaping our own narrative and engaging in our own community'.

The second presenter offered more support for government programmes and pointed out that the misuse of funds was a greater problem than the funds

themselves. ‘Gatekeepers lock doors; people with the capacity for a certain kind of work don’t get it; money is misspent’. But whatever the merits of government assistance, ‘it was Islam that got me to desist’, and it was Islam that would ultimately help others. A participant added that the reason ‘the right people’ did not receive funding was that ‘the government is giving money to people who tell them what they want to hear, who aren’t interested in community development—which is the only thing that will help’.

Another attendee, however, rejected the idea that government funding should be refused because it came with conditions. ‘Negotiation over conditions is part of what funding is’, he maintained, and ‘at least government funding is public’. But if Muslim organisations insisted on bypassing the government, then ‘we should raise the money ourselves—after all, we’re not a poor community’. He cited the fact that ‘lots of money can be raised for Gaza’, and suggested that Muslim charities should perhaps be made ‘to reserve some of their funds for social work in this country, and for people with the proper expertise’. This sentiment was echoed by a second speaker, who referred to the riches of ‘the Islamic evangelical TV industry’ and the ‘more than five hundred charities set up in London to assist Syria’. ‘Islam is still emerging in this country’, he pointed out, and so it should not be surprising that ‘many Muslims’ allegiances lie abroad, and that’s where their money goes’. Community-based social activism was required to integrate Islam more fully.

Along these lines, a different participant suggested that ‘the convert community’ itself begin to organise and fund groups to work with other converts, both in and out of prison. ‘We often look to the heritage community for solutions, but maybe we’ve got the resources to do it ourselves—maybe it’s time for converts to take the lead’. But the second presenter repeated the discouraging refrain. In most cities, converts were thought to be Salafis, and since Salafis were classified as non-violent extremists in the prison system, they tend to have limited opportunity to serve in this system. It was ‘a battle for converts just to get into the system’.

## 6.7 Hypocrisy in the Heritage Community

Many participants agreed that the lack of support for prisoners and ex-offenders among heritage Muslims was both an instance and a product of deep-rooted hypocrisy. One attendee suggested that the heritage community had ‘bought into the media narrative’ of prison conversions as ‘conversions of convenience rather than conviction’ and decided that ‘these converts don’t deserve our support’. It was ‘our work to counter that narrative’, he added. His

remark, however, tapped a deep vein of frustration with the heritage community's 'denial' of its own problems.

The second presenter was plain. The 'heritage community needs to look at the violence and crime within itself'; he cited child grooming and drug dealing as the primary offences. Born Muslims who accepted that their own sons could be offenders might then 'open the door to prison converts'. But 'they do not accept what's going on'. Instead they cast 'a blind eye' while problems were left to fester. One participant asked whether it was not the case that 'some Muslims believe it's okay to sell drugs to non-believers'. The presenter acknowledged that it was 'a big misinterpretation', although he pointed out that poverty and deprivation had more to do with criminal behaviour than religion did. The first presenter added mental health to the list of 'taboo issues' suppressed or distorted by the community—mental illness was too often treated as a question of 'black magic'.

One consequence of this collective denial was clear to certain participants. The community's unwillingness to admit its own faults had led it to neglect the principles of social justice and solidarity. One participant pointed to the Prophetic example: Muhammad had freed those prisoners 'who had the skills to help the community'; yet Muslims today still refused to engage in 'joint advocacy' on behalf of their coreligionists in jail. Another participant recounted his experience advising the police on convert issues. The authorities themselves demonstrated a glaring lack of expertise—he claimed to have been the first to raise such issues with them—but the speaker reserved his real incredulity for the fractious, self-interested actions of other Muslims. At one meeting, he had been the only Sunni to turn up, and so he witnessed a Shia participant giving false information to the police in order to prevent them from considering problems specific to Sunnis. The first presenter agreed that 'civic participation' was something 'which Muslim communities don't do well'. To his mind, their sights were too often set on conflicts beyond this country; the problems at home did not come into clear view.

Such admissions did not prevent some participants from branding the criticism Muslims received in the press both disproportionate and unfair. 'Only Muslim offenders have their faith discussed in the context of their crime', the first presenter contended. 'Yes, grooming is a problem', he declared, 'but faith and crime are not connected'. The Chair revealed that his reaction, at seeing news of sexual offences against children in the 1970s and 80s, was frequently to 'imagine the media storm if the offender were Muslim!' The oft-repeated

question, voiced by the media and by politicians, of ‘whether the Muslim community is doing enough to condemn this’, provoked further exasperation. One participant pointed out that this kind of inquiry could never be satisfied, nor was it ever directed at non-Muslims. The first presenter protested that ‘where Islam is brought in [to the discussion], it is smeared’.

But these complaints, according to others, were further evidence of the self-victimisation that prevented the Muslim community from seeing itself and its problems more clearly. One participant asserted that ‘the community has pushed to be labelled “Muslim this” and “Islam that”. Now it’s turned against you, you want to cry foul? No sir!’ Another attendee reminded the gathering that Muslims constituted 12% of the prison population in the UK. ‘The media mentions this not because they’re Islamophobes, but because it’s a problem’. In some cases, therefore, he did not blame the media for ‘highlighting the connection between Muslims and the crimes they commit: around 12% of crime stories would be fair’.

## 6.8 Faith is the Answer

Several solutions were proposed for these communal and institutional problems. Most were a matter of common sense: competence should answer incompetence; prison staff should redress the lack of inclusion in their ranks, so as to better reflect the large population of black converts; the authorities should be better informed on what does, and does not, constitute radicalisation; Muslim organisations should reorient their efforts and rearrange their priorities, from abroad to home. Lastly and unanimously, however, participants endorsed a view that countered the basic narrative informing much of the media’s and the government’s treatment of Muslims. ‘Faith is seen to be the problem, but faith is in fact part of the answer’.

# 7. MARRIAGE AND THE SECOND GENERATION

## 7.1 Themes

The final presenter of the symposium, and of the project, began by listing his themes and clarifying his focus. He would speak about marriage, children, inheritance, and death in the lives of converts—not dwelling on his own experiences, but examining those he had witnessed and been consulted on as a Muslim chaplain. Two threads would run through his presentation, observations culminating in a final recommendation to the gathering: the

absence of a professionalised network for the assistance of converts, and the instructive example of ‘the best model I’ve seen’, the Muslim Converts Association of Singapore (*Darul Arqam*).

## 7.2 Marriage

When it came to marriage, there was a huge difference of understanding between the average Briton and the average Muslim. The convert’s unique struggle was to move from one set of expectations to the other. The typical Briton saw marriage as a burden, as ‘the ultimate commitment’ for which one ought to delay until one was absolutely sure. A relationship should last years, at least, before scaling this peak. But when that Briton became a convert, he or especially she was instantly told, ‘you need to get married’. The shift in schedule, meanwhile, was only the first adjustment he or she would make. Converts needed to reconcile themselves to a limited pool of potential partners (‘more so for women’, who were generally restricted to heritage Muslims), to uniting with a family rather than with just an individual (which might also involve adapting to the family’s culture), and to the common distrust of converts (sometimes suspected of being spies, or simply considered flaky—‘even your closest Muslim mentor will not welcome the prospect of you marrying one of his female relatives’).

There were additional phenomena complicating the lives of eligible converts. The presenter mentioned ‘convert hunters’, heritage Muslims—particularly women—who believed that converts made ‘ideal Muslim husbands, respectful and not repressive’ and who often ‘liked the look of Western men’. Their attention sometimes amounted to ‘bombardment’. On the other hand, there was the unfortunate figure of ‘the English playboy convert’: men who converted ‘just so they can marry and have multiple relationships with sexy Muslim sisters’. The presenter did not wish to discount anyone’s conversion, but the fact that these men existed could not be denied. He spoke, finally, of polygyny. ‘Islam does allow this, clearly, and it is not always a disaster’. The ‘vast, vast, vast majority of cases’, however, ‘turn into catastrophes’.

The presenter would therefore counsel new converts to resist the pressure to marry quickly. If, as was so often said, marriage constituted ‘half of our faith’ in Islam, he would advise men and women to concentrate on the other half first. Marriage ‘can be a source of stability and firmness, but don’t go rushing in’. Too often, he concluded, the only criterion considered was whether a prospective spouse was Muslim. ‘What about everything else?’ The idea of a full, mutually enriching relationship should not be lost in the transition to Islam.

### 7.3 Children

The children of converts were in an unusual position, and yet they did not receive ‘any effective, large-scale support’. Often brought up as Muslims from birth, they were nevertheless subject to a number of unique problems—difficulties which necessarily implicated their parents. Confusion could arise when ‘their parents aren’t quite comfortable with their Muslim identity’, or when their parents professed different faiths: ‘what agreement can there be on how to raise the child?’ Equally, many of these children were ‘very British’ and simply not as zealous as their parents, whose degree of enthusiasm, after all, had caused them to embrace a new religion and lifestyle. ‘One of the most common problems’ was the sadness and disappointment of parents whose children, ‘despite all their efforts, don’t have the same drive’. This was, the presenter added, a problem for the wider Muslim community too; many heritage children were leaving or disregarding Islam. But the pain was often sharper for converts, who had ‘sacrificed a lot’ to raise their children in a certain way.

Alienation grew with age. The daughters and sons of converts were not infrequently marginalised in the Muslim community and at Muslim schools. They were ‘the black sheep, not fully accepted’. The presenter declared that he would not send his children to an Islamic school—he was confident enough to want his children to deal with the experience of mixed schools, to adapt to a variety of people and backgrounds. However, he did understand that ‘your average Asian parent doesn’t have that experience and confidence’, and he would advise them to place their children in Islamic schools.

Finally, of course, some children chose not to be Muslim. ‘All they’ve heard during their lives is *haram, haram*’. Convert parents, he pointed out, were sometimes even stricter than their heritage counterparts. His recommendation to them was to ‘take a chill pill’: ‘be understanding’ and ‘don’t overestimate your role as a parent’. Above all, ‘don’t turn them away, don’t turn them away, don’t turn them away’. The children of converts had the potential to be leaders; ‘more than anyone else’, they were suited to the necessary work of bridging communities and spanning cultural divides.

### 7.4 Inheritance

The presenter then addressed an issue of wrenching emotional importance to converts, though it might seem somewhat obscure to an outsider. He recited the following saying from the *Sahih al-Bukhari*, one of most important *hadith*

collections in Sunni Islam: ‘A believer does not inherit from an unbeliever, and an unbeliever does not inherit from a believer’. Given that, how could a convert inherit money from his non-Muslim parents?

Money was important, both practically and emotionally. ‘It may be that many converts don’t have much to inherit, but some do—and it can be a huge sacrifice to give that up’. What was more, such sacrifice, and the difficult conversation that would accompany it, had the potential to strain relations between a convert and his parents, ‘relations that are often strained anyway’.

Fortunately, there was a theologically sound means of inheriting something from one’s parents: they could make a bequest, or *wasiyyah*, of up to one-third of their wealth. It was, in other words, possible for a convert to receive a portion, though no more, from his parents. The presenter once again cited the example of *Darul Arqam* on this matter, the clarity of advice given by ‘the most developed convert support structure in the world’.

## 7.5 Death

As with marriage, ‘Muslim attitudes’ and ‘regular British attitudes’ differed greatly on the subject of death. ‘Speaking from my context’, the presenter reflected, whenever ‘a relative passed away, we drowned our sorrows at the pub and didn’t speak about the person for a few months’. But death was ‘much less of a taboo’ for Muslims—easier to live with and to discuss. It was ‘inevitable’, ‘the next stage’, ‘what our life was preparing for’. This was the main conceptual adjustment a convert had to make; there were, however, other, more practical considerations with the potential to cause additional grief.

Converts were often, and mistakenly, informed that they should not attend non-Muslim funerals. ‘The worst thing’, the presenter declared, ‘is a convert deciding the holiest thing is not to attend a parent’s funeral’. Yet these were instances of tragically misplaced piety: he himself would consider it ‘an insult’ to forsake a friend’s funeral, Muslim or not.

Burial posed its own problem: how could a convert be sure that he would be buried in a Muslim cemetery? ‘Will there be enough people in the Muslim community to secure a Muslim burial for us?’ Would a convert’s non-Muslim family refuse to allow it? Some converts, after all, stayed in the ‘closet’ and kept their faith from their family. ‘Every year’, in the presenter’s northern city, ‘there is one family that refuses and sometimes goes to the police’. And even when a family did visit the mosque, they would sometimes find ‘chaos’ there: ‘the way

many Muslims are buried in this country is a mess, with shouting and fighting over the spade—it's really shocking'.

Furthermore, there was 'no common policy' to guide converts, as there was in Singapore, where Muslim ID cards led to Muslim burials and *Darul Arqam* would 'liaise with and accommodate the families'. Above all, he urged converts to put their wishes in a will. It was important for their peace of mind: 'you can leave less conflict and commotion behind'.

## 7.6 Conclusion: One Clear Recommendation

The presenter offered one final, culminating piece of advice. He had spoken of common problems and reminded participants of their own experiences. But while it was 'important to get these issues on the agenda', they could not stop there. 'Everything in this project is pointing me in one direction: we need a professional network of support for converts that is informed by a clear set of guidelines'.

# 8. DISCUSSION

## 8.1 Themes

The final session expanded on the domestic set of issues the presenter had introduced—marriage and children—and delved into the decisions they raised for converts in their daily lives. 'Convert hunters' and polygyny, education and Islamic schools sparked the most absorbing debates. The problems cited were many, the solutions offered few, but each exchange spoke of the enduring duality of the convert's consciousness, its location at the intersection of cultures, which was sometimes a strain and sometimes a strength.

## 8.2 Marriage and Convert Hunters

The first participant to speak was in the process of finding a wife. His first experiences had been, in a word, 'demoralizing'. He had been turned down by different families unwilling to have their daughter marry a convert. The 'problems new Muslims face in getting married' had blindsided him, and he was struggling to find guidance. Although he wryly noted that "'convert hunter" sounds like the name of a good film', he would be glad to find social groups for convert men and women to meet.

The presenter answered that he was not aware of any such mechanism for

marriage, although there were Facebook groups that brought Muslims together. ‘I stay away from matchmaking’, he declared. Such services tend to be ‘bombarded by convert hunters’ and are often exploitative of converts—organising marriage events for single Muslims, for instance, and charging extortionate prices for tickets. Moreover, ‘I don’t see many successful marriages between convert and convert’. It was simply not enough, if one wanted a stable and long-term relationship, to have this quality and nothing more in common. But, he reflected, ‘if the born Muslim community won’t give up its daughters, then you have no choice’. He agreed with another participant, who revealed that although fellow Muslims had asked him about eligible converts, he ‘would only be comfortable recommending a couple of brothers’ as potential marriage partners. ‘You should be stable in your faith first’, he declared, and only then consider marriage.

The conversation lingered on the topic of convert hunters, both female and male. The Chair informed the gathering that after the report on female perspectives had been published, the Centre of Islamic Studies was contacted by ‘a number of people who wanted the names of participants: they were looking for converts to marry’. The presenter added that many convert organisations had a standard email reply ready—explaining that they were not a marriage service—because they too ‘are bombarded’.

One participant addressed the fixation on converts from another angle. ‘We have to tackle the fetishisation of the convert’, he argued. ‘A big element of *da’wah*, which needs to be reconfigured, is the idea that converts are better [than born Muslims], that they should be leaders. Often, he explained, it was not enough for a convert to simply be a Muslim. The burden of expectation—deriving, in his telling, from a complex of ethnic, class, and cultural privileges—led to ‘difficult relationships’ between converts and the Muslim community. ‘We have to scale back this portrayal of converts as a model minority, stop pushing them into spokesperson roles before they are ready’.

### 8.3 Marriage and Polygyny

On the subject of marriage, the Chair redirected discussion to the case made for polygyny by the symposium’s first presenter. This participant restated his ‘spiritual’ argument: if marriage constitutes half of one’s faith, then engaging in polygyny ‘turbocharges the reflectivity’ that enhances the spiritual life of each partner. He further pointed out that ‘polygyny is perfect for career women’, that if they could ‘get over their jealousy, they could have their cake and eat it’.<sup>45</sup> None of the other participants agreed that polygyny had spiritual value; some

suggested that it did, nonetheless, have social utility. It was an acknowledged part of Islamic culture (sanctioned by the Prophet's own marriages and reinforced by the example of other figures in the Islamic tradition) and even constituted an incentive for certain men to convert. Refraining from polygyny presented one instance of the various cultural adaptations most participants believed Muslims should make to the social norms of the country they live in.

One attendee told the story of a young married man who approached a scholar to ask about the possibility of polygyny. After all, the Prophet himself had been polygynous. He was told, 'first implement the *sunnah* [deed of the Prophet] of being married to one woman for twenty-five years; when she dies, then marry another'. This participant then addressed the first presenter directly. 'Yes, it's permitted in Islam for a man to fulfill his desires: be honest if this is what you actually want'. Another speaker wished to 'probe the spiritual aspect'—acknowledging, in an aside, that 'there were, at times, good social reasons' for polygyny. He was 'uncomfortable' with the presenter's more mystical reasoning; it reminded him too closely of 'people who just give a spiritual veneer to their own desires'.

Others picked up on this speaker's secondary point, developing the social rationale for polygyny. One participant declared that 'we have to understand the society we're in, and where the norms are'; among the British people, there was an undeniable 'sense of polygyny as something dirty and hidden'. Moreover, most women were simply uninterested in it. On the other hand, he argued, polygyny could prove useful to unmarried women who wished to have that kind of relationship and family—a widow, someone in dire straits, someone who could be helped. A second attendee spoke along similar lines. He had recently been married to an older woman, yet 'most of her friends are unmarried or divorced'. He lamented the toll on society of the breakdown of the traditional family unit. 'What's going to happen to single mothers?' The 'unmarried sisters' were struggling. How would 'the absence of fathers, of role models' affect children? He lived near a Muslim school and could see 'young Muslims kissing, doing all sorts of things'. 'We have to be realistic about our society', though he was not happy about its immorality: 'there are lots of young Muslim brothers and sisters who are addicted to porn'. Polygyny was a possible solution.

Several participants declared themselves satisfied with a single wife, however. One speaker cited his 'Englishness', pointing out that although he was now married to his third wife, each of his marriages had been distinct: 'Islam should

adapt to the culture of the country'. Another attendee placed more emphasis on the 'rider' than on the license of the Qur'anic verse permitting polygyny. This rider, he explained, 'is about being fair to each of your wives'. A potentially polygynous husband would have to apply it to the society in which he actually lived: 'applying fairness in the UK now' would mean 'setting up a household for each wife', and would thus be possible only for the wealthy. In the meantime, 'think of how unfairly we act towards just one wife'. Less jocularly, he warned that 'we're setting ourselves up for mockery if we demonstrate that we're this out of tune with socially acceptable behaviour'. A third speaker recalled his early involvement with the Salafist movement in Britain. At that time—the 1990s—it was expected among this community for a man to have at least a second wife. Yet of the many men he knew who did have second wives, only one was still bigamous. The participant considered monogamy a more stable and appropriate state of affairs. He agreed with the presenter, moreover, that one should look for 'compatibility beyond Islam' in a partner. Religion was the only thing that had bound his first marriage together—his wife had been 'the first girl to marry outside her heritage Pakistani community' and their divorce was, in retrospect, predictable.

#### 8.4 Other Marriage Issues

One of the attendees, though middle-aged, was unmarried and had no desire to get married. He had come to Islam through reading the Qur'an, rather than through personal encounters. Had he met Muslims before converting, he added in a refrain that several participants had echoed over the course of the symposia, he might not have embraced Islam after all. This participant understood that 'the Islamic norm is to get married', but he wished other Muslims would 'be sensitive to those who, for whatever reasons, cannot get married: don't make it hard for them'. If half of one's faith was marriage, then the unmarried Muslim 'has to do it all himself, without a strong partner'. Another speaker, echoing the earlier employment of distinguished precedents for polygyny in the Islamic tradition, pointed out that there were several 'examples of illustrious historical Muslims who did not marry'.

However, a third participant retorted that 'that was because they were sacrificing their lives for Islam—this is not the issue for ordinary Muslims'. He believed that family structure was under threat, and that marriage was necessary to maintain it. An older attendee supported this position up to a point, remarking that it was 'universally accepted that marriage, family, community are in crisis'. People were in the process of 'being separated': a

nuclear family itself was ‘not enough to bring up a child; you need a community’. ‘One has to take into account this crisis’, however, and a second marriage would be ‘unthinkable, a nightmare in a world in which it is so difficult to maintain just one marriage’.

The presenter raised a final marriage problem for converts: ‘there are married people coming into Islam and being told that their marriage isn’t valid’. This was false and deeply harmful; such bad advice had the potential to turn people away from Islam. The issue had come up in conversation with a scholar, wondering ‘what to do when a woman comes to Islam with a non-Muslim husband’. The scholar reminded him that married female followers of the Prophet had embraced Islam without discarding their husbands. The presenter advised the participants to ‘share this wisdom’ and criticised the dangerous presumption of those who offered ‘robotic, hurtful advice’, counselling converts to turn against their loved ones. He recounted the story of a woman who wanted to convert, called an organisation for guidance, and was told to divorce her husband first; she slammed the phone down in response. ‘And what happened? Every member of that family ended up converting’. ‘The priority is your relationship with Allah’, he concluded; ‘the rest comes after that’.

### 8.5 Convert Children and Islamic Schools

The final topic treated in this symposium was that of Islamic schools, or *madrasas*. It was a participant who raised it as a critical issue, one that for the sake of the project should not go unaddressed: ‘this report is a way of making our case to our local communities that the problems we face need to be addressed’. He had come across the following problems in sending his child to a *madrasa*: ‘racism’, ‘cultural illiteracy’, and unhappy children being ‘told they’re not real Muslims’ and asking their parents ‘why did you bring me to this religion?’

The presenter acknowledged the cultural dislocation of convert children in Islamic schools. They were often ‘not fully accepted’, though they had a better chance if they were ‘darker’, since such schools were ‘mono-ethnic, like mosques’. Several participants made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that their children would be sent elsewhere. ‘Why would you send children to the *madrasa*?’ one attendee asked. ‘They’re not Pakistani’. Another participant had worked for a time at an Islamic school and noted that ‘the children who didn’t fit in culturally had convert parents’. His own daughter went to a state school, and he would not consider sending her where ‘she wouldn’t fit in’.<sup>46</sup> To problems of abuse and bullying, a third attendee noted, they could add the fact of ‘a bad

education': not only were children 'told that white people are dirty and going to hell', but 'their English gets worse' too. A fourth added that he had tried taking his kids to an after-school *madrasa* but had abandoned the idea: 'the behaviour of Muslim children is just so bad; there is no parental discipline'.

'What the hell is a Muslim school?', another participant wanted to know. Was it really just like a Church of England school? Education should be about education, he declared. But with *madrasas*, convert parents were abdicating parental responsibility on two fronts. On the one hand, 'are we not actually getting away from our own duty to instruct children and point them in the right direction' by handing them over to a religious school? And on the other, 'we've been complaining through three symposia about the ignorance of the heritage Muslim community'. They had done so from the vantage point of not having had an Islamic education, which made the convert's decision to give his child 'that same cultural immersion' rather baffling. 'We should want a good secular state education alongside part-time religious instruction', he concluded.

Some defended the use and the quality of Islamic schools. The Chair floated the notion that religious schools might allow students to be secure in their religious identity and thus focus on the rest of their education, a line of reasoning he likened to the argument that all-girls schools produce better female pupils. He pointed out, moreover, that not all failing/underperforming British schools were Islamic. One participant went further, insisting that it was important 'to replace un-Islamic teaching with Islamic teaching'. Another, who worked with Islamic schools, argued that 'there are very good religious schools' and 'a place for religious schools in our society'. But he also believed the fear espoused by heritage Muslim parents that 'their children will lose their Islamic sensibility at state schools' was unfounded and bespoke 'a narrow view of Islam'. Nevertheless, his professional and civic interest lay in improving the teaching at *madrasas* and showing that 'Islam and citizenship should be the same'. It was possible, a third participant added, that teaching at such schools might benefit from 'more vocal convert input'.

The final and most pessimistic appraisal of the educational options for convert children came from the participant who had raised the subject in the first place. He had initially sent his young daughter to a Muslim school. Dark patches began to appear under her eyes; she was not sleeping well; one day, she came home from school and asked 'is Nanny going to hell?' She began 'to freak out, refusing to go to school in the morning'. He took her out of that *madrasa* and placed her in a state school. There, however, he found her class 'dancing

Gangnam Style and singing “sexy lady”. The dilemma was clear, the solution uncertain. But if parents were not happy with either of the available models of education, state or religious, then ‘we have to take the ethical responsibility’ to find another way.

## 8.6 Conclusion: Many Problems, Few Solutions

The presenter offered his final thoughts on where the discussion, and the project, had taken them: ‘we’ve identified lots of problems, but proposed few solutions’. Yet, he intimated, converts themselves represented the possibility of progress. On the particular issue of education, a ‘big responsibility lies with converts for their children: we can’t put the blame on heritage Muslims who don’t understand these issues as well as we do’. Perhaps, therefore, ‘convert-led *madrasas*’ would be ‘the way to go in future’, not just for their own but for heritage children too. Underlying his words was the conviction that from the experiences of converts, alternately spanning and falling between communities and cultures, a better British Islam would emerge.

## POSTSCRIPT

One of the participants in this final symposium was not, in fact, a convert. He was at ‘the pre-conversion stage’, on the threshold of embracing Islam but uncertain of his ultimate commitment. In his struggle to reconcile a liberal background with a conservative tradition—following the thread of his spiritual yearning from one to the other—he was nevertheless more representative of the gathering, or a significant proportion of it, than he had perhaps expected. He was drawn by the mystical poetry and ‘inclusiveness’ of Sufism, though wary of its ‘formlessness’, its lack of a structure for everyday living. Yet other schools of Islam were startlingly conservative. ‘My perspective is that it feels like stepping back in time’, he conceded, citing the disconcerting ‘pressure to be married’. He was not married to his partner, a Christian who intended to become a vicar, and she was ‘uncomfortable with where my faith journey seems to be going’. At the close of the symposium’s first day, he had declared the discussion ‘encouraging and eye-opening’, affirming that ‘I’ll stick with it’. His journey to Islam had not yet found its conclusion, though that too had its echo in the experiences of other participants, for whom the journey and the narrative that accompanied it were always ongoing.

## *Appendix One*

### **SYMPOSIUM III: GUIDING QUESTIONS**

This symposium will explore a number of miscellaneous themes. It will begin by considering any specific difficulties converts face in the process of getting married. It will explore the perception among Muslim communities and wider British society of marriages between convert men and heritage Muslim women, and the effects of conversion to Islam on pre-conversion relationships or marriage. The discussions will proceed by considering the experiences of the children of a convert parent, or parents, before focussing on issues around gender to explore the effect conversion has on converts' conceptions of masculinity and the rights and responsibilities of men and women. This will be followed by a discussion of converts' attitudes to sexuality and sexual orientation. In both cases the conversations will centre on how far converts' expectations reflect their reality as Muslim men, and what they share with, or how they depart from, normative discourses among heritage Muslims and wider British society. The symposium will go on to consider the causes of radicalisation among converts and what support these individuals have access to, and what more could be provided. It will consider the experiences of converts in prison to ask how prisoners become interested in Islam and what effect the prison environment has on their identity as Muslims and ways of practising Islam. The discussions will conclude by considering the struggles converts can face with Islam, what support they have available, and the experiences of individuals who exit Islam.

#### **3.1: Marriage and the Second Generation**

- Do male converts face different challenges and opportunities in organising marriage compared to male heritage Muslims?
- What are the experiences of converts getting married to heritage Muslims? Do converts have positive or negative experiences with their family-in-law? How are these marriages viewed by heritage Muslim communities and wider British society?
- Does marriage play a role in stimulating better understanding and communication between converts to Islam and heritage Muslims?
- What effect does conversion have on an existing relationship or marriage to a non-Muslim?

- Do the children of converts have a different experience of ‘belonging’ and ‘unbelonging’ among heritage Muslims and wider British society? How do children’s identities as Muslims and practices differ from their parents?
- What difference does it make having one or two parents who are converts to Islam?

### 3.2) Gender and Sexuality

- How do conceptions of masculinity change as a result of conversion to Islam? Are converts physically and psychologically circumcised when they convert to Islam? How is this shaped by the ethnic, class and cultural background of converts?
- Is there a difference between theory and reality in the experience of being a Muslim man?
- How far do the attitudes of converts about the roles and responsibilities of men and women differ from normative conceptions of gender in the UK and among heritage Muslims?
- What role do, or should, male converts play in challenging assumptions about gender norms in mainstream society in the UK and among heritage Muslims?
- How does conversion change attitudes towards sex: both pre-marital and within marriage?
- What discourses about sexuality are common among heritage Muslims and how do these affect male converts to Islam?
- How does conversion to Islam impact views on lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-gender and queer individuals?

### 3.3) Conversion in Prison and Radicalisation

- Why do prisoners convert at proportionally higher rates compared to mainstream British society?
- What effect does the prison environment have on converts’ identities as Muslims and their practice of Islam?
- Does conversion in prison and learning Islam within the prison environment make it more likely for converts to become radicalised?
- What can lead some converts to become radicalised? Are these individuals radical before they convert to Islam?
- What resources and actors exist to help radicalised converts?

### 3.4) Struggles with the Faith and Exiting Islam

- What aspects of Muslim faith and practice can prove to be especially challenging for converts? How does this differ according to individuals' pre-conversion faith background, location or marital status?
- What resources and organisations exist to support converts who are struggling with the faith?
- What are the consequences converts face when they exit Islam? Should more be done to support converts after they have exited Islam?

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> On the construction of narrative, see also Symposium I 6.2, 8.3; Symposium II 4.3.
- <sup>2</sup> On the upbringings of various participants, see also Symposium I 3.2, 5.3, 7.2; Symposium II 5.2, 7.2; Symposium III 3.2, 5.3.
- <sup>3</sup> On the arts, architecture, and creativity in general, see also Symposium I 2.7; Symposium II 2.6.
- <sup>4</sup> On first encounters with Muslims, see also Symposium II 1.5, 7.3.
- <sup>5</sup> On rational and emotional routes to Islam, see also Symposium I 2.5, 2.7.
- <sup>6</sup> On periods of crisis in a convert's life, see also Symposium I 3.2, 3.3, 7.2; Symposium II 7.8; Symposium III 1.2, 3.2, 5.3.
- <sup>7</sup> On questions of language and terminology, see also Symposium II 1.2, 6.3.
- <sup>8</sup> On converts caught between cultures, see also Symposium I 2.12; Symposium II 6.9; Symposium III 4.7, 4.8.
- <sup>9</sup> On 'naïve sincerity', see also Symposium I 2.8, 2.10, 6.5, 6.6, 8.9.
- <sup>10</sup> The British singer-songwriter Cat Stevens converted to Islam in 1977 and took the name Yusuf Islam.
- <sup>11</sup> On women and Islam, see also Symposium I 8.7; Symposium II 1.5; Symposium III 3.3, 3.4, 4.3.
- <sup>12</sup> On Islamic schools, see also Symposium III 7.3, 8.5.
- <sup>13</sup> On matters of spirituality, see also Symposium I 3.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 6.4; Symposium III 1.2, 1.4.
- <sup>14</sup> On tensions between converts and heritage Muslims, see also Symposium I 2.9, 8.4; Symposium II 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 6.6; Symposium III 2.2, 2.3, 2.6, 4.3.
- <sup>15</sup> The companion project to this one, *Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Female Perspectives*, was also based on three symposia. It was published in March 2013. [http://www.cis.cam.ac.uk/assets/media/narratives\\_of\\_conversion\\_report.pdf](http://www.cis.cam.ac.uk/assets/media/narratives_of_conversion_report.pdf)
- <sup>16</sup> On white privilege, see also Symposium I 8.9.
- <sup>17</sup> On the experience of black converts, see also Symposium I 8.5; Symposium III 5.2.
- <sup>18</sup> Medina, a city in Saudi Arabia, was the burial place of the Prophet and the capital of the early Islamic empire.
- <sup>19</sup> On notions of community, see also Symposium II 5.3.
- <sup>20</sup> On learning about Islam, see also Symposium I 4.3, 4.4; Symposium III 1.5.
- <sup>21</sup> One response to this revelation was to suggest that such Muslim-directed programming be more radical and participative. This speaker evoked the traditional radicalism of youth and suggested that they tend to see their mosque leadership as collaborators, participating with the government in 'a broken Western model'.

<sup>22</sup> The Salafist movement is a faction within Sunni Islam that promotes a literalist approach to Islam, in contrast to the mystical perspective of Sufism.

<sup>23</sup> On sectarianism, see also Symposium III 1.3, 1.5, 2.9, 2.10, 2.11.

<sup>24</sup> On converts and their families, see also Symposium I 8.3; Symposium II 2.9, 7.4, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.6, 8.7; Symposium III 7.3, 7.4, 7.5.

<sup>25</sup> On the social role of converts, see also Symposium II 2.8, 4.5; Symposium III 3.5.

<sup>26</sup> On the *ummah*, see also Symposium II 4.8, 4.9; Symposium III 2.7, 2.10, 2.11.

<sup>27</sup> On mosques, see also Symposium II 2.4, 2.6, 5.5.

<sup>28</sup> On developing a more British Islam, see also Symposium III 4.4.

<sup>29</sup> On questions of integration, see also Symposium II 4.7.

<sup>30</sup> On convert support work, see also Symposium II 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 6.8; Symposium III 5.2, 5.3, 6.8, 7.6.

<sup>31</sup> On funding Muslim organisations, see also Symposium III 6.8.

<sup>32</sup> On radicalisation, see also Symposium III 5.3, 6.5.

<sup>33</sup> On polygyny, see also Symposium III 8.3; on marriage, see Symposium III 4.2, 4.3, 7.2, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4.

<sup>34</sup> On apostasy, see also Symposium III 2.8.

<sup>35</sup> The term *iman* refers to a Muslim's faith.

<sup>36</sup> Nearly all of the participants were self-described Sunnis. One speaker suggested that the Chair had not been wrong to emphasise the Sunni-Shia split, but as no Shia converts were present at the symposium, the conversation would naturally turn towards the various schools of thought within Sunni Islam.

<sup>37</sup> The sect thus accused was later identified as *Deobandi*. One participant remarked that to the majority of the *ummah*, let alone to non-Muslims, the different schools within Sunni Islam are almost identical.

<sup>38</sup> Another participant suggested that a more likely explanation for the higher rates of female conversion was marriage to Muslim men.

<sup>39</sup> On sex and homosexuality, see also Symposium III 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, 6.4.

<sup>40</sup> One participant maintained that while the majority of Muslims might believe that homosexuality was forbidden, there was more scope for permissibility than they realised. Basing his argument on the Qur'anic principle that 'there is no compulsion in religion', the speaker declared that one might suggest to a gay man or woman 'don't do this', but one 'cannot say you are not a Muslim' if he or she does. Others disagreed with his interpretation of the principle in question: "no compulsion" is about not forcing people into religion, one explained, but 'once you're in, you do have obligations'. The participant was described by another as subscribing to 'non-traditional Islam'.

<sup>41</sup> On hypocrisy in the heritage Muslim community, see also Symposium III 6.6.

<sup>42</sup> On converts and prison, see also Symposium III 5.3, 6.2.

<sup>43</sup> During this discussion, the Chair clarified that they were speaking of 'radicalisation' in the same sense as the British government used the term: to describe individuals and groups who would resort to violence in an effort to impose their convictions on society.

<sup>44</sup> The Chair informed the gathering that while the female participants in the previous project had only been able to touch on the matter of prisons, for lack of expertise, they had posed this same question and 'answered democracy every time'. However, it is not possible to know if this was/is representative of the views held by British Muslims.

<sup>45</sup> In fact, the Chair revealed later in the discussion, one of the participants in the female symposia had spoken of her polygynous marriage: as one of two wives, she was 'happy and fulfilled'. The two wives divided their husband between them, each spending a proportion of her time with him and otherwise pursuing her own interests. Were she 'married to a man 24/7, on the other hand, she would get a divorce'. The polygynous arrangement was, for her, 'better and freer' than orthodox monogamy.

<sup>46</sup> This participant was the father to mixed-race children—not uncommonly among converts, he noted—and had as yet come across 'no discussion of the challenges of raising mixed-race, mixed-heritage children'. This was a whole area of experience which had not been 'acknowledged in religious spaces' or 'discussed here' at the symposia. Yet the problem of 'how to connect children to both sides of their heritage' was fraught and enduring.