

Conversion to Islam and Family Relations in Contemporary Britain

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Signature:

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing, which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies Degree Committee.

Abstract – ‘Conversion to Islam and Family Relations in Contemporary Britain’

Dorothea A. Ramahi

This dissertation explores the role of kinship relations in conversion to Islam in contemporary Britain. While the Pauline notion of conversion, which is a Christian concept, presupposes radical change brought on by an outer event, narratives of conversion to Islam convey a sense of continuity, where conversion happens as a natural, almost inconspicuous development of faith. The process of conversion is thus presented as a cumulative acquisition of knowledge, which is in line with one's path in life up to that point, mirroring what I call 'Islam's autobiography' in its presentation of Islam as the natural continuation of the former monotheisms. Instead, the realm of conflict as presented in narratives of conversion is the realm of family. 'Coming out' as Muslim vis-à-vis one's family was perceived as an anxiety-filled and nerve-racking process akin to those described in literature on gay kinship. The way in which Islam is positioned as 'other' within a Western, Muslim-minority context defines converts' primary concern with a social re-positioning vis-à-vis their families, and society at large. Narrating continuity and presenting conversion in terms of rationalism helps the converts to position themselves as modern subjects, while mystical experiences and the narration of dreams are rarely revealed, despite their significance. The social re-positioning that conversion to Islam entails also demands a re-drawing of boundaries, which becomes apparent through the study of the material objects that are significant in conversion narratives, where items like food and clothing can not only be markers of difference but can also constitute sites of rejection or accommodation between the converts and their families. The project of ethical self-formation, which some converts engage in through embodied practices like ritual purification, has the side effect of drawing boundaries between the converts and their families, but also between the converts and their old selves, which can result in the ethical dilemma of living in an enduring dual ethical situation. I argue that, rather than focusing on inner re-orientation, conversion to Islam in contemporary Britain requires a model of conversion that privileges social re-positioning, particularly in relation to the family.

[Key words: Conversion, Islam, Kinship, Family, Narratives, Techniques of the Self]

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Beginning	1
The Term ‘Conversion’	3
The Purpose of this Study	5
Fieldwork	13
Thesis Structure	20
Chapter One – Coming Out as Muslim	22
Lessons from Gay Kinship Studies	24
Truth Will Out	29
The Family	36
The Trajectory of Ignorance	44
Conclusion	49
Chapter Two – The Image of Islam and Family Biographies	51
Family Biographies and National Conflict	52
‘Islam’ as a European Imaginary Construct	58
Muslims are always your Neighbours	62
On Collective Memory	69
Family Ideologies	71
Conclusion	74
Chapter Three – From Otherness to Familiarity: Biographies of Self and Religion	76
Narrating Continuity	81
When Familiarity Replaces Otherness	89
The Testimony	97
From the Anthropology of Conversion	100
Conclusion	105

Chapter Four – The Religious Modern: Rationalism and Mysticism in	
Conversion to Islam	107
A Religion of Logic	107
Iṣlāḥ – Apologetics of Islam	113
Rationality is Modernity	117
Modern Compared to Whom?	121
‘I’jaz ‘Ilmiy’	127
Dreams that Matter	130
Conclusion	136
Chapter Five – Material Culture and Materiality	141
From the World of Things	143
Material Statements	146
‘You are what you eat’ or: you eat what you want to become	149
Battlegrounds or sites of accommodation – Objects as Sites that ‘do’	153
Spiritual Food Poisoning	154
Alcohol as the Men’s Hijab	157
Checking Labels	158
Conclusion	163
Chapter Six – The Ethics of Conversion: Ritual Purification and the Care of the	
Self	165
Purification as a Technique of the Self	167
Liberal Discontent with the Freedom of the Ethical Subject	169
Foucauldian Ethics	172
Bathroom Etiquette as a Mnemonic Device	174
Drawing Social Boundaries	177
Foucault’s Four-Point System and the Ethical Dilemma	184
‘You’ve got a mission to get to that paradise’	187
Conclusion	190
Bibliography	198

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Introduction

'Look, we're all looking in the same direction, I've just moved to another window to get a different view, but we're looking at the same thing.' – Dina, London, convert from Catholicism, talking to her brother Jeremy –

The Beginning

During Easter 2012 my brother travelled to Rome. He was seventeen years old and part of a Catholic youth group that wanted to spend the holy week there, attending masses in St Peter's Basilica and partaking in life at the Vatican during this sacred time. He had been a devout believer from early childhood and used to read the bible and pray at home while also being an active member of the church community. When I met him a few weeks later and casually asked '*So, how's the Pope?*' he declared much to my surprise that – being a free Evangelical – he had, in fact, nothing to do with the Pope. A few months on he accepted Islam and remains a Muslim until today. This was over a year after I had returned from my Arabic studies in Syria. At the time he had been fairly anti Islam and I had innocently presented him with a German translation of the Qur'an so he could see for himself what it said. What followed his conversion were years of continuous change that was anything but linear or incremental. At one point he donned the *Salafi* dress code with its cropped trousers, long beard and prayer cap (cf. Inge, 2016:12). There was a time when he refused to sit at the table with us – his family – because wine was served during dinner. He travelled to Malaysia and Indonesia during one Christmas to be in an 'Islamic environment' and at another time ran into a family friend, wearing a long white *thawb* (Muslim men's robe-like garment) after prayers at the mosque for *Eid al-adha*¹ – much to their mutual discomfort. There was a time when he tried to find a wife through the mosque community, only to encounter unbridgeable cultural differences, which sometimes prohibited him from even speaking to the potential bride for a lack

¹ [Feast of the Sacrifice] is together with *Eid al-Fitr* (celebrated at the end of Ramadan) the biggest Islamic holiday. It relates to a story about the prophet Abraham (Ibrahim), which is to be found in both the bible and the Qur'an and honours Abraham's obedience to God in his willingness to sacrifice his son Isma'il. However, God sends a goat to sacrifice instead just in time.

of language skills. There was a time when you could meet him on the streets as part of a *Da'wa* movement distributing copies of the Qur'an and its German translation and there came a time when he graduated from University and moved on to work in controlling and private banking. There were times when the dark spot that some pious Muslims exhibit on their foreheads, demonstrating commitment to regular prayer, would decorate his face and times when he would enjoy a birthday or wedding celebration until 5am (although he never had any alcohol). And there was the tension of occasionally having to choose the lesser of two evils, like when he chose to lie to his landlord and pretend that he had just had a dentist appointment to avoid having a drink with him during Ramadan to sign the rental agreement. During this time of fasting he was not allowed to even have water while the sun was up, but he feared that disclosing his Muslim identity to his landlord might jeopardise his tenancy. In short, his conversion to Islam was a process without clear beginning or end, entailing endless changes in different directions and occurring over a period of many years (and it continues to unfold). It is a life in progress with an enormous wing-spread.

In a great many ways my brother's journey is typical for the convert's experience, not because there is any other story like it but because it entails many elements that I found again when I conducted fieldwork for my MPhil and later for my PhD in the UK. While there is no single way into Islam and while all stories of conversion are idiosyncratic in some sense, converts all struggle with similar things once they convert. They all find themselves culturally anchored in a Western European society yet they embrace a religion that is perceived as 'alien'. They struggle between their religious aspirations and the demands of daily life in Britain. It is this position of the convert, as being in between 'two worlds', the 'bridge' or 'bridge-builder' (Suleiman, 2013, 2015; Zebiri, 2008), and the 'intimate stranger', that led me to study the subject (Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017). As converts must find ways of navigating daily life in 21st-century Britain they also tell us something about ourselves as non-Muslim western citizens. They show us where the limits of liberalism lie, they question the importance we ascribe to material things, they reveal the impact of our own histories and they test the veracity of family relations. Inasmuch, converts not only intrigue by their religious manoeuvres within a secular world, but conversion to Islam also serves as a lens through which to look at ourselves. Taking the old anthropological aspiration to 'make the familiar strange and the strange familiar', converts in modern day Britain allow us to do precisely that.

They allow us to see something ostensibly strange as something actually relatable, something deeply human, while simultaneously alienating us from what we usually take for granted. The specific research questions I ask are outlined in each chapter as they relate to different aspects of the conversion experience in a British family context. Generally, I posit kinship as central to conversion, and all research questions within the chapters revolve around this focal point. I show not only how the concept of family comes to occupy a constitutive role in the conversion process itself, but how it simultaneously appears as a lens through which to see what we used to think of as mundane everyday life. We come to see what family life is like, how filial-parental relationships are expressed, and what those relationships are. This study aims to make the familiar strange and to expose the ‘everyday’ as ideological particularity.

The Term ‘Conversion’

When setting out to study anthropologically the phenomenon that I had witnessed in my brother, I came to realise that the term ‘conversion’ was neither unproblematic nor straightforward as a label. Wanting to use the language in which my interlocutors describe themselves I found that there is no single emic label in use. While some of the people I met called themselves ‘converts’, others referred to themselves as ‘reverts’, and fewer as ‘new Muslims’, which was seen as problematic by some because converts stop being ‘new’ to Islam at some point. The term ‘revert’ was frequently used among my interlocutors as it reveals something about the fundamental nature of the process at work. Many converts believe that by accepting Islam they have returned to their natural state. Rather than changing one religion for another, they believe they have accepted that which God had envisioned for them all along: the divine truth that manifests in the framework of provisions and guidelines for all aspects of life. Hence, they see themselves as having ‘reverted’ to that state, which is the natural state for all humankind. While their parents may have led them to follow another religion, or none at all, Islam is thought to be innate in the human condition in the trajectory of ‘re-version’ (Zebiri, 2008:15). In the converts’ narratives re-discovering Islam was often portrayed as having started much earlier than the conversion itself, a topic that will be dealt with extensively in chapter three.

Besides the issue of trying to find the right emic term for what I was studying, ‘conversion’ brings with it another complication. The term ‘conversion’ in itself is not

a neutral description for religious change but it comes with a history, and that history is Christian. Further, inscribed in this Christian history is a certain theory of salvation, which differs in crucial aspects from the phenomenon at stake here. ‘Conversion’ finds its ultimate illustration in Saul’s experience on the road to Damascus, in which a persecutor of early Christianity transforms into an Apostle through a brilliant light that threw him off his horse and blinded him. Jesus then appeared from the heavens and asked Saul why he was persecuting Christians, causing a dramatic reversal in him, turning him from an enemy of the religion into an advocate and a pivotal figure in the early church. Through this salvific turnaround, Saul became Paul and, after fasting and praying for three days, his eyesight was restored through Christ’s disciple Ananias. The (Christian) process of ‘conversion’ thus implies a particular theology or theory of salvation, involving radical change, the rejection of one’s old way of life, something happening from without, and something ‘new’, and is reflected in the spatial metaphor of ‘turning’. As many studies on conversion to Christianity have shown, the idea of being saved – of letting go of one’s own ambitions in order to be saved through Jesus Christ – is central (Engelke, 2004; Haynes, 2017; Meyer, 1998; Stromberg, 1993; Webster, 2013). However, Rambo points out that the Pauline conversion story is only one part of a ‘tradition’ of conversion stories derived from the Book of Acts in the New Testament including prominent converts such as Paul, Cornelius, the Philippian jailer, and Lydia, as well as Augustine’s autobiography *The Confessions*, which – Rambo claims – has been a powerful shaper of religious consciousness in the past fifteen centuries (Rambo, 1993:159).

By contrast, Islamic theories of salvation are different, involving a cumulative acquisition of knowledge (textual or mystical or both), something happening from within, and a discovery or *re*-discovery, reflected in the spatial metaphor of ‘journeying’. As Matar points out in his illuminating work on conversion to Islam in early-modern Britain, ‘conversion’ is understood in very different ways in Islam and Christianity. In Islam all humans are born Muslims, in submission to God², and they only need to be reminded of the straight path to return to harmony with God, whereas for Christians sin alters human nature so entirely that a return to humanness requires the conscious recognition of individual sin and redemption through Christ (Matar, 1998:151). It is, however, not a question of terminology but of underlying

² ‘Islam’ means ‘submission’ in Arabic.

assumptions about the nature of the process that is being described. To this extent I will emphasise one thing: with some notable exceptions, almost all the models of conversion I have come across focus on the *inner* re-orientation of the convert (Snow & Machalek, 1984). While it seems obvious that a ‘change of heart’ focuses on the inner life, the data I collected demands a theory of conversion that deals with social re-positioning – an *outer* re-orientation – particularly in relation to the convert’s kinship relations. Such a model has not yet been developed. Considering the inbuilt theories of salvation in the history of the term ‘conversion’, ‘convert’ and ‘conversion’ may not be the best terms for describing the process at hand. However, after looking at some of the different sociological and anthropological models for adopting a religious identity, and after carefully surveying the history of ‘conversion’ and its scholarly use I came to the conclusion that I may use the term ‘conversion’ as a shorthand for the phenomenon I studied. By settling on the term ‘conversion’ – the term used by the majority of my informants – my thesis is able to contribute to the anthropology of Christianity as well as providing insights into the areas of kinship studies, the anthropology of Islam and the anthropology of ethics.

The Purpose of this Study

Converts to Islam in contemporary Britain remain enigmatic to most people. While they are sometimes viewed with a sense of fascination, often enough they are seen as traitors and as a potential security threat (Poole, 2002:69). ‘They see me as an intellectual doctor with some daft ideas, a bit eccentric’, explained Dina, a seventy-two-year-old medical doctor who converted to Islam at the age of fifty-two. ‘It’s like Orientalism. There’s lots of women who got onto camels and explored Africa and sat in tents. Lady Mary Wolseley or whatever her name was. The English aristocratic woman who goes native is a common stereotype. I think I’m seen in those lights.’ The perception of the British convert as an eccentric who has ‘gone native’ is, however, at the more benign end of a spectrum of perceptions, and at the other end is the image of the potentially violent renegade. This is a news media narrative which goes hand in hand with an overall scepticism towards Muslims, which has been heightened by reports of radicalised British converts who went to join ISIS or other *jihadist* organisations, such as the infamous documentary *My Brother the Islamist* (2011). In his study on British converts to Islam, Brice has suggested that ‘there seems to be a

clear message being promoted that converts should, at best, be viewed with suspicion. Even where stories are less openly negative (such as the “Why do people convert?” type stories), there is a clear suggestion that conversion to Islam is something that a “normal” person would not consider’ (Brice, 2010:16). Precisely because the publicity afforded to the ‘Jihadi Jacks’ of Britain is disproportionate to the actual number of converts who end up radicalised, which skews the general perception of converts to Islam in Britain, it was my explicit intention to focus on *non-violent* converts in this research. At the heart of this intention lay the impulse to offer my readers an understanding of the everyday concerns and struggles, joys and fears, thoughts and practices, intentions and experiences of ‘normal’ people who choose to convert to Islam.

Conversion to Islam is, however, not a new object for academic attention, and several studies have already given some insight into the lives of converts to Islam in Britain, including Zebiri, Moosavi, Köse, and Tarlo (Köse, 1999; Moosavi, 2011; Tarlo, 2007; Zebiri, 2008). Studies of conversion have analysed conversion motifs (Köse & Loewenthal, 2000; Lofland & Skonovd, 1981; Rambo, 1999), post-conversion experiences (Köse, 1994; Zebiri, 2008), meaning-making and spiritual search (Köse, 1996a, 1999), conversion and gender (Nieuwkerk, 2006), as well as syncretism (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999), and conversion to Salafism (Inge, 2016). Many of these studies are premised on a psychological understanding of religious conversion. Analysing conversion to different cults and religions, these psychologically-inclined studies posit some kind of crisis as, at least an enabling, if not the main, factor in religious conversion (Lofland & Stark, 1965; Rambo, 1999). Following Erikson’s notion of the ‘psychological moratorium’, a crisis period that often characterises adolescence, Köse maintains that ‘psychological upheaval of childhood’ and psychological crises in late adolescence are characteristic of converts to Islam in contemporary Britain, where conversion happens as the result of ‘identity achievement’ after a time of ‘identity diffusion’ (Köse, 1996b:258). In Stromberg’s analysis, too, conversion is a way of resolving contradictions that manifest themselves as emotional distress or conflict. An illustration of such a psychological understanding of conversion is given through the example of Jean, one of Stromberg’s interlocutors. Longing for connection while living through social relationships marked by separation, conversion eventually makes possible a lasting connection with

God, and is thus the redemption of her personal and emotional conflict (Stromberg, 1993:27-30).

By contrast, the significance of my research lies in an insight which I have not encountered anywhere else. Put simply, I posit that in conversion to Islam in contemporary Britain kinship and religion are mutually imbricated processes. Rather than reifying religion as a discrete domain, or reducing conversion to a matter of psychology, I use kinship as a lens through which to analyse the religious. This hypothesis might seem odd at first as it challenges both our common-sense understanding of what conversion entails, and also most of the research in the field. However, as I present my data, I will demonstrate that the struggle that converts are engaged in – a site of significant change – is the re-configuration of kinship relations. The narratives of converts do not usually revolve around personal crises or around difficulties in adopting a new faith. While many converts see their conversion as absolutely continuous with their previous beliefs, where Islam appears as the natural consequence of their previous beliefs, they all struggle with their *social* re-positioning, particularly in relation to family. To go even further, I surmise that family relations are constitutive of conversion in contemporary Britain. It is because of the need to mitigate family relations in order to maintain them that converts emphasise their rationalism and modernity, narrate continuity in terms of belief, re-interpret family histories, re-organise family trauma and collective memories, and aspire to hold on to the family's way of life while simultaneously adopting a new ethical framework, which requires the redrawing of boundaries.

Although much has been written about conversion to Islam, comparatively little has surfaced about the role of kinship in the conversion process. This – to me – is surprising because my own research revealed that, rather than being peripheral to the experience, family relations are central to – and even constitutive of – conversion to Islam. Although Zebiri (Zebiri, 2008:71-82) writes that 'many converts say that one of the hardest things about converting to Islam is telling their families and friends' (ibid.:71), she dedicates only ten pages of her book to the profound changes that family life undergoes upon conversion. In his analysis of 'intimate Islamophobia' Moosavi does dedicate himself to the theme of conversion in the family context but restricts his analysis to the antagonising remarks that constitute what he calls 'intimate Islamophobia' (Moosavi, 2011). The theme of social re-positioning in a civic context has been brilliantly illuminated by Özyürek with respect to German

converts to Islam (Özyürek, 2015), and for Scandinavian converts (Roald, 2006). Those studies that do go into the theme of converts' kinship relations do so in a very limited way, one that is only based on converts' narratives. What my research does is to offer an in-depth understanding of family dynamics in the context of conversion. For this, I engaged both converts and their families. This is crucial. Without also including relatives this research would have been a one-sided account of a process, which by definition, involves multiple parties. Precisely because conversion as portrayed in my study is a *social* and not only a personal religious process, it was essential to involve those 'others' who are an integral, indeed constitutive, part of the conversion story. Throughout my thesis I show that, without 'family', conversion to Islam in contemporary Britain would not be what it is.

A few remarks seem warranted at this point. The social environment, in which I conducted my research is particular as it is a Western, Muslim-minority context. As Roy (2013) points out, in the past conversions to Islam occurred mostly inside Muslim empires and kingdoms in order to align oneself with the dominant power. Travellers and merchants often converted because of the associated upward social mobility. In this context conversion used to work vertically from top to bottom with the top functioning like a magnet. This is no longer the case; conversion to Islam rather seems to take the opposite direction where converts consciously join the underdog (Roy, 2013:175). Unlike previous conversion inside *Dar-al-Islam*, contemporary conversion in Britain mostly occurs in an Islamophobic, post-Christian, Muslim-minority context. To Roy, today's voluntary individual conversions are important symbolic issues in that they dismantle existing categories and break the close association between culture, identity, citizenship and religion (ibid.:177). Contrary to the massive group conversions of the past for reasons of upward social mobility, contemporary converts stress that they are making a personal choice and that they want to break with an inauthentic religion. They emphasise freedom and individualism and oppose traditional sectarian systems. Their unwillingness to join one of the legal schools or sects inside Islam often leaves them a minority within a minority (ibid.:178). Another relevant observation made by Roy is that conversions inside the great Muslim empires were seen (and experienced) as a form of 'acculturation', where the convert would enter into another culture, adopting the associated dress, language, educational system, norms, and values. By contrast, today's converts consciously try to skip 'culture' completely in the process of

conversion (Özyürek, 2015:26; Zebiri, 2008:63). Modern converts often emphasise that they do not bring with them ‘cultural baggage’ (Roy, 2013:180). Because conversion today can hardly be described in terms of identity, acculturation or empowerment, it poses some difficulty for the social sciences in how to understand contemporary religious attitudes except by reducing them. Converts may adopt alien religions, go against accepted paradigms and antagonise public opinion as they insist on exhibiting a faith which is not ‘domesticated’ by local culture and traditional practices. Roy writes: ‘State and public opinions often react negatively (e.g. the ban on burqa and minarets, restrictions on proselytism...), treating converts either as traitors or as unconscious and weak tools of foreign manipulation, thus contributing to a toughening of the clash of culture paradigm, without understanding the logic behind conversion’ (ibid.:181). This Western Muslim-minority context is crucial for my assertion that conversion to Islam is about the re-configuration of kinship relations and mutually imbricated with matters of religious belief. The context is crucial because it is constitutive of the process at hand. A researcher looking at conversion to Islam at a different time in history and / or in a different context, such as a Muslim-majority context, might draw entirely different conclusions. As chapters two and three will show, the convert’s account of his experience is fundamentally shaped by the way that Islam is positioned as an inferior, potentially dangerous, foreign ‘other’.

Another signpost I would like to put up from the beginning relates to my dealing with narratives. The later section on fieldwork will reveal that I followed a mixed method approach in that I relied both on ethnographic fieldwork and on interviews, which are based on the narratives of converts and their relatives. As chapter three will deal with the genre of the ‘testimony’ in detail, suffice it here to say that I follow Webster in his insight that the highly conventional, yet intensely personal, character of the testimony allows us to draw conclusions about the social context in which it occurs (Webster, 2013:104-8). Rather than trying to decipher a reality beneath – or beyond – the testimony, I look at the structures and the language used in such narratives to understand how my interlocutors make sense of the change that conversion has brought into their lives. It is in looking at the speech act about conversion, rather than the experience (which researchers, generally speaking, do not witness first-hand), that insights are yielded concerning this process of ‘making sense’. And these testimonies problematize social and familial change while they claim continuity and experiential consistency, even naturalness, regarding their

change of faith. This was so much the case that, for some converts, the act of conversion was reduced to an act of ‘re-labelling’ themselves. The process of change that people sometimes painfully tried to come to terms with was the upheaval of family bonds, a change which conversion to Islam seemed to have initiated. As chapter four will illustrate, these narratives about conversion shift with the audience. While converts heavily emphasised the importance of ‘rationality’ as a driver for conversion in interviews and non-Muslim contexts more generally, their accounts of conversion in a Muslim context drew on mystical experiences as pivotal to their journeys to Islam. Because I followed a mixed methods approach, I was able to discern these variations in the narratives as they were offered in different contexts.

I have found Rambo’s work on *Understanding Religious Conversion* useful because he dismantles the Pauline conversion cliché by opting for the word ‘process’ over ‘event’ to describe something which is rarely an overnight, sudden experience and which has no clear beginning or end (Rambo, 1993:1). Moreover, when he writes that ‘religious conversion is one of humanity’s ways of approaching its self-conscious predicament, of solving or resolving the mystery of human origins, meaning, and destiny’ (ibid.:2), Rambo makes clear that he understands religious conversion not as a derivative of ‘cultural transformation’ or ‘identity change’ but as a religious phenomenon relating to our very ‘origins, meaning, and destiny’. While he concedes that conversion can mean many different things entailing ‘change’ of some sort, he is clear about the category of ‘religious conversion’ standing in its own right rather than being a reduction of something else. Rambo accurately captures the affective aspects and consequences of the religious experience. For instance, he relates the sense of intimacy with God that many converts experience post-conversion. The closeness and connection previously unknown as described by Rambo resonates with what I found in many converts to Islam. When Hannah talked about the ‘amazing feeling’ during prayer, when Neslihan explained – pointing to a place close to her left shoulder – that ‘he [Allah] is right here by my side’, and when Amira said that after taking the *shahada* she was ‘overwhelmed by the love [...] I was feeling happy inside’, it did seem that the gulf between the convert and God had been bridged (ibid.:160). In my view, Rambo thus succinctly captures the post-conversion experience of feeling an embracing source of love, the lifting of a burden and a relief from sin, and a sense of belonging in the new religious community, which became the converts’ homes and their ‘religious family’, as Hannah put it.

Despite Rambo's good understanding of the conversion process, two aspects of his description do not match my findings or only apply in some cases of conversion, but not in others. The first of these is his assertion that some form of 'crisis' usually precedes conversion (ibid.:44). Only some of my interlocutors experienced any kind of crisis prior to their conversion to Islam. Again, the idea that a crisis instigates conversion comes out of Christian conversion narratives, which usually relate some disruptive experience, humiliation or failure as the precondition for the convert's openness to convert (cf. Webster, 2013). However, most of my interlocutors came to Islam via more 'mundane' and less spectacular routes. Conversations with Muslim friends, studying the scriptures, screening the 'religion market' (Roy, 2010:15), and engaging in anti-Muslim discourses were all part of different conversion stories and stood at the beginning of what was often a long and gradual process. Contrary to Rambo's conversion model, according to which a 'crisis' precedes conversion, 'crisis' usually entered the lives of my interlocutors at the moment of 'coming out' (see chapter one).

The other point of departure from Rambo is his emphasis on a 'specific turning point' somewhere along the path of conversion, which he terms the 'fulcrum' of the change process (Rambo, 1993:124). While it is true that some of my interlocutors did have a (public) 'commitment ritual' – usually pronouncing the *shahada* in front of witnesses – to mark their entry into Islam, this was no standard procedure and no requirement for conversion itself. Unlike entry into Christianity, which usually demands baptism and often entails giving testimony, such 'observable events that give witness to the convert's decision' (ibid.) were not part and parcel of conversion to Islam, which sometimes happened silently and even solitarily. Indeed, some of the converts I met never pronounced the *shahada* in front of anyone and converted alone at home without ever having entered a mosque. Therefore, 'commitment rituals' are not by definition part of conversion to Islam, although they might still play a role. The drama of the Christian baptism, which proclaims the old life dead and the new life born, was usually absent from the conversion narratives I collected (ibid.:127). While Rambo's assertion that some religious traditions demand sartorial, dietetic and other behavioural changes as markers of transformation resonates with my findings, I found that the gamut of changes made was so large that it seems hard to make any modification a requirement or indicator of conversion itself.

Because conversion to Islam in contemporary Britain is about the re-configuration of family relations and about social re-positioning more generally, it is an inherently social phenomenon. As such, conversion is also about boundary-drawing, about delimiting the ‘new’ social group from the ‘old’ and about constituting a community of learners. I chose to look at this process of boundary-drawing through two different lenses. The first is the lens of material objects where food, clothing, architecture and home decorations can reveal something about the way in which converts constitute themselves as Muslims vis-à-vis their families. Material objects also reveal the limits of a liberal material culture, which – seemingly inclusive – appears as bounded by the dietetic and sartorial requirements it demands from ‘insiders’. The other lens that allowed me to discern the boundary-drawing at stake was the project of ethical self-formation pursued by the women of a mosque class I attended. While aiming to make themselves into people who have *taqwā* (God-consciousness) through purification rituals, following the new ethical code as presented in the class also required a simultaneous detachment from ‘old’, ‘un-Islamic’ ways. Like the handling of material objects with religious significance, these techniques of the self were fraught with tension because of the convert’s simultaneous inhabitancy of two incommensurable ethical systems: the inherited framework imparted through the family at a time that lay outside of Islam and the newly accepted provisions of Islam that offered the prospect of salvation.

In this context, I have found Robbins’ discussion of Sahlins’ models of cultural change to be among the most instructive. Although relating to ‘cultural change’ the models that allowed Robbins to accurately grasp what was happening to the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea also turned out to be very helpful in my own analysis. In Sahlins’ third model of ‘modernisation’ people adopt a wholly new culture and do not try to fit the new culture’s elements into their traditional categories. Robbins prefers to call this model ‘adoption’ (Robbins, 2004:11), which highlights one important aspect of the conversion process. Whereas the first two models³ require that the traditional culture changes – either through a change in categories or through a change in the relations between the categories – the model of adoption leaves room

³ In Sahlins’ first model as discussed in Robbins ‘people are able to fit new circumstances into old categories’ (ibid.:10). In this case the relationships between categories remain unchanged but the categories themselves become larger to encompass the new referents. This model Robbins calls ‘a model of assimilation’. In the second model of ‘transformation’ or ‘transformative reproduction’ the relations between the existing categories have to change.

for the situation in which people ‘take up a new culture in its own terms’ (ibid.:10), *without abandoning their old culture*. As Robbins explains, ‘the kind of process this model lays out, one in which people self-consciously work to grasp a new culture on its own terms, is one that can lead to a situation in which people live with two largely distinct and, in important respects, contradictory cultures at the same time’ (ibid.). Robbins’ explanation for the enduring dual cultural situation of the Urapmin could thus be explained through the model of adoption: a situation in which the Urapmin had adopted the new Christian cultural system through conversion, but simultaneously maintained their traditional Urapmin culture. Living in these different and often counter-opposed systems simultaneously troubled Robbins’ interlocutors and resulted in ethical dilemmas.

In many ways the model of adoption also describes what I found in my research. The converts I met took on a new religion and, arguably, a new religious culture, while simultaneously maintaining (at least partially) the culture that they grew up in. Through conversion to Islam, converts not only changed their faith but also modified their dress code, diet, language, leisure locations and changed the circle of friends they engaged with. Many converts also changed their Christian names and substituted them with Islamic names. However, these very converts also simultaneously remained – often white – British citizens in a majority non-Muslim country. They usually remained part of their families and partook in family life. Living in this dual religio-cultural situation led to many conflicts, particularly inside families, and forced the converts (and their relatives) to navigate these sometimes contradictory cultural logics.

Fieldwork

As I set out to understand the process of conversion to Islam in a family context in rich detail, I engaged in qualitative rather than quantitative research. In the following I will outline my research methods, my research sites or settings, and the sample of converts and families I worked with. While my PhD fieldwork commenced in December 2014, I had previously conducted fieldwork for my MPhil during three months in the summer of 2013. My MPhil research focused on female converts to Islam and inspired me to expand the project and make it into a PhD, which would also include men and enable me to understand the process at hand in much more detail. As

I have used the insights I gained from my MPhil research in this sequel project, I conducted a total of one and a half years of research on conversion to Islam in Britain within a family context. The nature of my project determined my work in many ways. Having trained as an anthropologist I was keen on doing ethnographic fieldwork. However, converts do not live together as a community and as such classical ethnography was not an option. Instead, I decided to follow a mixed methods approach and explore different research routes that would allow me to gain a good picture of the process I was studying, always trying to carry out ethnographic fieldwork where possible. My three different fieldwork settings, which I will discuss subsequently, include interviews, classes at two different London mosques, and my participation in the *Narratives of Conversion: Male Perspectives* symposia organized by the Centre of Islamic Studies throughout the spring of 2015.

I thus relied partly on extensive semi-structured interviews with converts, their non-Muslim families and, sometimes, their spouses. I had a small catalogue of questions that I asked in all interviews but also allowed the interviews to develop into the direction that my interlocutors took. The interviews often took completely unexpected turns and revealed themes that I had not previously considered. Later, in my analysis of these interviews, I carefully tried to decipher the themes and also the categories that my interlocutors used in their narratives, and I thus think it justified to speak of ethnographic interviews. While I rely on narratives, which are unique and fascinating in their own rights, they are not exceptional. Like other studies that rely on narrative accounts, this research also reveals *patterns*, particularly those relating to the dynamics of British family life in the context of conversion (cf. Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). All chapters entail fieldwork data as well as the relevant theory. I have used pseudonyms in order to protect my interlocutors' anonymity but have tried to keep the character of their names. For instance, I replaced Turkish names with other Turkish names and Arabic names with other Arabic names. I always mirrored names that my interlocutors used for themselves. While some kept their Christian names (in these cases I chose a corresponding pseudonym) others had adopted Islamic names, such as prophets' names, which I honoured in my choice of pseudonyms.

These semi-structured, in-depth interviews with informants took place between May 2013 and August 2013 for my MPhil and then again between August 2016 and May 2017 for my PhD. My interviews took place in various locations including London, Cambridge, Birmingham, Cardiff, Swansea, Woking, Guildford

and the Greater London area. I had initially received contacts to converts through the Centre of Islamic Studies, which had done a project called *Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Female Perspectives* (Suleiman, 2013). Three of the women that had participated in Suleiman's project were willing to meet with me for interviews. After getting to know them they were happy to introduce me to other converts, and so I recruited all of my informants through snowballing. After I had completed my MPhil and started my PhD a year later, I went back to my initial contacts and continued the snowball sampling, as it had worked well. In this way I recruited nine men and seven women in addition to the nine women from my MPhil research. The result is a total of twenty-five in-depth interviews with converts, which lasted between one and four hours each although most interviews tended toward the four-hour-side of the spectrum. Two converts were interviewed twice (one of them twice during the PhD fieldwork, the other once during my MPhil and once during my PhD fieldwork) and one convert had left Islam at the time of our interview, after having been a Muslim for twenty years.

Without claiming or aiming to be broadly representative, my sample was varied in terms of ethnic and religious backgrounds but not so much in terms of class, as most of my informants came from an educated middle-class background (most of them held a university degree). Interviewees were aged between twenty and seventy-two, with most of my informants in their thirties and early forties. The time that had passed since conversion took place varied considerably. The recency of conversion ranged from a few weeks to almost forty years. This means that the narratives I analysed were of very different natures, as some already sketched conversion as a process with different stages and developments, while the more recent conversions did not offer that 'hindsight perspective' and were very much in the middle of it all. In terms of religious background, most of my informants had been brought up non-religious / atheist, or Church of England, but my sample also included converts from Judaism, Hinduism, Catholicism, a former Methodist, an Alevi, a Greek Orthodox, an Eritrean Orthodox and two other Christian denominations. Again, I used the terms that my interviewees provided me with. In terms of ethnicity, most of my interviewees were white British but the sample also included three black and African-Caribbean converts, South Asians, Turkish and informants of mixed background. As many interviews involved travelling to my interlocutors' homes, I often ended up spending half a day with the interviewees and their families, including meals around

the interviews. The time surrounding the actual interview allowed me to build trust, meet the converts' families and to engage in informal conversations, which are typically involved in more 'traditional' modes of anthropological fieldwork. I found these interviews particularly rewarding as converts generally opened up very quickly to give a narrative account of their conversion and offer their perspectives on various topics, particularly on family relations. All interviews started with narrative accounts of the converts' upbringing and conversion but – as they were only semi-structured – unfolded in different directions.

While I found it relatively easy to recruit converts who were willing to be interviewed, accessing their families was a lot harder and arguably my biggest fieldwork challenge. Access to the families happened through the converts, whom I asked whether it would be possible to speak to their families, highlighting the dialogical nature of my study. While I received only a few refusals from family members who were asked (via the converts) whether they would be willing to participate in an interview, it was usually the converts themselves who posed the obstacle by refusing to ask their families. This was a repetitive issue, which eventually highlighted for me the sensitivity of the topic I was studying. While conversion to Islam is often treated in a sensationalist manner by certain media outlets (involving stories of radicalisation and jihadism), conversion was also a very sensitive topic within families, and many relationships were fraught because of it. It seemed that in such a context, converts did not want to put an extra strain on these relationships by asking their relatives to reflect on and speak about the topic of conflict. Many relationships were kept alive specifically by avoiding the topic of conversion, and sometimes religion, altogether. 'We don't speak about it' was a sentence I heard over and over again. In order not to cause harm to my informants I therefore saw it as an ethical responsibility not to put pressure on them and not to persist where my request for contact to the family had been denied. In another way I perceived these refusals to make contact as a protection of the converts' newly built narratives. As other authors have pointed out, narrative accounts give converts the opportunity to re-construct their life histories in light of their newly adopted religion (Rambo, 1993: 158; Snow & Machalek, 1984; Zebiri, 2008). Counter-posing these accounts against 'the family's version' would threaten the validity of the converts' constructions, and was thus undesirable from their perspective. Whatever the ultimate reason (or combination of reasons) may be, this meant that I ended up with fewer

family members to interview, but unfortunately I did not see a way around this obstacle. I nevertheless managed to interview thirteen non-Muslim family relations, including four fathers, four mothers, three sisters, one friend and one wife. I also interviewed six Muslim spouses even though they were not the focus of my research. With the permission of my informants, I recorded all of my interviews on my phone (as this was less invasive than a recording machine) and also took extensive notes during the interviews. In order to have things fresh in my memory I transferred my notes to a digital document on the same day that the interview took place or, at the latest the next day. All interviews were fully transcribed at a later point.

To increase my opportunities for participant observation, and to get in touch with more converts, I chose to approach the London Central Mosque and one other London mosque⁴ in order to participate in classes. The London Central Mosque offered monthly ‘Introduction to Islam’ days, which were aimed at new Muslims and people interested in Islam. But apart from these, it did not offer specific classes for converts, so I enrolled in one standard Arabic class and in one Qur’anic Arabic class, which I attended from September until December 2016 in order to meet converts. This was a relatively time-consuming approach, which however led to a few contacts, which resulted in three in-depth interviews. The one ‘introduction to Islam’ day I attended in September 2016 also allowed for informal conversations with a number of very recent converts as well as my inclusion in a converts’ Whatsapp group, where an enormous range of topics of interest to converts was addressed.

The other London mosque offered a ‘New Muslim Circle’, which was gender separated. I contacted the mosque in order to gain access to the women’s circle. I submitted an official application, outlining my research to the mosque. After some initial hesitation, I found the woman who ran the circle to be quite open and welcoming and eventually got permission to join the class, which I attended weekly from January until June 2017. While I used this circle to make contacts with potential interviewees, it was also an excellent environment for informal conversations and participant observation (converts interacting with one another), and it offered an insight into how new Muslims learn about Islam. Classes consisted of a lecture about some Islamic topic, followed by questions, discussion and workshops on how to recite

⁴ This other London mosque shall remain unnamed for the purpose of anonymity. Identifying its name would also identify the participants of the New Muslim circle, which will be dealt with in detail in chapter six.

the Qur'an in Arabic and how to pray. The women also used this circle as a social forum to talk about problems they faced in relation to their conversion and frequently this brought up the topic of family relations. Occasionally an Imam joined the class to give a lecture and answer questions. Because not all participants came every week, it is hard to say how many women I met through this circle but I estimate that they were roughly forty women, many of whom I spoke to regularly. In every introduction round I disclosed my researcher identity and outlined my interest in Islam and in converts. Whenever I got into deeper conversations with converts I also told them about my research and never tried to hide the fact that I was there for research purposes.

My third fieldwork setting consisted of the four weekends of symposia, including one scoping session. Between December 2014 and May 2015 the Centre of Islamic Studies in Cambridge organized a sequel of one scoping session and three weekend-long symposia called 'Narratives of Conversion: Male Perspectives'. This was the follow-up of the female equivalent, which had taken place in 2011/ 2012 (Suleiman, 2013:17). Both projects resulted in an extensive report on the narratives of conversion. I attended the male project in the spring of 2015, which gave me first-hand experience of the presentations given by converts and the ensuing discussions. As these were four weekend-long events, the symposia also offered plenty of opportunities to connect with and talk to converts during breaks and over dinner. Forty-six men in total participated in the symposia, many of whom attended more than one weekend and became somewhat familiar throughout the process.

While I interviewed twenty-five converts and nineteen relatives during in-depth interviews, the other research settings in the two mosques and during the symposia exposed me to many more converts – both men and women – whom I talked to informally but who knew about my research, so that I ended up with roughly one-hundred-and-eleven convert informants (twenty-five interviews, forty-six converts from the symposia and approximately forty converts from the mosques). While I am content with the frequency and intensity of my contact with converts, my contact with only nineteen relatives, all of whom I interviewed, remains a relative – if unavoidable – weakness of my research. It means that the perspective of converts is 'over-represented' compared to the relatives' perspective.

Finally, a word on my own positionality in the field seems warranted. Considering the topic's sensitivity and potential harmfulness for the converts and their

families, building trust was a key element in my research approach. As I did not live with my interlocutors, building trust was not always an easy task, particularly when I met people for a one-off interview and had only seen them a few times, once, or – sometimes – never at all before the interview. Being a German Catholic meant that I was an outsider to all my informants. However, several aspects helped me greatly in my work. The biggest ice-breaker on all fronts was the fact that my own brother had converted to Islam. I mentioned this wherever I went. The converts' families seemed to immediately identify with me, in a way seeing myself and them as sitting in the same boat. Because we shared the experience of having a convert in the family they felt understood, and did not hesitate to relate the problems that the conversion had caused in the family. Since all of my interviews were dialogical in nature, most family members also started asking me questions about my family's experience. I always answered these questions as objectively as possible, trying not to 'take sides', not to persuade, and not to suggest anything in my descriptions. While trust was established particularly quickly with non-Muslim family members, converts also seemed to take comfort in the fact that my brother was Muslim, that I had studied Arabic, and that I held a positive attitude toward Islam. I always disclosed my own identity to the converts, which prompted many to ask questions about my religious beliefs, possibly hoping to convert me through their testimonies (Rambo, 1993:159). I tried to answer these questions as briefly as possible, outlining my Catholic upbringing, my openness toward all religions, and my positive interest in Islam. What was more, all of the converts I met asked about my brother's experience and relating his story to them allowed me to showcase my empathy for the process they, too, were going through. Although I was a non-Muslim 'other' who was studying them and who did not share their experience of conversion, I gained trust very quickly with the converts who seemed to locate me in some sort of 'middle position', being someone who understood her brother's journey into Islam and studied the subject with genuine interest from an academic perspective. In addition, since all of my contacts were gained through other converts or the Centre of Islamic Studies, a certain level of trust was already in place as these connections vouched for my sincerity. In one case I was contacted by a convert and his wife, as they had heard about my project through an acquaintance, and they offered to volunteer.

Thesis Structure

My thesis is organised in six chapters, which can be thematically divided into three 'blocks'. The first block deals with the way in which 'family' is renegotiated. Chapter one, *Coming out as Muslim*, draws a parallel between my interlocutors' experience and that of gay people disclosing their homosexuality to their families. This chapter highlights kinship's impermanence, as conversion reveals its susceptibility to change. This chapter shows that the place that 'jerks and tears' – where the 'pain' is – in the process of conversion is kinship as family loses its status as permanent. At the same time, converts' anxiety is the symptom of a contradictory understanding of identity, which allows for change in some social situations but demands fixity in relation to family bonds. As in gay kinship studies, 'family' itself appears as a process, as something we 'do', rather than a status, as something we 'are'. In chapter two, *The Image of Islam and Family Biographies*, my interlocutors explain their family biographies, ensuing ideologies about Islam and the power of collective memory. Islam-disparaging discourses, which sound very similar to Orientalist discourses but stem from a position of inferiority, posit Islam as a violent threat. Although other sources are available, the families' ideological constructs appear as curiously resistant to transformation. As converts come to terms with the effect these discourses had on them while growing up, they also re-negotiate their own place within the family.

The second 'block' of this thesis, consisting of chapters three and four, relates to the way conversion is narrated. As a researcher on conversion to Islam, I never experienced – that is, witnessed – the actual conversion of any of my interlocutors. Instead, I rely on their testimonies and these accounts are what the second block of my thesis deals with. Chapter three, *From Otherness to Familiarity: Biographies of Self and Religion*, analyses why converts narrate their journey into Islam as continuous with their previous beliefs. The observation that converts tend to reconstruct their previous lives in light of the new religion is not new (Butler, 2005; Crapanzano, 2000; Ricoeur, 1979; Webster, 2013). Snow and Machalek point out that 'personal biographies and identities are redefined continuously in the light of new experience' (1984:177) and Zebiri points to the 'reconceptualisation of past experiences in the light of the new religious values and norms' (2008:103). However, I use the data I gathered to identify 'Islam as other' and what I call 'Islam's autobiography' as the two most important forces that shape the converts testimonies.

‘Rupture’ or discontinuity enters the converts’ narratives only with respect to the social world, in relation to social others who look at their conversion as a radical break with the past. Because converts narrate continuity on the level of belief and discontinuity on the level of sociality, I posit that conversion to Islam requires a theory of conversion that emphasises the ‘inner reorientation’ *less* and the social re-positioning of the convert *more*. In chapter four, *The Religious Modern: Rationalism in Conversion to Islam*, I look at the different kinds of testimonies that converts engage in in conversation with non-Muslims and fellow converts respectively. While the testimonies offered in non-Muslim contexts emphasise the converts’ rationality – a rhetoric reminiscent of the apologetics of Islamic Modernism – the symposia, which consisted mainly of converts brought forth a discourse that highlighted dreams and mystical experiences as the entry point to Islam. Without trying to discount either of these narratives, chapter four discusses the reasons why converts engage in such radically different discourses.

The third and final ‘block’ of my thesis deals with ethical themes involving self-formation and boundary drawing. In chapter five, *Material Culture and Materiality*, I reveal the importance of material objects both in their communicative function and in their transformative power. My data shows how material objects often become the battlegrounds in the converts’ struggle to assert themselves as Muslims vis-à-vis their families – and sometimes themselves. In my final, sixth chapter, *The Ethics of Conversion: Ritual purification and the care of the self*, I analyse my material from the ‘New Muslim Circle’ to show how the women at these mosque classes are engaged in an ethical project of self-formation. In Foucauldian fashion, converts engage in learning bathroom etiquette and internalising the rules for purification in order to fashion themselves into good Muslims who always remember God, who have *taḳwā*. However, these projects of ethical self-formation also have a social dimension, which is too often neglected: by following rules religiously, converts sometimes end up in situations of ethical dilemma where Islam’s demands and the family’s demands contradict one another. While such situations mean torment for the converts, they simultaneously constitute moments of boundary-drawing between the converts, their families, and society at large.

Chapter One – Coming Out as Muslim

‘I’m dreading that conversation. I’m dreading the day I have to tell them.’

– Gwendolyn, London, convert from Christianity –

‘When I came to London [from university, after the term had ended] the closest place that I knew that gave the *jumu’ah* [Friday prayer] in English was the London Central Mosque and the Brixton Mosque. In Brixton there are lots of converts. There was the Bakerloo line all the way from my house in Wembley to Elephant and Castle, I had one change for the Brixton Mosque. I think one day I went there and I got back later than my anticipated time. I think my dad wanted to take me somewhere or something. He said, “Every Friday you suddenly disappear for hours. What’s happening?” The first couple of times I dismissed it or made some story up. I had to go to the centre of London or something.

I’d kept it from them for so long and now they’ve known me since I’ve been a Muslim for nearly nine months and I’m hoping that I’m still the old person and I haven’t changed in any way. This time might be a good time *to come out* with it. I just got tired of holding this thing inside me. I said, “Yeah, I went to mosque, Dad.” He said, “What?” I said, “Yes, I went to mosque.” There was a massive big argument. I think he actually hit me, when he’d never hit me before. He started punching me and stuff, which I took, because I knew how angry he would be. I think he was so upset the next day he kicked me out of the house. We tried to reconcile and I tried to make all sorts of compromises.

I think it was a couple of days later and he said, “Right, you need to pack all this up and you’re going to go.” I said, “Dad, I’ve got all this stuff. Where am I going to go?” He said, “I don’t care, just pack your things and get in the car.” He just dropped me off with all my stuff to Alperton train station, which is on the Victoria line I think, or the Northern. It’s in Wembley anyway. I had all my things, my suitcase, my boxes, all my university stuff. It was the holidays so I had books and all my stuff with me. I thought, “How am I going to take all this on the underground?” To this day I’ve no idea how I managed to go from there with all this stuff to my

friend Mueid, who I knew through some of the contacts. He was training to be a pilot at that time with British Airways.’

I visited Ismael, a forty-two-year-old medical doctor and father of four, and his family at their home in Birmingham. After spending the first four years of his life in India, his family then moved to Nairobi for two years and to Mombasa thereafter, which is to this day the locus of his earliest memory of Islam in the form of the Muezzin’s *adhan* (call to prayer). At the age of eleven Ismael and his family moved to London where they have been ever since. Ismael comes from a religious and well-educated middle-class Hindu family. As a child, he remembered, his whole family used to pray together every morning and he would often lead the *puja* (ceremonial worship) and perform the chanting. ‘We were one of the few families who used to pray together every day at 7 o’clock. I used to lead the puja, light the candle. My dad used to play the harmonium and he used to lead the hymns. I used to be the main person to have the flame in front of the idols and statues. I used to ring a bell, do all the incantations and chants and things like that. We used to be fairly religious and we were quite unique.’ The family’s diet was strictly vegetarian and his father had attended a priest school in India. ‘We were from the Vishwakarma. My dad never believed in castes. He was quite open minded in a way. But he was a very strict Hindu. We were vegetarians, not quite vegans. Our community is called Swaminarayan.’ In his account they were very religious but not overly strict and eager to integrate into English society so that his father would have a pint for Christmas at a local pub.

Ismael converted to Islam at the age of twenty when he was studying medicine away from home, at the university of Southampton. During the long conversation we had he recounted the events surrounding his ‘coming out’ – the term he used – as Muslim to his parents, an event which changed his life in significant ways. I am going to use his narrative of ‘coming out’ as a point of departure for investigating issues of identity and relatedness within ‘the family’. In this chapter I am going to look at the moment of ‘coming out’ as a moment of revelation, as a point of intersection between what I conceptualise as two trajectories of knowledge. The first trajectory of knowledge is the convert’s and entails something he has always known or gradually come to learn, while the second trajectory is the family’s and involves ignorance

followed by knowledge. The point where they intersect is the moment of ‘coming out’, of not hiding anymore, where what was private is now publicly professed. Viewing the convert’s ‘coming out’ as a moment of revelation mandates the discussion of several related issues. As I explore the themes of fear, time, ‘the family’ and ‘the self’ I will draw extensively on the parallels offered in the study of gay kinship.

Lessons from Gay Kinship Studies

Ismael’s story of ‘coming out’, as he and numerous other converts revealingly labelled the event of telling the family that they had become Muslim, resembles the testimonies of gay people to a remarkable degree. Exchanging certain phrases would suffice to make his account completely compatible with the coming out stories that Weston (1991) collected in the San Francisco Bay Area of the 1980s. While Ismael’s story cannot be representative of the many accounts collected, it taps in to an array of issues which were relevant in nearly all coming out stories. One of those issues is the intense feeling of anxiety experienced by nearly all of my informants prior to telling their families. With the exception of only three people, none of my informants told their families prior to conversion when they were already convinced of Islam’s truth and had taken the decision to convert, that this was indeed their intention. All those families learned about the conversion in hindsight – as a *fait accompli*. As in Weston’s study, most converts waited for a significant lapse of time before they finally told their families. While this waiting time has sporadically been explained with wanting to settle into the faith before informing others, overwhelmingly the wait was out of fear.

Ismael waited roughly nine months after his conversion before telling his family in the full consciousness that the reactions he was to face would drastically alter his life. His account from the beginning illustrates his waiting, then making excuses and finally ‘coming out’, which was received with physical violence by his father and being evicted from home. He recalled his first visit home from university when he had just converted to Islam:

‘My family didn’t know at all at that particular time that I’d accepted it [Islam]. I knew how they would react, because of all the interactions that I’d

had, so I kept it from them for close to a year and a bit. I used to pray secretly. I ate whatever they ate. It was quite easy because they were vegetarians, so there was no issues with halal meat. It's interesting trying to pray *fajr* [dawn] prayer. I had to go to the bathroom. I'd make my ablution and try to not do any creaking and then come back into my room and pray as quietly as possible. I'd sneak into bed again. I did that for months and months'.

Converts go to great lengths in order to prevent their families from finding out about their conversions. During this time 'inside the closet' they are in a situation of having to make compromises of many kinds and of essentially 'lying' to their families, which they perceive as a source of pain.

Gwendolyn, a young woman in her thirties whom I had met at the London Central Mosque and who had recently converted out of Anglican Christianity, was still in the process of thinking about how she could possibly tell her family that she converted. When we met for coffee she was about to go to her parent's place soon, in time for Christmas, and was making 'plans' on how to 'navigate the dinner table', making sure to eat *halal*, and how to avoid going to church. In her narrative the word she used most often in the context of telling her family was 'dreading'. The prospect of telling the family – whom she described as 'very close' and with 'very strong bonds' – was a source of enormous anxiety for her. 'I'm dreading that conversation. I'm dreading the day I have to tell them'. Gwendolyn explained this fear in a twofold manner. Her first fear, which she also articulated first, was the 'fear of hurting the people you love'. She feared 'causing pain to those that are closest to you'. Having grown up in a practicing Anglican family she said that this is the way she was raised and it was expected to pass on the family tradition, so conversion to Islam would be perceived as an act of 'treason'. In her anticipation, her conversion would be perceived as 'changing camps' and 'changing allegiance', while her family would feel rejected. Because of Gwendolyn's painful awareness of the trouble her 'turning away' was going to cause the family she decided to wait for an indefinite time until she would have gathered the courage to do so. But, she admitted, the secrecy she kept was also a source of pain, and was increasingly so. The longer she kept it from her family, the harder it got.

While Gwendolyn's first fear was based on the fear of hurting others, her second fear in the context of 'coming out' to her family revolved around being hurt

herself. What she feared for herself was 'losing family'. This fear revolved around 'that support system' not being there anymore. This is the fear of stepping out, of becoming an 'outsider' to one's own family. While her first source of fear was the others' anticipated perception of 'you are not who we thought you were', Gwendolyn's second source of fear was finding out that the others are not who she thought they were – and who she wanted them to be. This finding is perfectly analogous to Weston's observation in the gay coming out scenario that at stake is not only the anxiety about telling the family 'who I really am' but also about finding out 'who they really are to me': 'Coming out to a biological relative put to the test the unconditional love and enduring solidarity commonly understood [...] to characterize blood ties' (Weston, 1991:43-4). Gwendolyn also made a direct comparison of her own situation to that of a gay friend who had come out to his family, which had resulted in severe conflict, rejection and shunning for months. 'Now they're one happy family but it took years.' It seemed as though Gwendolyn wanted to draw some comfort and confidence from the fact that her friend had, in the end, been reconciled with his family. But the prospect of going through such a painful experience was understandably a source of intense fear.

What complicated matters in the case of conversion – as opposed to gay disclosure of identity – was the emotional intricacy of fear combined with guilt. While gays and converts recounted strikingly similar feelings of 'fear' and 'anxiety', converts also felt guilty. As became clear during multiple conversations, classes at mosques and the symposia, many converts felt guilty for 'condemning them [the family] to hell' as one convert explained. While the belief that non-believers would 'go to hell' is subject to one's interpretation of Islamic teachings, several converts did believe that this was the case and felt guilty about it. They felt guilty for believing in a God that would condemn non-Muslims to hell because, by extension, they would themselves condemn them to hell. This sense of guilt went alongside converts' hopes to see their families again in paradise. During one of the new Muslim classes I attended the teacher encouraged the converts to lead a life of 'righteous deeds' with an ultimate focus on the afterlife. Having lived a righteous life, the teacher explained, would allow Muslims to ask Allah to grant them their wishes in the Hereafter. The teacher asked the converts to share their greatest hopes for paradise with the group. Tellingly, most converts headed their list of wishes with the desire to see non-Muslim

family, and parents in particular, in paradise. Seeing them again would mean that they had not after all been condemned to hell, which would relieve the convert of his guilt.

In Weston's as in my own observations, the symbolic weight accorded to rejection is disproportionate to the numbers of people who actually experience rejection but most – converts as gays – experience fears before disclosure even if rejection does not follow (Weston, 1991:62). Converts who had a positive experience in the sense that their conversion was immediately accepted by the family thought that they had 'very little to tell' and that there was 'not much of a story'. Simultaneously, they seemed to be aware that a positive reception by the family was something exceptional. Such was Jim's experience. He was a thirty-two-year-old convert from Surrey who had converted at the age of twenty-one, a year before marrying his wife, Firdaws. While Jim's conversion had been received with acceptance in his family and among friends, leading him to say repeatedly that there was 'not much to tell', Firdaws, on the other hand, voiced her astonishment at the positive reactions Jim received from relatives:

'The one thing that really hit me with the whole thing, because all of his friends and all of his family were so supportive. He was only twenty-one, twenty-two. He was so young and he was making a life-changing decision to change his religion. He was also talking about getting married. We got married the following year [...] I was pretty gobsmacked – I remember asking someone, "You're just not telling me. Are people saying things and you don't want to upset me?" He was like, "No. They're not saying anything".'

Firdaws voiced the anticipation that there would be some kind of negative reaction, an anticipation that all converts shared. The absence of this anticipated negative reaction consequently came as a 'gobsmacking' surprise.

Jim was one of the three converts who told his family beforehand that he had met a Muslim girl, that he was reading into Islam and that conversion was a possibility. He gently prepared his parents for the event and made clear that not having done so would have caused damage to the relationship. As I was talking to Jim and his wife I asked him whether he had discussed the topic with his parents before conversion or whether he told them after he had already converted, as I had seen to be the common practice. Immediately, Firdaws said 'It was before. Definitely. You had

conversations with them before. You wouldn't have sprung that on your parents' whereupon Jim agreed:

'No, I wouldn't have done that. It must have been before [...] They knew that as a consequence of meeting Firdaws I was reading into Islam and understanding the religion and that conversion was a possibility. When it happened it wasn't a surprise [...] The initial conversations around "I've met Firdaws, she's Muslim and I'm reading into Islam" may have been. That was followed by six months of them taking it on board before I converted. The actual conversion wasn't a surprise in that sense'.

Here, Jim and his wife agreed that to 'spring' conversion on the parents out of the blue is a no-go. Parents of converts who had told them only in hindsight agreed with this sentiment, as they perceived the lack of communication beforehand as a breach of trust. Yet, despite the shared feeling that coming out to parents about conversion after the fact was difficult for the relationship, it was the only road available as most converts saw it.

Among the converts I met Ismael experienced one of the harshest reactions from his family to his conversion. Most converts experienced a milder reaction, where responses ranging from verbal rejection to silent notice, disinterestedness, apathy and positive affirmations of the chosen path were all recounted. In both Weston's and my study, accepting parents voiced their acceptance through an affirmation of love and the permanence of blood ties, such as 'we love her and she is still our daughter' or 'she is still the same to me'. Even though such statements reaffirmed kinship, the implicit assumption that family is forever faded away. Through such an emphasis on the permanence of kinship ties, parents simultaneously revealed the possibility of kinship severance. In my own findings these affirmations of kinship ties were often supplemented with liberal statements to the effect that 'she could be whatever she wanted to be'. Conversely, rejection could entail severance of family ties previously held to be inalienable, as was the case in Ismael's experience when he 'was cut out of the family tree'. The graphic symbol of being evicted from the parents' house informed him that he would no longer be treated as part of the family.

While overt rejection – much less still physical violence and being kicked out of the house – was a rare experience, the *fear* of rejection was real for most converts.

Much more than just disclosing one's identity to the family, what was at stake at the moment of coming out was the revelation of 'truth'. As Weston (1992:51) put it:

'The ambivalence and uncertainty frequently associated with a decision to come out arise because disclosure entails far more than the cultural conviction that a person can liberate or explicate the self through confession [...]. What became clear from talking to hundreds of lesbians and gay men is that they expected coming out to yield insights into relationships. Would kin ties prove genuine? Could familial love endure? What kind of power dynamics might be uncovered in the process?'

Therefore, 'coming out' entails much more than self-revelatory confession in front of the family but rather, it created a discourse about 'truth' with respect to both the self and the person's blood relations so that 'at the end of what many [...] imaged as a long journey to self-discovery, when I tell you "who I (really) am," I found out who you (really) are to me.' (ibid.:44).

Truth Will Out

The term 'coming out' refers to the metaphoric event of 'coming out of the closet' where the person who reveals the news is thought to have lived in isolation inside a closet up to that point. The moment of 'coming out' is a moment of revelation where the convert is finally able to speak the truth, which is contrasted with the act of 'lying' and 'hiding' inside the closet. While hiding is seen as a necessity, it is also a burden on the convert, of which he eventually feels the need to break free. The urge to break out of the closet and into the 'truth' becomes apparent in Ismael's words: 'I just got tired of holding this thing inside me'. Similarly, Gwendolyn contended that she 'hate[s] the secrecy [...] I want to be open about who I am. I want to tell them the truth'. The agony of not talking about her conversion was intensified as she kept making excuses, such as 'I can't drink, I'm on antibiotics'. The longer she held out inside the closet, the harder it got to keep the truth from the family and thereby undermine the 'trust' that was the basis for their 'strong bonds'. At the same time, disclosure held the visceral prospect of losing that 'place of trust' – notably a place

where speech about the religious is rarely heard and felt to be inappropriate (cf. Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017).

However, the act of coming out, while being a necessity, is a double-edged sword. For the convert the moment of coming out is a moment of relief, as he can finally speak the truth and be in line with himself (cf. Fadil, 2009:447-450). But the breaking out of the closet by the convert entails a simultaneous 'closeting' of the family. In other words, the same situation of having to think how one is going to tell others is transferred to the parents and siblings, who now have to think how they will tell other relatives and friends. The stigma is transacted, not overcome. This situation that the family has been put in through the convert's coming out challenges them to battle cultural images of Islam and to go past the existent stereotypes, to create a new image of the family based on the reality that their child is Muslim. In their study of parents of gay and lesbian children, Herdt & Koff (2000) found exactly this dual process of the child's 'coming out' with a simultaneous 'closeting' of the parents: 'While gay children may have exited their "closet" by coming out to their parents, the parents suddenly find themselves newly "closeted" – the parents of a gay child.' (ibid.:23). Cosmo's mother, who strongly identified with the Greek Orthodox church, struggled so immensely with the shame associated with her new 'closeted' situation that she eventually told her Greek family that Cosmo had become Hindu. She felt unable to tell them the truth, which was complicated by personal and national images of Islam. Having a family history of being violently expelled from Turkey, Islam was mainly associated with Turkey and becoming Muslim was seen as 'turning Turk' in a quite literal sense. In such a context it seemed more acceptable that her son should have converted to Hinduism. What this episode highlights is the closeting and the struggle of being truthful that begins for the family where it ends for the convert – at the moment of 'coming out'.

The closet thus becomes a metaphor for an inarticulable paradox inherent in conversion. While the closet is first a necessary hiding place – even a safe place – for the person fearing for the loss of love and family membership, it is also a necessity to come out of it again in order to test the presupposed love and family membership for their authenticity. The revelatory act of coming out ultimately puts to the test whether love is unconditional and whether family relations are permanent. 'Hiding the truth' was seen as an obstacle to closeness, which introduced 'strangeness' into the relationship with family. While disclosure was seen as a prerequisite for closeness in

relationships, it simultaneously endangered this very closeness. As Weston (1991:53) put it, 'no method exists to measure the strength of social ties; indeed, "strength" is a quality inferred largely with hindsight, as relatives affirm or deny kinship in the aftermath of disclosure', which means that there is no way around 'coming out'.

At the core of that moment of revelation lies 'the self' and its relation to 'the other'. One could ask why it is necessary for the convert to reveal his identity to the family at all, considering the fear and potential damage it holds in store. The answer to this question has to do with the core self of a person and its relation to 'the other'. As one of Weston's informants put it: 'As long as it was just inside of me it wasn't real'. This utterance hints to the conclusion that somehow speaking the truth to family means saying it for the self. Or in other words, the 'truth for the self' is inextricably linked to the 'truth for others'. In this vein, Weston has pointed out that coming out is not about 'producing truths about the self through confession in the Foucauldian sense but rather, it aims at establishing that self's identity as a *social* "fact"' (ibid.:66). Whether that identity be gay or Muslim, by being disclosed and therefore verbally articulated, a person's identity is established as a social fact, which means that it has become a legitimate object of discussion and asks for a response. At the heart of this inter-relatedness of 'self' and 'other' lies Hegel's insight that man as a social being can only recognize himself in 'antithesis' to another, which implies that ultimately self-recognition as Muslim depends on another's recognition of oneself *as* Muslim: 'Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it *is* only by being acknowledged or 'recognised'.' (Hegel, 2003[1807]:11). Among the first thinkers to open the discussion of identity construction, Hegel maintains that a fully developed self requires recognition of its status from others as it is not subjectively self-sufficient. Inasmuch, 'coming out' is directly related to 'becoming real' for the convert.

When converts referred to relatives being 'close' or 'distant', these terms incorporated conglomerate 'geographic, socioemotional, and genealogical dimensions' (Weston, 1991:52). Thus, when converts thought about coming out to relatives, both emotions and genealogy influenced that plan as they performed 'a kind of cultural calculus to determine the best course of action.' (ibid.) While disclosure was seen as a prerequisite for intimacy, coming out set a context in which one could create or destroy closeness. In that 'cultural calculus' the person responsible for childrearing was usually the centre of concern, typically parents, but if a grandparent

had raised the child then it was this person. Yet surprisingly, in some instances grandparents were more accepting than parents. Amira, for instance, who had been raised by her grandmother after her parents' death, was primarily concerned about her grandmother's reaction although she also lived together with her aunt and uncle in one house. Precisely because she felt very 'close' to her grandmother as she had been her social parent, Amira was not capable of telling her first. Her course of action led her to come out first to her aunt, who was more 'distant':

'My gran when she was still with us, I thought, "I am going to kill her." She'd had two strokes, a heart attack. I thought, "You are going to finish her off." There was that guilt [...] I can't quite remember how it happened, but I think I did it on the phone. I wasn't that brave. I was a bit scared. Though I lived with my auntie and uncle, because they weren't my parents we didn't have that tight a bond. It's like, "We're not your parents but we brought you up out of the goodness of our hearts, now how are you going to do this?" It's not a nice feeling [...] Then when I went to visit from uni one weekend I really prayed to God and said, "Please make it easy for me, I'm terrified." We sat down and I said, "I've become Muslim." Then my gran said to me— *[breaks out in tears]* She said, "Don't worry, there's only one God." I was worrying about it all that time, and she said, "Don't worry, there's only one God." She said, "We call it different names." All that stress, and I'd been worrying and worrying, and that's what she said to me. She was fine about it. That was it. It was probably as short as that.'

Amira's account is one of the few where a convert started to cry while relating what they experienced. Like the other converts, she experienced intense fear before coming out, and anticipated the worst. The fact that she first phoned her aunt to come out was exceptional, as most converts gathered the courage and decided to tell their families face-to-face. Not having been able to do the same prompted Amira to say 'I was such a coward'. The moment where Amira starts to cry is the place in her narrative at which she relives the gratitude and relief at her grandmother's reaction. After her aunt voiced her dismay at Amira's conversion, the gran tells Amira that all her worrying and all her fears have been mistaken and thereby nullifies them at once. The immense surprise at this reaction helps to illustrate the anticipation of 'the worst' that most

converts experienced. As in Weston's study, the converts I met generally depicted mothers as more understanding than fathers. Weston does not address the question why this might be, but she gestures in one possible direction when she says that disclosure is about finding out whether a relation is marked by unconditional love. Hence, cultural notions which assign 'reason' to men and 'feelings' to women and that credit women with the responsibility for the maintenance of 'family life', may be the reason why mothers were experienced as more accepting in the context of coming out as they offered their unconditional love (cf. Fromm, 1956).

Usually, as Weston (1991:50) points out, revelation of truth vis-à-vis the family is preceded by a period of 'coming to terms' with oneself. For converts, it was the period preceding conversion, which could last from anything between six months to ten years, in which they engaged in an 'internal dialogue' – and sometimes struggle – in order to 'come to terms' and achieve self-acceptance. Jane described the dispute inside herself that went on as she discovered her beliefs to be Islamic rather than Christian. While she increasingly thought that Islam was the truth she also felt a deep loyalty toward Christianity, the betrayal of which stirred in her a feeling of guilt: 'On the spiritual side I did start to feel guilt and there was a six month period leading up to my final conversion where I was just praying every day saying "God, guide me to the right religion. If I'm sinning by asking you for this then please forgive me for sinning". There were logical merits but I still felt like I might be betraying Christianity'. In Jane's account there is an internal conflict inside herself, which she then turns outward by directing her fears towards God in prayer. Many converts described the inner dialogue, which preceded conversion and self-acceptance *as* Muslim, as troubled times when they felt 'wretched'. Amira even described her coming to terms as a 'battle': 'I was too scared. It was a battle inside. What am I going to say? You're going to really hurt them [the family]. This is not the way we do things. You're causing problems in the family. They don't need this. Why do you have to tell them? You're at university, they won't see you.' Usually, the moment of self-acceptance was simultaneously also the moment in which converts started to think of themselves as Muslims. In this moment, 'truth' is admitted, the self is accepted as Muslim and consequently the truthful act of conversion follows while social implications, most notably the fear of rejection by the family, are consciously taken on. Notably, in Jane's account she opens the Qur'an on the first page and it reads 'This is a book of which there is no doubt, a guide for those who are pious'.

Upon reading this statement she feels ‘so confident’ that she cannot ignore it. ‘It felt more true to me than saying, “This is a table”, or “this is a cup” [...] From then on I considered myself a Muslim’. Jane’s narrative makes explicit the connection between admitting ‘the truth’, accepting Islam and thereby also accepting oneself. The inner conflict ends in this moment.

Ismael’s narrative offers a similarly explicit description of the inner struggle that preceded his conversion. His ‘wretchedness’ became apparent in his account as he retold the bodily restlessness immediately before he gathered the courage to accept Islam and himself:

‘It was probably 2 o’clock in the morning [...] I was there tossing and turning. Southampton Airport was quite close by, I could see it from my bedroom, all the planes landing and taking off. It was really stupid in my mind. I thought, “What if I go to sleep and one of these planes crashes into my tower block and I don’t wake up? What will happen?” I thought, “Why am I thinking such a stupid thing?” I just couldn’t get that thought out of my mind. I think it led to, “What if I die tonight and I haven’t become a Muslim? What’s going to happen to me?” I went to my friend’s door, I was just about to knock and I was thinking, “No, I can’t do it. What would my parents think? What would my family think? What would my brothers and sisters think?” I was just about to knock on the door but I went back to my room, cuddled up. I just couldn’t get back to sleep. I think it happened three times. I think the fourth time I knocked on his door... I just couldn’t do it. I knew what was about to come. I knew that if this happened and I took this step then there was just... with my parents and stuff. It would be horrible. I knew what was about to come. In my mind I was convinced that actually I’m probably following what God ultimately wants me to follow. If my parents are displeased I’ll try to deal with it. I’m not doing it to displease them but I know they’ll be displeased. I accepted Islam that morning. I think the first prayer I prayed was *fajr* at 3:30, 4 o’clock in the morning.’

In his narrative, Ismael vividly describes his wretchedness, the tossing and turning, the inconclusive getting up to convert and then lying down again in fear of the family’s reaction. Ultimately, it is the fear of death itself, which is more

overwhelming than the fear of kinship severance that motivates him to convert. Where a belief in the afterlife exists, death represents the ultimate confrontation with truth. Have I lived a truthful life and do I deserve paradise or hell for it? The fear of hell overpowers the fear of a broken family, which after all – however painful it may be – is of this world. Truth, on the other hand, is thought to be of eternal significance. Having lived a truthful life – and this includes following one’s calling to Islam – might ‘secure a home in paradise’ as many converts expressed it. However, unlike Jane, Ismael wanted a witness for his acceptance of Islam. When I asked him why he had gotten up to knock on his roommate’s door, he answered ‘I wanted to say my *shahadah* to him [...] Yes, I wanted a witness to say, “I’m ready now, tell me what to do.” He gave me a big hug, we prayed and all of that. “Welcome.” No looking back.’ Ismael wants his Muslim roommate as ‘witness’ to testify to his conversion but also as a sort of mentor who will instruct him – the new Muslim – like an apprentice on ‘what to do’.

While Ismael was partly looking for instructions when he woke up his friend in the middle of the night, he also wanted a witness who would be the first person to recognise him as Muslim. This illustrates the need for recognition by others discussed earlier. While ‘coming out’ to the family is eventually also indispensable for Ismael, his roommate is also necessary in the moment as a witness. Possibly because Ismael was aware of the severe consequences of conversion, which made it more intangible, he needed a witness to make it real – real for him and real as a social fact. While self-acceptance is essential in the truth-performing process of conversion as it allows the inner self to reconcile itself with itself and to become whole (as opposed to ‘torn apart’ and ‘wretched’), it is not sufficient without the recognition by others. As Weston explains ‘self-acceptance could facilitate unification of the inner self, but without disclosure to others this self would remain trapped in the private, interior space known as the closet.’ (ibid.). It is, therefore, only through coming out that a convert could create a ‘sense of wholeness’ and establish ‘congruence between interior experience and external presentation, moving the inner into the outer, bringing the hidden to light, and transforming a private into a social reality.’ (ibid.)

The Family

Within the anthropology of kinship, alternative constructions of the family have been explored since the 1980s (see Bodenhorn, 2000; Carsten, 2004; Carsten, 2000; Ragoné, 1996; Weston 1996). Moving away from the idea that ‘blood is thicker than water’ (Schneider, 1984:174), these alternative constructions call into question the permanence of family bonds. In anthropological studies, kinship ties have frequently been conceptualised as ‘ties that endured’ (Weston, 1996:87), based on the assumption that kinship ties should not be broken or substantively changed ‘in response to life’s vicissitudes’. Schneider prominently noted the strength of ‘blood’ as a metaphor of connectivity and Fortes posited the ‘axiom of amity’, the principle of ‘prescribed altruism’, to hold as a universal attribute of kinship systems (Fortes, 1969). ‘Relatives were not supposed to keep a strict accounting of services rendered or make loyalties contingent upon a person’s conduct’ (Weston, 1996:88). However, this theorisation has not always held true. Weston’s fieldwork in the Bay Area during the 1980s on gay kinship has shown that the gays she met often defined their family as ‘the ones who are always there for you’ (ibid.). The elevation of ‘chosen families’ to the status of ‘real families’ needs to be seen against the backdrop that a lot of the gays who had ‘come out’ to their biological families were rejected and abandoned by them or saw their relationship deteriorate as they failed to meet the family’s expectations. Ironically, in the case of gay kinship it was often the blood ties, which were meant to be permanent, that did not last. A network of gay friends usually offered most support in various life situations and who showed most perpetuity in their engagement and presence.

Weston’s discussion of ‘real’ (i.e. blood) vs. ‘fictive’ kinship ties contests the narrow definition of kinship and questions the make-up of kinship ideologies in their attempt to separate the ‘genuine’ from the ‘imitative’ through biological relatedness. Through her material on gay kinship relations, Weston challenges the attribution of permanence to blood relations and impermanence to non-biological relationships. Prior to the ‘80s, anthropology had treated ‘friendship’ merely as a liminal category to the study of kinship but now ‘coming out’ stories focused on the prospect of ‘losing the family’. Friendships, by contrast, were seen as the most durable relationships and were at the core of ‘gay families’ (ibid.:88-98). Weston’s informants defined the

notion of ‘family’ primarily through ‘care’ and attachment that had grown over time: ‘whatever endures is real’ (ibid.:100; cf. Bodenhorn, 2000; Borneman, 1997).

Rather than being confined to gay kinship only, Weston’s findings on troubled family relations – in which gays, much like the converts, appear as intimate strangers, being outsiders to their own families – can be extrapolated. Although this may seem far-fetched, her analysis is highly relevant in the case of converts to Islam and their intimate relations. Many converts – even if they were not rejected by their families – connected their ‘coming out’ stories at least with the *fear* of being cut off. The fear of ‘losing family’ made converts hesitant to tell their families and made apparent the transience of kinship ties. Even if they were not abandoned by their families, converts often felt misunderstood and neglected as their intimates failed to engage with the conversion. As a consequence, some of them looked elsewhere for people they could relate to – often other converts. A common faith, shared activities and continuity in partaking in the other’s life could sometimes make these relationships appear as more ‘real’ than the biogenetic paradigm would have it. Noah explained the connection with his ‘Islamic brothers’ in direct comparison with his biological brother:

‘I feel like it’s true where it says that the bond between two Islamic brothers is much more than the bond of blood [...] It’s the *ummah*. You should stand by the *ummah*. I’ve been looking at Mikal [his friend who converted together with him] as my brother. He’s been like a brother for me. The other things are changing. My [biological] brother is on the other side. Even though he understood many of the reasons for why I did it I cannot be with him every day.’

Noah’s potentially idealised depiction of the kind of bond that he saw existing within the *ummah* remotely resembled Fortes’ axiom of amity, originally used to describe blood relations. Weston observes that ‘if anthropology has credited “other” societies with timeless traditions, it has simultaneously ascribed to Western societies a category of belonging called kinship that places social ties outside time’s reach’ (Weston 1996:103).

The coming out episodes of the narratives I gathered probably tell us more about kinship than they tell us about conversion. This again raises the issue of how we should conceptualise the process being described. Kinship appears as another angle

from which to challenge the notion that an individual ‘turning’, an interior cognitive reorientation, is at the core. Family sentiments may be not a reaction to, but rather constitutive of, the process. Ritual affirmation, family sentiments, entry into new kinship networks can be seen as mutually imbricated and mutually constitutive processes, rather than separate events that can be hierarchically ordered according to conceptual importance. We might ask: where do assumptions of the separateness and relative importance of these processes come from? The term ‘conversion’ privileges individual interiority as the locus of pertinent change, which shows the influence of theories of salvation on our conceptualizations of the process. It is in Protestant notions of salvation that the individual’s inner conscience is privileged as the site that matters (for salvation), but anthropological accounts of what is happening highlight other aspects of the ‘conversion’ process. Here, conversion appears not as a cognitive or psychological process but as a social phenomenon. As highlighted in the empirical data in this chapter, the site of significant events and processes is kinship. So it could be argued that what is happening is not only interior, as in models of ‘conversion’, but equally a reconfiguration and reassessment of social networks. Rather than relegating family and conversion to separate realms, they need to be seen as mutually imbricated, and even mutually constitutive processes.

During interviews and many other conversations about conversion and revealing one’s conversion to blood relations fundamental issues of kinship were discussed, such as ‘what is a family’ and ‘how does a family reproduce’? Ideas about the nature of family differed among my informants (and even among members of the same family), although central concepts such as ‘care’ and ‘support’ were shared by most people. I met Maryam and her sisters Judith and Rachel separately for interviews. The three sisters were all close to one another in age and had grown up in a traditional Jewish household. They all emphasised having been close as children and adolescents. When I discussed the meaning of ‘family’ with Rachel, she made clear that for her family meant ‘being able to relate’. Family also meant having common markers of identity and religion was one of those markers even where people are not religious. While Judith described herself as ‘not spiritual’ and explained that she did not believe in God, she still considered herself Jewish, which was important to her. She regarded religion in general as something positive in that it could serve as a ‘shield against I-focus and indulgence’. More importantly, she emphasised, she did not need to believe in God in order to be Jewish. ‘You don’t have to believe in God to

be Jewish. You really don't. You can be Jewish and the whole God thing remains a question mark for you. I'm perfectly happy with that. They'd lose a lot of people wouldn't they, if you had to believe in God.' To Judith, being Jewish had to do with 'Jewish cultural practices', which included music, food, traditions and also keeping Jewish religious festivals:

'They're things that you feel comfortable with and yearn for if they're not there. The whole God thing, it's too difficult to say what it is. I went to a service on Saturday in Finchley, which was a reform service. It was a different prayer book to the liberal. It was totally in Hebrew. It was led by a female cantor and a female rabbi. It was really almost ecstatic. It was like a gospel service with people ecstatic singing. I was in tears. It was really beautiful.'

While Judith does not believe in God, she feels Jewish because she is 'able to relate' to the extent that a service at the Synagogue can move her to tears.

Very much like Judith, Rachel described 'family' as being relatable. Consequently, not being able to relate to her sister after she converted was a source of pain and estrangement as it shook the fundament of 'the family':

'I felt that I couldn't relate to her because I'm not a spiritual person. I just couldn't relate to it. Why would somebody want to devote their life to a spiritual path in such an extreme way? I just couldn't relate to it. That's it, in a nutshell. I felt like I couldn't relate to it. It was mainly the spirituality, to be so religious. That was a bit of a shock to me when I realised that she was so religious because she wasn't that religious during her adolescence as we grew up, then she became more religious, whatever religion it was. I couldn't relate to that, because I became less religious.'

In this short excerpt Rachel uses the expression 'relate' five times, which shows its centrality for her. Not being able to relate meant 'not understanding', not 'knowing what it was about' and ultimately feeling estranged and cut off from her sister. 'We were close as sisters. Then she felt like a stranger [...] she became so immersed in it, it was difficult to engage with her [...] I couldn't relate to her cause I'm not a spiritual person'.

Importantly, while both Judith and Rachel described themselves as ‘not spiritual’, they did feel Jewish and they wanted to impart that sense of Judaism to their children. ‘Passing it on to the next generation’ was, in their eyes, part of ‘one’s task as family’. Consequently, Rachel found born Muslims ‘more acceptable’ than converts because they had ‘been brought up in that way. It’s part of their way of life’, where the ‘way of life’ is synonymous with the family’s way. This idea that it was one’s duty as family to pass on the family tradition – of which religion is a part – to the next generation was shared among many of my informants. Consequently, betraying that duty by ‘turning your back on the family’ instilled feelings of fear and guilt in the convert and could rouse feelings of anger on the part of the family: ‘I was cross really. I think I was cross that she had done something so challenging to the family’ (Rachel). The sense of rejection of the family is therefore again strikingly similar to what Weston concluded when she observed that gays were seen as a ‘threat’ to family because they could not reproduce (Weston, 1991:25). Although conversion did not threaten biological reproduction, converts were seen as a threat to family because they could not reproduce the family tradition which carried common identifiers and was seen as the basis on which people could ‘relate’ to one another. In other words, while gays were seen as a threat to family because they could not reproduce biologically, converts were seen as a threat to family because they could not *reproduce ideologically*. Albeit formulated in slightly different terms, Yang & Abel (2014:151) confirm this point in their survey of the contemporary sociological study of conversion when they state that ‘family members seek to prevent conversion when they fear the new religion will threaten existing family practices and thus the means to family solidarity.’ Families thus need continuity in terms of family practices in order to reproduce *qua* family and where conversion threatens this continuity it also threatens ‘the family’.

This explains why families with more ‘existing family practices’ or ‘traditions’ struggled more with the conversion of a member than families that did not have such a particular identity. Amanda, Christine’s mother, who had no religion and felt culturally English, illustrated this point when she exhorted ‘If you decided not to come around at Christmas that would upset me. I don’t view it as a religious thing, it’s just a family thing.’ Christmas as a non-religious but cultural *family* festival is such a tradition or family practice, on which ‘family solidarity’ hinges, so she insists that her daughter come around for Christmas after having become a Muslim. This matches

Weston's remark that family gatherings help to define family membership (Weston, 1991:31). But families that have more family traditions such as Ismael's Hindu family or Maryam's Jewish family also demand more continuity, which conversion makes impossible. Theoretically, the family's identity does not need to be religious for conversion to be a problem, but in my observation families with a strong religious identity struggled more with a family member converting out of the received tradition than families who did not or were not particularly religious. Usman's mother Bettina, who was formally a member of the Church of England but did not practice and did not feel very strongly about it, articulated this point succinctly when she explained concerning her sons' conversions that 'if Paul [her husband] was a vicar or something it might have been a problem. If we had a nice little church down the road and our three sons⁵ were Muslims we'd think, "What have we done wrong?" As neither of us was, it wasn't that bad. You wasn't really religious, I wasn't. We done what we thought was right, but we weren't always in churches.'

While the issue of family identity and being able to relate through inherited family traditions was important, what my informants primarily associated with 'the family' were notions of 'care' (cf. Borneman, 1997). Different converts described the family as 'a place of care', a 'safe place', a 'place of trust' and a 'support network' with 'unconditional love' as its main characteristic. Implicit in these descriptions of the family is the notion of permanence, which is thought to be ingrained within the blood relations, which are consequently thought to endure. Yet, the fear of 'losing that support system', the fear of being rejected and 'cut out' calls precisely this permanence into question. While few converts were completely shunned by their families, the fear and potential threat made clear that possibly these blood bonds were *not* permanent as they *could* be severed. While Maryam's sisters emphasised being able to 'relate' as the basis for the family, Maryam herself insisted that what made a family was not shared interests or being able to relate, but 'care'. Though she admitted that she 'was never intimate with [her] family' and that they 'had a culture of not sharing' she also said that they were 'very caring' in the sense of supporting her, calling her up, giving her money and 'being there' for her. Her family, she was adamant, always remained her family. To Maryam, the family was 'a place where you are accepted for *who you are*; not your ideas but who you are' and that family

⁵ Following Usman's conversion his two younger brothers also converted to Islam.

members were ‘people who love you’. In these descriptions we find a tension between such a definition of family and an understanding of conversion as defining one’s identity. It seemed that individuals deal with this tension by developing different and inconsistent ideas of identity which are foregrounded in different domains: conversion as defining one’s identity in some social settings and identity as something given pre-conversion, perhaps through blood-related kinship and care, in a family setting.

Maryam expressed the innate nature of filial love when she explained ‘you love the person because she’s your daughter so that love was put in your heart’. Here, the ‘unconditional love’ between blood relatives and particularly between parents and their children is portrayed as innate and immutable. Paradoxically, most converts thought of family relations as innate, immutable and permanent, yet feared the severance of these relations upon coming out. The process and its anxieties highlight inconsistent understandings of kinship and identity. Gwendolyn, too, thought of her family as ‘people that love you unconditionally’ and that ‘you can always come back to’: ‘You can go to Africa, come back, you can do x, y, z and always come back. They are always gonna be there, that bed is always gonna be there for you, that cup of tea is always gonna be there.’ Her reference to the enduring, even eternal, in her pronounced use of the word ‘always’ explicitly stresses the permanence of kinship ties, which finds its idealized spatial imagery in a social landscape where ‘the world around you can change but the family is a constant; always stays that safe place, which defies all change around you’. This imagery presents itself as the perfect oxymoron as Gwendolyn ‘dreaded that conversation’ that held the visceral prospect of losing her family’s unconditional love as her fears unmasked filial love as *not*-unconditional and kinship bonds as *impermanent*. Consequently, ‘family’ – through the process of coming out – is not *revealed* but, more accurately, it is *created*. Revelation is not ‘disclosure of what is’ but creation. As humans ‘*do* culture’, they ‘*do* family’ and constantly create it anew in different situations. The coming out of converts to their families tests the hitherto imagined ideals of the family.

While Ismael’s experience of being ‘cut out of the family tree’ meant a severance of ties and exemplified kinship impermanence for him, he struggled to accept the situation as he – like my other informants – thought that the relations *should* endure. Ismael explained his efforts and failure to regain familial love and membership:

‘All the holidays were working and chilling with my friends in London. I’d go to talks, I’d go to study circles and all that stuff. I look back and it was an amazing time. I think *once I’d finally come out and told my parents*. I used to write weekly letters to them to explain. “I’m really sorry for what I’ve done. I didn’t mean to hurt you. If there’s anything I can do to make up. I owned up to how long I’d been Muslim, and hopefully you didn’t notice any difference in me. I’m still the old person.” I used to write little passages of the Qur’an or the hadith to give them to solace, to say, “I haven’t become a madman or a crazy person. I’m still trying to rationalise my decisions.” I think none of that worked at all. I tried to send them gifts and flowers. Sometimes the letters used to come back to me. Gifts used to come back, flowers. I’d get a phone call from the flower company saying, “Sorry, this person hasn’t accepted delivery.” I tried that for years and years.’

Again, viewing conversion and kinship as mutually imbricated processes highlights the way that individuals hold and continually negotiate between a variety of inconsistent understandings of identity – as formed by faith commitments and therefore undergoing significant change at conversion or as formed through family history and therefore unchanged by faith commitments. ‘I’m still the same person’. Viewing conversion as primarily interior cognitive reorientation misses this complexity, and remains one-dimensional in allowing us to think of conversion as redefining identity and as constituting a kind of rupture. Ismael tries to make amends with his family because he does not accept the impermanence of his kinship relations in the face of their severance. Therefore, while his experience showed him otherwise, Ismael – like many gays in Westons’ study and like most other converts – still had faith in that ‘indelible biogenetic grid’ that is traceable out there and which relies on the conception of biological family based upon ‘culturally generalised notions of blood and love as the symbolic grounds of kinship’ (Weston, 1992:74).

Further, in Ismael’s account the use of time *as witness* is characteristic of converts’ ideas about truth as self-evident. ‘Time’ is used in multiple ways in the narratives I gathered. While on the temporal dimension of eternity, kinship bonds were seen as permanent, the threat of severance was immanent, which could convert eternity into the shortest time. While Gwendolyn was trying to ‘buy time’ by making excuses for why she was not drinking or coming to church, some converts saw ‘time

as a healer', which often manifested in the form of grandchildren as they allowed converts to reconnect with their families and bring them closer. Among the uses of time, however, the narration of time as witness along the lines of 'I've been Muslim for so long and they haven't noticed a difference so they can't reject me' fascinated me most as it recurred in many accounts. Ismael was using time ('I owned up to how long I'd been Muslim') to try and simultaneously manifest continuity ('and hopefully you didn't notice any difference in me'), and thus claim his place in the family ('I'm still the old person', which also means 'I'm still your son'). This use of time as witness is complemented by the idea that 'time is a healer' and that family relations will gradually normalise after the conversion until 'permanence' is – paradoxically – reinstated. Contrary to this widespread assumption which did hold true in some cases, two fathers reported having become more opposed to their daughters' conversions over a course of thirty years, while Ismael's kinship relations failed to normalise and Rachel maintained that the pain, which her sister's conversion caused, remained – thirty-three years after the fact: 'Sometimes something comes up and we'll talk a bit. It comes up naturally, but it's not a long, deep conversation about what or why. I think it's quite painful for everybody still. My older sister [Judith] as well, if she was saying all this I'm sure she'd be in floods of tears.' This shows that there is no such automated mechanism in which time works as a healer. Likewise, and contrary to the converts' imagination, time does not serve as a guarantor in showing the family that 'nothing has changed'. By having passed time as Muslim without the family's knowing, converts hope to show them that they have not even noticed and thus should not be upset. But since 'the family' is not about the individual members' staying the same but because it is – among other things – also about ideological reproduction, the supposed working mechanism of time does not work.

The Trajectory of Ignorance

Jane was an eloquent and thoughtful thirty-one-year-old woman of mixed ethnic background. Her mother was a white English woman and a devout member of the Church of England. Her father was Indian and had himself converted from Hinduism to Christianity. As chapter three will show, Jane described her conversion very much in terms of continuity both in matters of belief and ethnicity. With regards to her close social environment, however, she narrated rupture. Not only did conversion change

her social environment as many friends were replaced with Muslim friends but Jane was aware of how abrupt her conversion must have appeared to anyone that she was close to:

‘My friends were shocked because I’d been so anti-Muslim for so long. All this time I’d been debating this I hadn’t let on that I’d been thinking about it at all. Leyla, who’s a very close friend of mine, said, “No you’re not.” She literally said that for about three or four months. She thought it was a joke, like, “Why are you saying that? You’re not.” Not in a nasty way, I just don’t think she could wrap her head around this person who’d been so anti-Muslim all this time.’

Here, Jane’s previous anti-Muslim attitude makes it all the more ‘shocking’ for her close friends that she would have become ‘one of them’. The gradual transition, which let Jane shift from being staunchly Christian and even anti-Islam all the way to becoming Muslim herself, was invisible to her friends and family because she ‘hadn’t let on’ that she was considering Islam, that she was studying it and that her position had been gradually shifting.

In a similar fashion to her friends, Jane’s mother was thrown off her guard when she learned about the conversion. ‘My mother didn’t know what to do at that time. She was shocked, she thought it was a phase because I was a teenager and I would grow out of it. Over the following two years her shock turned into worry and disappointment. It took her two years to realise that I wasn’t going to go back to Christianity.’ Jane used to be much more religious than her two siblings. Her ambition was to study Christian theology and become a female vicar – a right that she had campaigned for together with her mother. From the viewpoint of her mother and other intimates Jane’s conversion must have seemed like a ‘Road to Damascus’ experience, where Jane went from being devoutly Christian and even anti-Muslim to becoming Muslim in no time. ‘I think it was my upbringing and because I had such a close affiliation with Christianity it was a strong part of my culture. It was a strong part of my future and it was a high expectation of me. I was going to church every week, I was very involved in church, I was helping out at the youth club, I was teaching children, I was applying to study theology so I could become a vicar.’ While Jane was very close to her mother and while they were the two most religious members of the

family who would go to church together, Jane never told her mother about her questions of faith, her doubts and her conversations with Muslims. Like many other converts she struggled particularly with the concept of the trinity and with Jesus' status as the Son of God. Jane's sister considered herself agnostic and her brother saw himself as a Christian in a 'cultural way'. She was the one who knew the Bible inside out and who took her religion very seriously. Jane understands that out of the three she must have been 'the most shocking'. 'If it had been my brother or my sister I think my mum would have been less shocked. She probably would have thought, "Well at least they found a religion."' Consequently, Jane's conversion came out of nowhere in the eyes of her mother:

'She didn't know the questions that I had, I never asked them to her. All she saw was this person that wants to become a vicar and is very religious and is always at church. She was very excited about the fact that I was going to be a female vicar. She would have loved that and it's something we both fought for together as well. We both campaigned for women to be allowed to become vicars. For then for me to turn around and go, 'Mum I'm going to convert to this strange Eastern religion that treats women really badly.'

In Yang & Abel's (2014) comprehensive article about the sociology of religious conversion the authors treat religion as consisting of 'worship' and 'fellowship' where the first relates to matters of belief and practice and the second encompasses the social aspects of religion. 'In other words, conversion is not just what you believe but what you do, who you do it with, and how you feel about doing it' (ibid.:150). In Yang & Abel's view conversion always entails rupture with respect to group affiliation or identity, which can be classed under the rubric of 'fellowship'. However, their generic model, which looks at conversion in a roughly divided process entailing 'worship' and 'fellowship', misses an important dimension. While the authors very briefly mention 'family' as a variable in conversion, which can greatly impact the convert and his social ties, the category of 'fellowship', with which they mainly deal, relates to the religious group that a convert moves into and affiliates after conversion. In this case then, 'fellowship' relates to the Muslim community. The renegotiation of kinship ties, which I illustrate in this chapter, is not captured by the second prong of Yang and Abel's model of conversion, namely the insertion of a

person into new arenas of (religious) fellowship. Rather, conversion entails a person renegotiating their position within the (not necessarily religious) domain of family. While this may always be the case, conversion to Islam in a British context highlights the centrality of these kinship dynamics and negotiations to conversion, because of the way that Islam has been positioned in the public sphere, especially recently. This observation reiterates my previous argument that conversion should be understood in these cases not per the established models as inner cognitive reorientation but rather as a renegotiation of social and kinship networks.

The narrative of close friends and family is predominantly one of rupture. Most family members recount feeling ‘shocked’ at learning of the conversion. Christine’s mother resented the perceived lack of trust, which had kept her daughter from discussing conversion with her: ‘It was the fact she hadn't said anything. They've [*their three daughters*] always told us everything, and she didn't tell us this [...] it made us think how long has she been planning that? Perhaps she didn't feel that she could tell us. It was just a shock.’ Christine’s father Darrel confirmed the impression that ‘it was just out of the blue’, and that they ‘never got an inkling until the hints came about the pork and not eating things, that she had converted to Islam’. In a separate interview Christine confided that she had kept her conversion to herself in order to be sure of the decision she took. She feared that her family would influence her decision and deliberately kept them out of it:

‘My family didn’t really know that I was studying Islam. I just thought that because my family had never been really religious if I told them about it they might try and argue against it and it might sway my decision. I really did feel that I wanted to know the truth [...] I don’t know if they thought I was really serious [...] they were a bit shocked and surprised. I think they were taken aback because they’d never expected me to be a religious person. Especially because I hadn’t told them about it, it felt like it was coming out of nowhere.’

This is a common phenomenon; in the process of thinking about conversion, converts rarely talk about it with their close relations out of a fear that this could divert them from their path. These processes of getting acquainted with and learning about Islam can sometimes take many months, or even years, which is why it feels gradual and continuous to the converts. Because intimates usually don’t know about this gradual

transformation and only learn about conversion *after the fact*, it seemingly comes ‘out of nowhere’ as a real shock.

Besides the realisation regarding the convert’s new belief system, the trajectory of ignorance also entails a confrontation with radical outer changes. Conversion often comes with a change in name, eating habits and dress code that intimates have a hard time understanding. As Darrel put it: ‘It’s because you wouldn’t have thought it was something for Christine. She’d have killed for a bacon sandwich at one time, and I could never have imagined her giving up pork’. For parents who have known their child and her preferences all her life such changes become blatantly visible:

‘Christine’s gone from years of wearing mini-skirts to now not showing any skin at all. She’s gone from years of trying to keep a nice figure and now we see nothing of it [...] It affected the girls as well [Darrell and Amanda’s other daughters]. They couldn’t understand it either. They look for a reason for everything, and they couldn’t understand. Things like the fact that you used to love clothes and you and Clair... Then overnight it’s not an interest to you anymore.’

Apart from these radical changes in outer appearance and taste, which seem to go against the convert’s own likes and inclinations, families also feel mystified in cases where conversion and marriage come together – both seemingly out of nowhere. In some cases where converts got introduced to Islam through a partner, they decided to get married (at least in Islamic terms / *nikah*) at the same time as they took their *shahada*, sometimes at a very young age. Christine was eighteen when she told her parents that she would convert to Islam and get married only the day before she did both. Her father said ‘she had been with Wardan for only three months anyway, but we had never realised it was that serious’. Her mother resented the fact that they did not even have the chance to attend the wedding ceremony because Christine only called them up the night before. ‘You know if you’d converted and then gone back the next week and had the marriage, we would have gone to it. It’s just that, it was all happening at once and she hadn’t even told us. It’s like, she turned round telling us that she’s going to become a Muslim and that she is getting married tomorrow.’

Despite Christine's assertion that she did not want to exclude her parents on purpose, 'it did feel like that' for her mother.

Conclusion

What has been presented in this chapter is the nerve-racking process of converts 'coming out' to their families. I have illustrated the anxiety-filled nature of this process as the convert anticipated 'the worst' as a consequence of their conversion. The discussion has raised related issues of truth and time, of self and other, of family and relatedness. As kinship bonds symbolised by blood proved terminable because they were selectively perpetuated rather than 'naturally' given, the overwhelming majority of my informants remained attached to the idea that family should endure, and made all possible attempts at amends where relationships had suffered.

The biggest practical conundrum I faced during my fieldwork phase was gaining access to converts' families. In stark contrast to the dazzling ease with which I was able to recruit converts for my research, and even to be let into closed circles, it was incredibly hard to get in touch with the families. It was hard not because the families refused to talk to me – in most cases it never got to that point, so I will never know – but because the converts refused to make that contact. The majority of people I met did not want me to interview their families. While one might assume this to be the case where people were no longer in touch with their families, other converts who were in touch with their relatives also refused. This indicated to me that 'family' was a very sensitive issue for converts. After hearing the 'coming out' narratives of the converts as well as some family narratives, I understand that this is terrain on which a lot of harm can potentially be done as the conversion continues to sit uneasily with many families even after years. In light of what I have dealt with in this chapter, I interpret the converts' refusal to put me in touch with their families as a vulnerability that they were aware of and as the fear that more damage might be done by stirring up the topic of conversion when it should rest. Most families had apparently found a *modus vivendi* with respect to the conversion but it was hardly ever talked about. Bringing speech about conversion into the private sphere of the family was not only considered 'bad form' but could potentially be harmful to family relationships. However, this may also illustrate – as indicated previously – that my interlocutors maintain, and negotiate between, contradictory understandings of selfhood and

conversion: conversion as definitive of a new selfhood in some settings (among Muslim friends and when speaking to me), but also as ‘not changing who I am’ when speaking to their family. By introducing me to their family as someone interested in their conversion, i.e. their religious identity framed as a significant life change, might risk bringing the two incompatible understandings into a painful confrontation. Looking at the use of Muslim names and the maintenance of previous family-given (‘Christian’) names is another indicator as to how my interlocutors sought to create, inhabit and manage the relationship between different bounded domains of identity and sociality. While approximately half of the converts I interviewed chose Islamic names at conversion, they all maintained their given names when with the family.

Chapter Two – The Image of Islam and Family Biographies

'I think I was well prepared for being othered by being mixed race. It's just that in Islam you're othered in a hugely negative way that I didn't experience before. Before I was just a slightly different Other, now I'm a potentially dangerous Muslim Other.'

– Jane, London, convert from Christianity –

Connecting to the previous chapter, Herdt and Koff (2000) maintain that parents' reactions to their children's 'coming out' take form against the backdrop of a generally prevalent image of what it means to be gay or lesbian, especially in the absence of personal contact with gays or lesbians. Without a certain negative societal idea about homosexuals, reactions to the disclosure would be very different. As Herdt and Koff put it: 'If one lacks personal contact with gays and lesbians, the more negative stereotypes that are rampant in society often constitute one's sole notion of gays and lesbians. Those stereotypes can trigger the same fear and anxiety in parents as they do in society at large. Parents' reactions to their gay or lesbian children may be unduly shaped by the stereotypes that are part and parcel of our culture.' (ibid:35). In order to understand where the attitude-forming images of Islam and Muslims in my research came from, this chapter aims to explore the image of Islam in British society and in the families I met. I will start by outlining the history of Islam's portrayal in Britain from the eighteenth century onwards, with a particular focus on the image of 'the convert'. However, as my data suggests, the conflict is not geographically straightforward in the sense of being a clear East-West struggle, as suggested by classical Orientalist theory. Rather, I found that the image of Islam is formed and specifically modelled according to particular cultural and familial contexts. Here, national conflicts and collective memories of expulsion and violence play into the specific image of Islam created in the various cases I encountered. This insight is vital for a differentiated and nuanced understanding of the workings of Orientalist and Islamophobic prejudice in contemporary Britain. Hence, I will complement my brief

history of the image of Islam in Britain by a presentation of Islam in different contexts, where nationalist language, ideology and collective memory will feature in the context of particular family biographies. Perceptions of Islam in Britain are thus shaped by a variety of national imaginaries, perspectives and histories and not simply by a Saidian colonizing Europe vs. colonised Orient dichotomy. Rather than just a colonial history, it is the emergence of nationalisms that gives content and force to these framings of Islam.

Family Biographies and National Conflict

In several of the cases I encountered, political conflicts became involved in shaping the image of Islam. In these cases, particular collective memories of defeat, expulsion or injury through ‘Islam’ shaped family biographies and meant that the view of Islam as ‘other’ was distorted in a certain way. Jane, whom I introduced in the previous chapter, had talked about her initial prejudice against Islam. Her paternal grandparents were Indian Hindus and had lived through the partition and the war with Pakistan:

‘They’re from Lahore which is now Pakistan, but they’re Hindu and were made to leave. Some members of my family were killed in that war. You can imagine. My grandfather’s brother — it’s one of the stories we heard growing up. His brother was shot in the head in front of him in Lahore. Then they all fled when that happened [...] What happened with partition was that all the Hindus that lived in what’s now Pakistan had to leave. In Lahore, they all had to leave. My grandfather’s family, my great-grandfather and my great-grandmother were very stubborn because they were an established family, they were a wealthy family. They had a very nice home and a very nice set up. They absolutely refused. Also members of my family did things like, they built the new Lahore, my great-grandfather was an engineer. His brother was a high court judge. These were very establishment families. They said, “There’s no way we’re leaving”. The violence escalated and escalated and escalated to the point that they were chased through the town. My grandfather at that time being sixteen or seventeen, and his brother. They were shot at. He ducked down and the bullet went over his head and it killed his brother right in front

of him. He dodged the bullet and because he ducked and didn't die his brother did. You can imagine the impact that had. Those were Muslims, a Muslim mob shooting at them. This is the impression they have of Muslims, those memories of Lahore after partition. You can imagine we were brought up with some quite negative stories about Muslims. So much so that I kept it [the conversion] from my grandparents for about five years.'

With this family memory imparted on Jane as she was growing up, it comes as no surprise that her views on Islam were 'purely prejudicial' in 'a very politicized way'. From her Indian family she understood that Islam was a violent, merciless and dangerous religion – a threat. What is more, Jane also regarded Islam as an 'Oriental religion'. This perception seems to have been an amalgamation of the 'Indian' and the 'English' views imparted on her:

'I guess because the context within which I'd learnt about it had been that. These horrible people in India, the place where my grandfather came to England from. I always imagined it was an Eastern religion. I knew it was Middle-Eastern as well but I learnt about it in the Indian context, I guess, in a very politicised way. I'd never learnt anything about the theology. It was quite funny because my best friend until I was twelve was Muslim. He was the only Muslim in the town, Mehdi, but I never learnt anything about his religion. His parents were quite — they used to come to the church and spend time there [...] I think the associations I had before, which were that it's this Oriental religion which goes against everything we believe as monotheistic Christians. That's the great irony. Islam was seen as something which was not monotheistic. It's quite funny how the structure of Islam came to be perceived.'

Here Jane talked about her friendship with Mehdi as a child. Although he was her best friend she never even conceived of him as a Muslim. Although theoretically he and his family would have offered Jane the opportunity to view Islam through a different prism than the one imparted on her, the attachment to the memory of family trauma described above seems so strong that his Islam was invisible to her.

Jane described how – as a consequence of her conversion to Islam – she became stigmatized within her own family. For the Indian side of her family, she had not merely changed her religion. Rather, her change of religion did not matter in and of itself. Her own father had converted from Hinduism to Anglican Christianity, which was not seen as a problem. Instead, her conversion to Islam was very much seen as an act of treason and a conversion to ‘being Pakistani’. In the context of the family biography and the attached collective memory, her conversion appeared as a national betrayal:

‘My brother went crazy because of the whole India-Muslim thing. If you speak to an Indian Punjabi, the region where my family came from, for them a Muslim is someone from Pakistan. Me becoming Muslim for them was akin to me becoming Pakistani. I’m choosing Pakistan over India. I’ve made a much bigger symbolic decision than just one of pure faith [...] From my brother, to all my uncles, aunts and my grandparents when I finally told them. This stays in my mind because it [9/11] was a year after I became Muslim, a bit more, maybe two years. When it happened, I remember seeing it, I was living in Belgium at that time and I was travelling back for the weekend to see my family. I got back and the first thing he [Jane’s older brother] said to me when he opened the door was, “Have you seen the news?” I said that I’d seen it. He was really angry, noticeably agitated. He took me by the arm, led me into the lounge, pointed at the TV and said, “Your people did this.” He then went on to call me Pakistani. These are the constructs. It’s interesting now when I look back at it with more logical eyes. The reactions from the Indian family and the reaction from the English family and the cultural paradigms that were influencing their opinions.’

The ‘constructs’ Jane describes and their working mechanism are born out of a particular family situation where her paternal Indian side of the family associates ‘Islam’ with Pakistan and the connected memory of expulsion, war and violence – a memory of Muslim superiority and domination. By converting to Islam, she has become Pakistani. However, there is, simultaneously, the ‘British trope’, according to which Islam is an ‘Eastern’ or ‘Oriental’ religion, possibly with many gods and definitely contrary to everything that Christians believe in (cf. Said, 1997:16). The

event of 9/11, for which Jane was blamed and asked to offer an explanation, bizarrely fitted into both tropes, as both the English and the Indian side of her family associated Islam with violence and felt that the terrorist attack fitted into that schema.

Jane went on to elaborate the two ‘paradigms’ that shaped her pre-conversion image of Islam:

‘On the English side it was a fear of this Oriental unknown. It was a very Orientalist construction where I was walking into something which treats women as objects and in which women have no voice [...] It was mistreatment of women, women are objectified, women don’t have a voice. It was also, “it’s not English. It’s not what English people do.” It’s not Christian, you’ve been taught the best way and now you’re going to this foreign, ill-informed religion. Christianity is the established religion and it’s fully correct. It has no flaws in it. You’re opting for this lesser religion from a less civilised society. You’re opting to then be a woman with no agency [...] My English family’s view was an English cultural-cum-theological view I guess. They believed that a) Christianity had more merits than Islam but b) Christianity is the religion of England and Islam is the religion of a less civilised East [...] On my father’s side it was much more that I’d made a political choice. This is the thing about becoming Pakistani because Islam was the religion that established Pakistan and that’s what they experienced in partition. I made the decision instead of saying with my family, “Like you I’m culturally Hindu,” which they did consider me before I became Muslim. I’ve gone, “Well actually, no, I’m culturally Muslim. I’m Pakistani.” That’s how they interpreted it. I stopped watching cricket with them. Cricket is a very big thing in my family. When India and Pakistan play that’s a big event. I’ve stopped going, because every time I go and watch cricket with them the elder people in the family will say, “Oh you’re supporting Pakistan.” If Pakistan are losing they’ll say, “Jane, your team are losing.” They just can’t dissociate the religion from the nation.’

Jane characterised her English family’s perception of Islam as ‘cultural-cum-theological’ with no knowledge basis about Islam apart from the Orientalist stereotypes described above. The cornerstones of this view are that Islam is ‘not English’ and that it is inferior both culturally and religiously. On the Indian side, Jane

explained, her family members were actually quite familiar with Islam, its teachings and its content. However, the political impact of the partition and the ensuing collective memory made it impossible for them to see Islam as a religion. When Islam was a 'racialised category' for the English family, it was a politicized category for the Indian side of the family: 'For my Indian family for all they knew about Islam, they never shared any of the theological merits with me because obviously they saw no need. Muslims and Hindus were all co-educated before partition so they knew a lot about each other's religion. They prayed together. Their view was a political view'. Therefore, although the family had 'known Muslims' in Pakistan pre-partition (and knew Muslims in contemporary UK), these experiences were sidelined and the conversion instead became a shorthand for 'turning to misogyny', 'violence', and 'treason'. This preference, in attachment to the collective family memory of partition violence, will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

Besides the accusation of violence, the bad treatment of women was another Orientalist stereotype which was particularly pertinent among Jane's English family.

'That narrative on Muslims goes back a long long way. Edward Said I think writes about it in *Orientalism*. The view of the woman as subjugated and objectified. That narrative was strong even before 9/11 but that was one of the main narratives about Muslims, their mistreatment of women. My nan, my mother's mother, sent me a long, five-page letter begging me to come back to Christianity because of the danger of the religion. As a woman I would be mistreated. That was within her narrative as well.'

While the family reactions Jane experienced were shaped by the particular biographies of her family on both the English and the Indian side, these perceptions of Islam were also situated in a British cultural context. Jane even refers to *Orientalism* in order to characterise her family's narrative and the larger social narratives concerning Islam. The narrative of her English family resonates with Flaubert's description of Kuchuk Hanem as presented by Said⁶ (1978:6) – a subjugated, muted

⁶ Flaubert's encounter with Kuchuk Hanem, an Egyptian courtesan, became hugely influential in the Western perception of 'the Oriental woman'. In Flaubert's description of her, Kuchuk has no voice: she is represented by a foreign, wealthy man who describes to his readers in what ways she is 'typically Oriental'. Rather than an exception, Said takes this encounter and the ensuing description as prototypical for the West's treatment of the East.

woman – and the concomitant fear that Jane, as Muslim, would turn into that kind of woman. Strangely, this fear of Jane’s objectification as a Muslim woman went along with her stigmatisation as a ‘terrorist’ as presented above. However, 9/11 did not only call for her stigmatization as quasi-terrorist by the family but Jane also noticed hostility in society at large, which seemed heightened after the attack. Jane’s visibility as Muslim through the *hijab* made her susceptible to Islamophobic incidents:

‘I’d certainly say that when I wore it [the *hijab*] I was subject to Islamophobic abuse, I had things thrown at me, I’ve been spat on, I’ve been kicked [...] I’ve had quite a fair few of verbal and physical attacks on me whilst wearing the headscarf [...] It was crazy, it was pretty nasty. Literally, I had people move away from me on trains. I used to do ju-jitsu so I would carry around a backpack with me after ju-jitsu. I had a headscarf and a backpack and if anyone saw what was in the backpack it was ju-jitsu stuff. They probably would have been even more scared. If I would sit down people would shift up the carriage and stuff. There were some quite negative reactions to me as a woman in a headscarf’.

When Jane tried to rationalize the Islamophobic attacks that she suffered while wearing the headscarf, she turned to history in search for an explanation. To her mind, contemporary attitudes towards Islam in British society are the heritage of an image that has been shaped in a particular fashion throughout centuries of encounter, defeat and conquest and that has been passed down the generations through collective memory:

‘I think that the history between Europe and the Muslim Orient has been a troubled one. From the time of the crusades onwards and the power struggles. The Ottomans had a lot of power. The Europeans were trying to have more power. They were very scared of what Ottomans and Muslims would do whether they would invade us, whether they would take over our countries as they did with countries in what we now call Eastern Europe [...] But even post-crusades the narrative on Muslims and Ottomans was, “How far in Europe are they going to come? Are they going to come and stay? They are now in the Eastern European countries, are we in danger?” Politically, the

only thing that brought European countries together at that time, because they were all fighting against each other too, was this need to resist a Muslim aggressor, whether that be the Ottomans or that be the Abbasids, whichever direction they were coming in. That created a lot of very strongly held anti-Orient, anti-Muslim narratives, which I think have carried on until today. Muslims have been the foreign aggressor for centuries. That's imbued in our myths, in our stories, all the things that come into the modern day. Now we're part of the social fabric, and British people, like myself, are becoming Muslim. I can see how that's confusing. A modern cultural understanding of Islam and Muslims has been as a foreign other who, to some extent, are uncivilised and barbaric. That's still how we're informed about Muslims now.'

'Islam' as a European Imaginary Construct

In order to better understand the 'constructs' described by Jane, I briefly introduce Edward Said's and Nabil Matar's discussions of 'constructions of the Orient', as they to some extent mirror my findings. Whereas Said's arguments concern the connection between Orientalist discourse and relations of domination, where Islam appears as incapable, inferior and in need of being ruled over, Matar illustrates Muslim domination, which was perceived as a threat in 16th- and 17th-century Britain. In their outcomes the two reveal remarkably similar Islam-disparaging messages, where Islam appears as inherently 'other' and essentially 'bad', but these stem from radically different – even contrary – sources or structures, namely from Western colonialism and the sense of civilizational superiority which it both required and reproduced (Said), and from a position of inferiority in a situation of Ottoman and European rivalry, where the Ottoman institutionalised cultural and political power appeared as superior (Matar). Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains the most influential discussion of Europe's endeavour of 'constructing' or 'imagining' the 'Orient', based on the juxtaposition of two simplified, monolithic 'blocs': a modern, secular and civilised 'West' against a backward, violent and despotic 'East' in need of being ruled over⁷.

⁷ The working mechanism of *Orientalist* discourse is defined through its structure, which resides in the tendency to divide the human continuum into the two simplified blocks of we/they or West/East, whereby the latter is also regularly used as a shorthand for 'Islam'. This dichotomous division lays the

This aspect of ‘domination’ is key in Said’s argument so that not any discourse that posits ‘East’ and ‘West’ as two monolithic and mutually excluding entities is Orientalist. It is the will to *dominate* ‘the East’ that makes an endeavour Orientalist, and as such Orientalism is inextricably linked to Colonialism, which produced it in the first place. Islam, as ‘the Orient’s’ main religion came to be seen as an integral part of ‘the Orient’ in Orientalist discourse.

On Jane’s Indian side of the family the view of Islam is not based on domination and superiority. On the contrary, Islam is seen as a violent threat, and ultimately as the force behind the family’s expulsion from their native homeland. In an inversion to the Orientalist structure, they – the non-Muslim Indians – are the underdog in this narrative. In order to better understand an image of Islam based on fear, I find it useful to juxtapose Said to Matar’s account of *Islam in Britain* (1998), which explores the image of Islam in early modern Britain between 1558 and 1685, prior to the Orient’s construction as inferior. It was a time when Islam and the Orient were a competitor and a challenge to Christianity (Said, 1997:5). Contrary to the period under analysis in Said’s work, Britons then suffered defeat at the hands of Muslims and were dominated by the Ottomans, a superior civilisation.

The term ‘renegade’⁸ was first used in 1583 in English to mean a convert from Christianity to Islam and became synonymous with apostasy from Christianity. Although the term had a negative meaning in English writings, the reasons for conversion were various. At times Christian children were forcibly taken from their parents and raised as Muslims as part of an Ottoman tax levy on Christians living under their domain, and were turned into Janissaries. Christian slaves often converted in an attempt to end their slavery, which did not always work and resulted in startling accounts of former captives having resisted apostasy even under torture that then served to inform compatriots about the ‘fearsome world of Islam and to generate anti-Muslim sentiment’ (Matar, 1998:27). However, many people also converted because of the cultural environment of living in the Ottoman Empire or out of religious

ground for a number of oppositions, wherein ‘we’ appear as ‘civilized’ versus they as ‘backward’; we as ‘modern’ versus they as ‘traditional’; we as ‘democratic’ versus they as ‘despotic’. In this way, ‘the West’ constructs ‘the East’ as essentially different, homogenous and inferior, and therefore in need of Western intervention. Inherent in the structure of Orientalism are the power relations that shape and reproduce it and which are premised on Western supremacy over the East.

⁸ Entirely to the contrary of Bernhard Lewis’ assertion, the numbers of converts must have been immense: there were 200,000 in Algiers in 1619, and these were not just refugees or religious experimenters. Many ‘renegades’ felt genuinely attracted to Islam, a fact to which the ‘Renegado’s Gate’ in Algiers testifies (Matar, 1998:16).

conviction. The renegade of 16th- and 17th-century Britain as a precursor to our contemporary convert is an interesting figure, because it is by the descriptions and references to him that the power of the Turks was brought home to England (ibid.:50).

While Islam as a religion was perceived with awe and fear as belonging to an overpowering and dominant civilization, the renegade within British society occupied a role akin to that of a traitor: somebody who by virtue of his moral debasement had abandoned Christianity and chosen to follow ‘a demonic religion of apostasy, blasphemy, and obscurity’ (Said, 1997:5). It comes therefore as no surprise that the convert to Islam came to be seen as an ‘enemy within’. What was particularly objectionable about the renegade was the fact that ‘he was no swarthy Moor or contorted Papist or necromancer but a common English or Irish or Welch man who wilfully renounced God and monarch and “turned Turke”’ (Matar, 1998:52). The renegade was seen as a threat that English society had to confront because he foreshadowed the numerical and geographical supremacy of Islam. Matar explains that ‘in English seventeenth-century thought, the renegade [...] threatened not just the faith but the idea of England. He was renouncing all that defined England to Englishmen, and he was doing so by adopting the religiously different culture of Islam.’ (ibid.:71). Therefore, the renegade was ‘othered’ as an enemy within because, by adopting the racialised category of Islam (cf. Özyürek, 2015) as a religion, he rejected ‘Englishness’. While Christianity is no longer the focal point, it is in a very similar fashion that, in contemporary Britain, the converts I met felt ‘othered in a hugely negative way’ (Jane) and vilified as an ‘enemy within’.

Drawing directly on the relevance of this medieval perception of the Islamic threat for contemporary perception, Said (1997:5) observes:

‘closer to Europe than any of the other non-Christian religions, the Islamic world by its very adjacency evoked memories of its encroachments on Europe, and always, of its latent power again and again to disturb the West. Other great civilisations of the East – India and China among them – could be thought of as defeated and distant and hence not a constant worry. Only Islam seemed never to have submitted completely to the West: and when, after the dramatic oil-price rises of the early 1970s, the Muslim world seemed once more on the verge of repeating its early conquests, the whole West seemed to

shudder. The onset of “Islamic terrorism” in the 1980s and 1990s has deepened and intensified the shock.’

To Said, collective European memory is crucial in the understanding of the general image of Islam prevalent in much of Europe today, as memories of encroachment translate into the perception of Islam as a threat (Sofos & Tsagarousianou, 2013:36). This perception, in turn, is reinforced by current affairs, such as 9/11 and 7/7, which are seen as consonant with past experiences. Dina, a seventy-two-year-old convert from Catholicism, thought that it was only natural for British people to come to that conclusion. She explained:

‘When 7/7 happened I felt such anger. Two things: first of all I started shouting at the television because an imam with a fuzzy hat, by which I mean he came from the Indo-Pakistani continent, came on British television and said, “You don’t understand, the young Muslims today have a hard time.” I’m sorry, that does not justify blowing up people going to their day jobs in an underground or on a bus. You can’t do that in the name of religion or in the name of a hard time, or in the name of anything. It is completely unacceptable, and for somebody in this country who has the moral guidance implicit under the name ‘imam’ and being the imam of a mosque, for them to justify it was outrageous. This is what we have to deal with in this country. I do not blame people, when they hear something like that, getting a very negative image of Islam. If they hear an imam justifying that level of carnage and murder they obviously think the religion is to blame. I think that’s a very reasonable conclusion.’

However, as I will demonstrate subsequently, in the data I collected the ‘otherisation’ of converts did not straightforwardly conform to the imagined East-West dichotomy that Said analysed in *Orientalism* and that finds its modern sequel in Dina’s description. Rather, as will become evident, perceptions of Islam were significantly formed through family biographies and collective memories involving national political conflict. Islam was positioned as ‘other’ by structures of racial and cultural privilege but not straightforwardly along the West-East divide. While the general

juxtaposition of Europe versus Islam remains somewhat intact, nuances in perception need to be understood in a family context.

Muslims are always your Neighbours

Like Jane, all other converts also had a perception of Islam that was shaped against the backdrop of both their particular family biographies and wider historically-rooted societal images of Islam as 'other'. I might be stating the obvious when I point out that perceptions of Islam were critically moulded by the Muslims 'one knew' from particular cultural contexts. In other words, personal contact, or rather the *memory* of such contact, had initially shaped an image of Islam, which then became curiously resistant to alteration. This meant that, for the specific cases I studied, Turkish women who converted had 'gone Iranian', a Jewish woman had 'sided with the enemy', Indians had 'become Pakistani' and a Greek had 'turned Turk' quite literally. Curiously, what all of these designations in terms of nationalism share is that they to some extent conform with the *Orientalist* image of Islam as a backward, violent and uncivilised 'other'.

Cosmo, son to a Greek mother and a Welsh father whom I introduced in the first chapter, along with his sister, Lalie, related a similar image of Islam based on Greek-Turkish hostilities. Cosmo described his Greek Orthodox mother as 'very traditional in her beliefs'. Lalie explained her parents' different reactions to her brother's conversion:

'I think because he [their father] wasn't religious himself I don't think it was such an issue for him. He read a lot, he was saying types of things like, "Muslims can become fanatical", that type of thing. He was concerned about those things but I think he was primarily concerned about his studies more. I think my mum was more concerned about the religion because she was actually religious. To her it was like he was changing the religion. Because my mother grew up in Greece as well, the history they were told about the Turks was biased towards the Greeks and obviously there was that whole aspect as well. The Turkish Muslims are sort of hated in Greece [...] Some of my family had come over from Asia Minor. They'd been forced over. They'd been forced over to Athens, so yes, it was quite personal. I think my great uncle died of

starvation, basically. He was walking back and forth after they had to move to Piraeus, the port of Athens, and he just dropped dead on the road. Quite close to the family. Basically my mother said in school all the history was around the Greeks being wonderful and the Turks coming in and killing thousands of Greeks. That's what they were brought up to believe [...] My grandfather's father was thrown out of Asia Minor so they moved to Samos then. Eventually then they moved to Athens.'

Keeping this personal family experience with an antagonistic and overpowering Turkey in the early 1900s in mind, it comes as no surprise that Cosmo experienced his mother's reaction to his conversion as 'very antagonistic and it stayed that way for quite a while'. Lalie confirmed that in her mother's mind Cosmo's becoming Muslim was akin to his 'becoming Turkish', and that she felt intensely pained by these events. 'When we go to Greece – not now, but years ago – there was a massive conflict between Greece and Turkey and I think that was at the forefront of her mind. Just being hurt'. Here, the relatively recent conflict over Cyprus is experienced as continuous with past aggression, expulsion and defeat as experienced by members of the family. Cosmos's mother seemed to have projected this image of 'the Turk' onto her son despite the fact that he never changed 'culture' and that his conversion took place in modern day Cardiff – quite unrelated to Turkey or Greece. Reflecting on the image his mother had of Islam as Turkish, he did not find her reaction strange and confirmed his sister's assertion that she 'was deeply, deeply hurt by this' because of the family's experience and the memories she was brought up with. Cosmo described his own upbringing as being 'stuffed with propaganda':

'Because of that Greek-Turkish interface, you know "Muslims are this and that", something I learnt was that, once one wall of the propaganda you've been brought up with falls it all begins to fall. You begin to realise that if that's an untruth, how much more out there is not true? I think that is why it came tumbling down so quickly [...] My Greek side of the family were very anti-Turkish and so anything to do with Turkey was bad. I remember that the first time I went back to Greece following my conversion my mum had told my family that I had converted to Hinduism. This is how bothered my mother was by this whole thing [...] I explained that I had converted to Islam and my

mother was too ashamed to say it, at which point my cousins were opened mouthed [...] My uncle, my mother's brother, would always push me a little bit, especially if a little drunk. He would ask why I became Muslim, and what about this, and what about that? He raised all of the traditional propaganda things that Greeks are raised with; about what Turks are like and Islam is like, the way they treat women.'

Here, Cosmo experienced his mother deliberately telling the Greek family an untruth because of the immense shame she felt at his 'turning Turk'. In her eyes, any religion – even a very remote and alien one – would have been preferable over his choice to become Muslim. In his uncle, who is more distantly related, he found a more subtle and light-hearted form of rejection. As Cosmo went on to describe his uncle's prejudice against Islam as violent, despotic and misogynistic, he labelled these as 'the traditional propaganda things that Greeks are raised with' – but of course these are also traditional Orientalist images prevalent throughout Western society. Here, we can see very clearly the convergence of two different Islam-disparaging discourses, which come to buttress one another. However, Cosmo emphasised his awareness that his mother's attachment to Greek culture and the concomitant image of Islam as 'evil Turkey's' religion was so strong that in fact he had fared quite well with his conversion: 'But I'm lucky, converts I am friends with and others I have heard of, particularly from Greek Orthodox and Jewish traditions, have families who have disowned them, literally thrown them out of the house. I'm very fortunate.'

Maryam and her two sisters, who were also introduced in the previous chapter, confirmed Cosmo's perception that converts from Jewish traditions have struggled intensely with their families' reactions to conversion to the extent that some have been declared 'dead' by their families (cf. Köse, 1996:137). In these cases, the families would sit *shiva*⁹ for the convert, which sealed their fate as having died to the family (Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017:15). As Judith, Maryam's older sister, explained: 'If you desert to such a significant extent, the common practice was to sit *shiva*. To do the prayers for the death of somebody and to live life as though that person is now dead. Very harsh.' Although Maryam's parents refrained from sitting *shiva* and tried to come to terms with their daughter's conversion, the three sisters described their

⁹ Sitting *shiva* is the Jewish weeklong mourning ritual for first-degree relatives that have passed away. Sitting *shiva* for converts signals their 'social death'.

parents as ‘hugely’ and ‘deeply hurt’. Although their pain is certainly explainable in a number of ways, the sisters described their family as Zionist in the sense of supporting Israel and explained that Maryam’s conversion was perceived as ‘siding with the enemy’. While nobody mentioned that Maryam had ‘become Arab’, the act of conversion was seen as an act of treason. ‘The recent perception since the 40s is that they’re [Muslim Arabs and Jews] in conflict’, Rachel explained. ‘Whatever the rights or wrongs of that is, it’s not my perception now because I know more and I understand more and my political views are different. However, the way that we were brought up in a Zionist family, that’s how we felt then. Unconsciously. That was what was fed to us intellectually. Until I consciously questioned that, that was my upbringing’. Maryam confirmed this perception when she tried to explain how her antagonistic image of Islam came into existence as part of a Zionist upbringing and a love for Israel, which, however, was increasingly at odds with her experience of living in Israel intermittently. Maryam described her experience of living on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem as an eye-opener that refuted everything she had internalised while growing up:

‘Maybe it was after meeting my sheikh and living there for the first time and the contrast between living on the Mount of Olives with Arabs; I was shocked. I wrote to my parents about what I was witnessing and my father didn’t want to believe me because he would have found it too painful. I come from a family where there is a lot of respect for humanity, so to have this discrepancy between how you treat an Arab... My mum used to say to me that she hated how harsh the Israeli soldiers were, and things like that. As I grew up we were fed information about Bedouins and Arabs and how they can harm you. Propaganda I think. I think it’s true that there were murders there; if Israeli Jewish people went into the desert then maybe someone was killed [...] [these stories came from] Hebrew class, or maybe just people speaking. I can’t remember now but I remember feeling fearful. It’s true, you know, I would never hitchhike there and there were times when Arabs would look at you and you felt very uncomfortable.’

The described image of Arabs who were also the primary reference of ‘Islam’ for Maryam’s family resulted in a deep-seated fear and distrust, which the sisters

described as having been part of their upbringing. While they explicitly described a Jewish context and the kind of talk circulating in Jewish circles – stories of abductions and murders also resonate with Orientalist literature on Arabs and Muslims prevalent in contemporary Britain. Although Maryam thought that British society was generally accepting of difference – much more so than other European societies like France and Germany – as a Jew-turned-Muslim she had also experienced the difference when it came to acceptance: ‘I think they [the British] are definitely more accepting of Judaism. I think people see Islam as a threat’. On the other hand, Maryam’s description of Israeli violence were met with suspicion because her parents, for whom the Holocaust was still a very recent memory, could not reconcile that scale of Jewish suffering with Israeli Jewish violence.

Turning towards the last of the national imaginaries that played a role in people’s perceptions of Islam, Ayshe, a forty-three-year-old Turkish woman from an Armenian family explained that she had been raised in Istanbul with a strong Marxist and Leninist leaning. ‘It was very anti-religious. It was a secular, socialist, feminist upbringing and I was brought up not believing in God.’ Ayshe had come to the UK as a student and later married Tom, a white English convert to Islam. She described her family’s reaction to her conversion as very antagonistic and patronising with an easily perceptible disappointment that, in her endeavour to go to Europe and educate herself, she had fallen prey to a backward, irrational and anti-modern religion. While her family shared the usual Orientalist prejudices against Islam, becoming Muslim – to them – also meant ‘becoming Iranian’:

‘My friends are still OK. They didn't overreact, but my family did. I couldn't actually go back for six years, I just wasn't strong enough. I went to a photo studio to take special photos with my new aprons and photos with my old aprons. I made an album, which I still have. I wanted them to see that it is still me. I put on one page my old look and on the next page my new look. I knew they would be very harsh on me, and in the end I didn't even have the courage to send the album. I thought, if I send these photos they can get angry and maybe rip up the photos, but at least I am not there. But still, I didn't have the courage. When Tom popped up and I got engaged I announced to them that I would be visiting them with him, their prospective son-in-law. So the first time I went was in November 2001 after the *nikah*, so religiously we were

married. Tom was my encouragement to go meet my family again. They met me in the station as you see me today and they were shocked. But in a way they were relieved because when you don't see someone for a long time you exaggerate a lot of things. Someone had told them that I had become like the ladies in Iran. In Turkey it is a political slogan that secularist politics use, that “We won’t be becoming like Iran or Iranians. We won’t allow Turkey to become Iran.” They thought I was covered with a *chador* top to toe but when they saw me they saw that I was dressed like any other Turkish lady, in half Europeanised and half traditional clothing.’

Neslihan, another Turkish convert I took Qur’anic Arabic class with confirmed the prevalent Turkish fear of Iran in the context of Islam:

‘This is how they read it. Liberals. There’s this fear of Iran in Turkey [...] Because we always got this fear of what happened in Iran. Although we don’t really know what happened in Iran. Iran used to be a very modern, open society. Anyone did anything they liked. All of a sudden – they were of course definitely wrong – this revolution happened and everybody covered. Women’s rights were suspended. All those ridiculous things in the name of Islam. This is the problem with people’s Islam. This is not Islam, this is people who create it in their heads. Some men, some groups. It’s not Islam.’

In my interlocutors’ explanations, becoming Muslim was seen as ‘becoming Iranian’ in the sense of ‘going backwards’. Islam, in this perception, means subservience to political tyranny. In Neslihan’s elaboration, partial and skewed knowledge about Islam manifested in a logic in which ‘Iran is an Islamic republic, so Islamic laws apply. For murder there’s capital punishment, cutting off hands. They don’t know the real sharia law. They just hear it.’ Based on hear-say about procedures in Islamic law, the image of a merciless and violent – in this case Iranian – ‘other’ is reinforced and the conversion is rejected on these grounds. Unlike the previously cited cases of Greece and Israel Islam is not the imminently dangerous enemy (Turkey/ ‘Arabs’) but it is a negative example *par excellence* of how to miss out on progress by turning toward religion – a ‘threat’ to Turkey’s future. However, as in the previous examples,

Iran, too, experienced the surge of a Muslim nationalism as a political tool to cast off US and British domination.

For my two Turkish interlocutors, the reasons for the rejections they experienced from friends and family differed slightly, based on their different backgrounds, where Ayshe came from an atheist Armenian family and Neslihan from an atheist Alevite family. However, both explained the anti-religious upbringing they had received. While the common attitude seemed to have been an anti-religious one, a particular disdain for Islam prevailed, which Ayshe explained by a dismissal of the Ottoman period:

‘In Turkey the whole system, from school is designed to make you dislike religion. It’s propaganda. For instance the films always include a harsh Imam who convinces people to stone a teacher who is teaching in a village, things like that. These films were brought into school and we watched them as children. The baddies were Imams and goodies were teachers. It could have been balanced, that one was a spiritual teacher and the other a worldly teacher, but they didn’t do that so we ended up disliking religion. It was like scaring a child, but that child has never seen the monster. My family was brought up in that generation. It’s a very militarist, extremist secularism. It separates people from their belief, from their spirit, from their history. We were made not to like our history; the Ottomans were bad and the New Turks were good [...] It’s very crazy. It is a denial of a whole nation’s identity. How can one nation, one State do that? How can you be such an enemy of your own history? Germany and England have bad things in their histories such as colonialism, and every country can’t claim that they have an innocent history. Why can’t you say that you had good things and bad things, accept it and move on. Why do you have to deny? [...] In Istanbul there is an old university called the University of Istanbul. In the very entrance to the gardens there is a plaque written in Ottoman language, which is Arabic script. For a long time I didn’t know what it said. Cambridge and Oxford used this university as a model for their own universities. They took these ideas from those places. Now that I know Arabic I know what it says, and it says “*bismillah alrahman alrahim*” [In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful]. You are entering the university, which is a learning place, it’s a place of knowledge which is

sacred and you enter that gate in the name of your lord. Now I am able to read it.'

Here, Ayshe described the general anti-Islam discourse in Turkey with a rejection of the country's Ottoman past. Collective memory, in this case, is overshadowed by what Sofos and Tsagarousianou (2013:2) have called 'organised forgetting'. The Turkish affairs as described by Ayshe seem somewhat similar to the case of Andalusia, where careful representation management of Islam in Spain as a temporary exception in a Catholic country led to the neglect of Islamic history in southern and southeast Europe as a result of which the collective national memory became 'obscured through the force of organised forgetting'.

On Collective Memory

In her brief genealogy of the sociological study of family life, Smart explores the conceptual foundations that underlay different 'periods' of the discipline. Most relevant to this chapter, she identifies work 'which points to the significance of memory, place and history to an understanding of the workings of family life' and which contributes to an understanding of the ways in which families inhabit both personal and cultural imaginaries and explores how these two imaginaries intersect (Smart, 2011:14). These contributions to the conceptual foundation of the sociological study of kinship relations are important because they allow us to think about family memories of violent conflict and expulsion in Pakistan as formative of family mechanics. Smart identifies 'memory' as one of the instruments in the 'conceptual toolbox' of the sociologist in his attempt to understand the working mechanisms of family life (ibid.:18). Memories come up at particular moments, either collectively at times of cultural celebration (e.g. Christmas) or individually at particular life events. In Jane's case, conversion to Islam seems to have been such a life event, which conjured up memories of violence. The idea of an idiosyncratic family biography, which relies on shared memories thus offers the chance of understanding family reactions to conversion and their images of Islam in the context of their own histories. It is an attempt to grasp their movement through time rather than offering a static description of the status quo. In following Halbwachs' (1980) understanding of

memory, it is worth pointing out that memory is in fact rarely private, as it links the individual to the group, to events involving other people, and to a group consciousness (cf. Peleikis, 2006). In other words, shared memory is instrumental in creating cohesion and a sense of oneness in a group such as the family.

Closely linked to the discussion of memory and its importance as a function of group cohesion is the theme of what Ewing (2008) has called the 'national imaginary' or the 'social fantasy' in relation to Muslims (cf. Anderson, 1983). In her study of Muslim masculinity in Berlin she examines how the stigmatization of Muslims simultaneously serves to define what 'German-ness' is. The system of cultural representations she studies explains why Germany as nation state becomes 'emotionally intelligible' as these representations create a sense of belonging based on the mutually exclusive 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy (Ewing, 2008:2). Ewing explains that in the 'national imaginary of belonging, the other occupies what Butler has called a 'zone of uninhabitability', in which the thought of inhabiting the position of the other is a threat to one's own sense of identity' (ibid.:3). In Jane's explanation that her English family perceived Islam as 'not English' and belonging to a less civilized Eastern culture, we encounter precisely such a 'zone of uninhabitability'. Through the ongoing process of 'myth-making' a sense of wholeness is created by 'abjecting' that which is considered improper or even dangerous to the integrity of the self. In Ewing's study, Muslim masculinity is perceived as an 'uninhabitable' way of being and as the formative opposite to being German. Therefore, while social fantasy stigmatises the Muslim man as the 'other', it simultaneously constitutes German national identity. Ewing's observations are thus consonant with Said's recognition that Orientalist discourse positions 'the Muslim' as other and in antithesis to what it means to be 'Western', enlightened and civilized. Ewing therefore concludes that in spite of Said's intervention, the existing dichotomies of 'us' versus 'them' prevail (ibid.:27).

However, Ewing also points to the differences in national imaginaries that could be equally applied to the family imaginaries or family ideologies that I encountered during my research: 'Each nation-state experiences the Muslim challenge in somewhat different terms because of the place that specific Muslim populations occupy within the national imaginary of the country they inhabit.' (ibid.:4). Hence, while there is an underlying discourse that positions Muslims as 'other' in an 'us'-versus-'them' matrix, individual family ideologies – based on family biographies and shared memory – like national imaginaries, differ according to specific experience.

Family Ideologies

In the case of Ismael, who was introduced in the previous chapter and who received a particularly harsh treatment by his family upon conversion, Pakistan as the hostile neighbour also played a role in forming his parents' view on Islam although his family did not experience displacement in the way that Jane's family did. Rather, because Ismael's father had initially been determined to become a Hindu priest, the (ritual) slaughter of animals in Islam became a component of the prevailing image of Islam and fed into the narrative of 'violence':

'I would have discussions with my dad. I think he had such a cultural background and such hatred that he's convinced himself that there's nothing good in Islam whatsoever. It's almost like the more you try to paint something good, the more you'd pain him. He tells me he had a bullet in his thigh or something from combat or something. There was a war between India and Pakistan, he volunteered [...] Plus I think all his life he'd been under the guardianship of the priests. He was a person of high standing in the community. He'd lead hymns and he had such a good family who would do this *puja*. I think there was a big pride factor in him. He started doing medicine. He just couldn't reconcile it. I think his big thing is to this day about meat. His moral compass says, "How can a religion be good that slaughters animals and eats meat?" [...] That's his key thing and there's nothing that I can try to do to rationalise it or try to explain it. Even though I might not personally eat it, I don't have to eat beef and stuff, but it all stems from there. The fundamental nature of Islam is violence because it allows meat, slaughter and violence. That's what a lot of the priests go on about, "They eat meat." It's the same old thing. They don't move on beyond that in terms of the concept of God, prophethood, what the Qur'an might actually say. It's very much on the superficial rituals and they build a whole mythology around that.'

According to Ismael, becoming Muslim in his parents' eyes was akin to 'being a terrorist, becoming somebody who's violent and extremist'. Amira who also

converted to Islam out of an Indian Hindu family confirmed the impression that stories about Kashmir and the war with Pakistan while growing up shaped her initial perception of Muslims as ‘terrorists’. However, the particular image Ismael described can only be explained by a curious amalgamation of an Islam-disparaging discourse, the context of war with Pakistan and a religious rejection of animal slaughter. The image of Islam as a violent ‘other’ is key in this situation because the rejection of animal slaughter is put forward in this context. In relation to other religions, Ismael’s parents did not seem to regard animal slaughter as a proof for a violent nature. ‘They’re happy to be good friends with Irish Catholics who are our neighbours in London’, Ismael explained. ‘They share stuff and talk to them. Their own son who doesn’t want to eat meat but who does it for social reasons they can’t reconcile the whole religion. It is a particular hatred of Islam rather than Christianity or Judaism.’

In Ismael’s case, the narrative of violence relates to both the political violence of Pakistan and the spiritual violence of eating meat, all embedded in the larger meta-narrative of ‘Islam as terrorist’. However, in Ismael’s elaboration the Western pre-Orientalist narratives about Islam as conqueror are mirrored by the almost identical Indian narrative about Muslim invaders. ‘The Mughals, the rulers previously, I’ve no doubt they weren’t very good to Hindus’, Ismael explained. ‘It probably stems from historical reasons. They feel that anybody who’s Muslim has never been good to Hindus. It’s still being fed in modern-day India where, although the Taj Mahal survives, anything Mughal is negative. It pains them that that big symbol is a Muslim symbol rather than a Hindu symbol. It’s the Mughal empire.’ In this narrative, Islam as the religion of the Mughals appears as an aggressive force that pains Hindus through collective memory – and architecture – up to the present. The amalgam of family biography and collective memory that we find in Ismael’s story is resistant to correction through real-life encounters. ‘I’ve gone out of my way’, Ismael elaborated in an attempt to illustrate his efforts to refute his image as ‘terrorist’. ‘I’m a doctor, I try to save people’s lives. All the stuff I try to engage in the community. It’s about cohesion, it’s about bringing up young people who are balanced in their thinking and not extremist and not thinking righteous things, that just because you’re a Muslim we are right.’ Yet, real-life experiences resist the power of ideology, according to which Islam is ‘violent’ by nature. Neither his work as a medical doctor nor his efforts as a foster parent could correct the image of Islam that his parents held on to. The fact that

people hang on to memories of family trauma in their reactions to conversion in preference to present-day encounters can only be explained by recourse to ideology.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* Žižek describes the ideological space as being made up of unconfined ‘floating signifiers’, which are ‘overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements’ (Žižek, 1989:95). Their meaning depends on the lexical context into which they are placed through ideological ‘quilting’. As Žižek puts it: ‘in the ideological space float signifiers like “freedom”, “state”, “justice”, “peace” [...] and then their chain is supplemented with some master-signifier (“Communism”) which retroactively determines their (Communist) meaning: “freedom” is effective only through surmounting bourgeois formal freedom, which is merely a form of slavery [...]’ (ibid.:113). Quilting in the ideological field of Greek Orthodoxy could produce a meaning for ‘Islam’ as essentially ‘evil’ and ‘conversion’ as an act of treason. However, within the same family, the ideological field of Welsh atheism could mean that ‘Islam’ meant an irrational belief in danger of becoming fanatical and ‘conversion’ an act of regression. Interestingly, my data suggests that there is such a thing as an ideological field within a bigger, more encompassing ideological field. For instance, in Jane’s case her family held on to an ideological view about Islam, where Islam was a threat – associated with misogyny and terrorism as framed in the context of war between India and Pakistan. However, this ‘family ideology’ was simultaneously situated within a wider British ‘societal ideology’ (Orientalism), according to which Islam was seen as an inferior ‘other’ that – over the centuries – moved from the ‘outside’ (Ottoman Empire) to the ‘inside’ (British Muslims). These two ideological fields – one apparently situated within the other – appeared to coalesce despite their opposing power differentials.

To Žižek, an ideology’s success can be measured by its resistance to ‘correction’ through real-life encounters. In his example of anti-Semitism, Žižek describes a fictional individual in Nazi Germany, and that individual’s neighbour Mr. Stern. Every day, the man is surrounded with anti-Semitic propaganda but he actually gets on very well with Mr. Stern, and their children play together. Yet his everyday encounters with Mr. Stern cannot resist the ideological construction of the ‘Jew’: ‘An ideology is really “holding us” only when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality – that is, when the ideology succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself’ (Žižek, 1989:49-50). Rather than dismantling the ideological fantasy, the discrepancy between experience and propaganda is turned

into an argument *for* anti-Semitism ('You see how difficult it is to recognise their true nature?'): 'An ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favour' (ibid.:50). This observation held true in many of the interviews I conducted: family members held on to ideological fantasies about Islam, which could not be dismantled by their experiences with the converts or other Muslims. As Jane's friendship with Mehdi could not ameliorate her perception of Islam, Ismael had 'gone out of his way' to demonstrate the peacefulness of his Islam to absolutely no success. The ideological construction of Islam through family biographies and collective memory was more real than anything my informants could observe in the 'here and now'. In trying to make sense of this discrepancy, between imaginary Islam and everyday encounters, some relatives dismissed converts as 'exceptions to the rule' who were different from 'real Islam' and thus not authentic ('yes, you are different but... you're not really mainstream') (Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017:9).

Conclusion

The division of the world into an enlightened 'West' and its antithetical, backward and equally monolithic 'Eastern' opposite, in need of salvation through Western rule, becomes Orientalist with the 'West's' will to dominate that 'East'. This kind of discourse about Islam, where Islam appears as Europe's inferior other that needs to be ruled over, is by now ubiquitous in Western society (Asad, 2003b; Saeed, 2007; Sofos & Tsagarousianou, 2013). While the vignettes I presented in this chapter clearly display a non-Orientalist discourse, and a discourse of victimhood, in the sense that my interlocutors portrayed Islam as an overpowering threat akin to that presented in Matar's description of 16th-century Britain, the resulting rhetoric, wherein Islam appeared as a misogynistic and terrorist religion, sounded almost indistinguishably similar to the Orientalist rhetoric. What we saw in this chapter, then, is the convergence between two Islam-disparaging discourses of radically distinct sources.

To my mind, the difference between these two constructions lay with institutional power, which manifests in domination. In the Orientalist discourse the institutional power of the West (the state, cultural organisations, academia, etc.) allowed the domination of an Islamic East. In the constructs I encountered during my

fieldwork, however, Islam appeared as a dominating aggressor in the form of Islamic nationalism. In that sense, while the effect of the Islam-disparaging discourse was the same as that which came out of the Orientalist tradition, these discourses originated from very different sources, namely from domination and victimhood respectively. The emergence of Islamic nationalisms after the colonial period thus constitutes the context in which Islam is framed as an ‘other’ and a threat – a powerful institutionalised enemy. This is different from Said’s analysis of the colonial encounter, where Islam is portrayed as a backward inferior other.

Curiously, the families of the converts I met seemed to hang on to memories of family trauma in their reactions to conversion in preference to present-day encounters. These ideological attachments to images of Islam with no foundation in immediate experience appeared as much more powerful than any real-life efforts to dispel these images. These idiosyncratic family histories are the lens through which Islam is seen even though other prisms are available, such as Muslim friends at school, neighbours, or Ismael’s attempts to demonstrate his peacefulness to his family. In asking why more importance is attached to memories of family trauma than to real-life and present-day encounters, I surmise that the two anti-Muslim ideologies presented above buttress and reinforce each other despite their different sources. Jane’s story unites the two ‘constructs’ – her Indian family’s view and her English family’s view – and illustrates the strength of these strangely consonant and mutually reinforcing discourses despite their different sources. This mutual reinforcement lends them a particular strength and makes them into an ‘argument-proof vest’, which denies correction (Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017:9). For Said, an indispensable concept for understanding the working of Orientalist discourse is Gramsci’s notion of *hegemony*: a form of ‘cultural leadership’ or the ability of the dominant group in civil society to project its way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as common sense and natural (Gramsci, 1971; Said, 1978). According to Said, it is hegemony that gives Orientalism its outstanding durability and strength. Hooking into Said’s discursive explanation for Orientalism’s success, I want to highlight the buttressing effect of converging Islam-disparaging discourses, which result in a hegemonic and dogmatic image of Islam that refuses to be challenged.

Chapter Three – From Otherness to Familiarity: Biographies of Self and Religion

'I did believe in God, as long as I'm convinced it's the same God—I had no interest in becoming a Buddhist, a Hare Krishna or a Sikh or anything else, or even a Jew. As long as I was convinced that Islam was the continuation and the most up to date version of this message and it's the same God that I believe in anyway.'

– Usman, Swansea, convert from Christianity –

Many of the converts I met narrated their conversion in terms of continuity with respect to faith, but several converts also experienced continuity ethnically or socially. Models of conversion proposed in sociological and anthropological studies presuppose an element of rupture on the level of belief or, as Snow and Machalek (1984:169-70) have put it, a 'reorientation of the soul'. Taking a cue from Mead (1962:88-90), they identify a change in one's 'universe of discourse' as the relevant concept to think about the change that occurs during conversion. Conversion goes beyond a change in beliefs, values and identities and amounts to a paradigm shift of sorts. Such a definition is at odds with the data I gathered because it neglects the social aspect of conversion and thus misses 'the thing that jerks and tears', which is kinship. Consequently, they are unable to account for the conversion experience as reflected in my interlocutors' narratives. In this chapter, some of the guiding questions will be 'why do converts to Islam narrate continuity?' and 'how does that help us to rethink conversion?' What forms of continuity exist in Islamic conversion narratives, how can we account for them, and should we still use theories of conversion to understand the process that is being narrated? While I do not pretend to be able to answer these questions in full, I will show that the conversion narratives I gathered are shaped primarily by two forces: the way in which Islam is positioned as 'other', and what I will call 'Islam's autobiography'. These findings call into question the extent to which conversion as rupture, as an interior cognitive reorientation, and

perhaps ‘conversion’ itself as a category, are useful in understanding the phenomenon at hand.

Inasmuch, this chapter amounts to a historical-contextual analysis of narratives of conversion which present the change not as rupture and newness as in Christianised models of conversion, but as a return to an already existing more ‘authentic’ reality. Besides this empirical focus on narratives of belief, this chapter also introduces another, distinct, yet related, object of analysis. This second object of analysis concerns the converts’ social repositioning and relates to the theme of ethnicity and whiteness, where Islam appears as the religion of the underdog. While narratives of belief and social repositioning are clearly distinct issues, they are also connected by the theme of familiarity, and insofar as they are both shaped by power relations. The authorized narrations of conversion that I am going to present revolve around sameness with the converts’ past selves where converts discover that Islam entails that which they have always believed, and which mirrors Islam’s position vis-à-vis the older monotheisms. At the same time, non-white converts often experience sameness or familiarity with other minorities, which sheds light on the role that ethnicity plays in conversion.

I met Jane through the *Narratives of Conversion: Female Perspectives* project. She agreed to an interview, so we met in a London café where we recorded nearly two hours and then continued our talk informally for many more hours while walking through London. She talked about her political activism for women’s rights both inside and outside the Muslim community, her care for the environment and her love for animals, which has resulted in her being a vegetarian. When I met Jane she had stopped wearing the headscarf for one and a half years, after having worn it for seven years. As I explained previously, her mother instilled in Jane a deep sense of religiosity from a very young age, to the point that Jane was determined to study theology and become a vicar. ‘I was a Christian, a very believing Christian. I would go to church more than once a week. I had a faith education until I was sixteen. Quite a strongly ingrained Christian identity I would say’. At the age of sixteen things started to change, when Jane decided to attend a mixed-faith college. Although Jane

described herself as ‘very prejudiced’¹⁰ against Islam, she started to meet Muslims and to make Muslim friends. ‘We used to debate and, like I said, I was quite negative about Muslims. I would ask them really tough questions like, “Why are you so barbaric? Why do you treat women the way you do?” All the standard stereotypes. This was before 9/11 as well. This was 1998 when I started having these discussions. I converted in 2000.’

At the same time, Jane started to have doubts about her Christian faith, particularly the concept of the holy trinity and Jesus’ status as the Son of God:

‘I’d read the scriptures, I had also looked into the history of modern day Christianity, how it came to Europe, how it changed, how it became politicised. I had questions about things like – although I believed very strongly in my God and my Prophet – I had questions about the Trinity, big questions. For me it was not more than a metaphor and it was impossible for it to be reality because that would mean that you had two Godheads, yet it calls itself monotheistic [...] I could understand that if it was to be taken as a metaphor, which I did, but not if it’s to be taken at face value. This was one of my questions, about the Trinity. The other one was, there were a lot of prophets before Jesus, were there any prophets after Jesus? Then obviously I had questions about the divinity of Christ. For me I could understand that he’s a prophet, a special prophet, not that he is the direct Son of God. That was a question in my mind. I had no idea that Islam dealt with all of those subjects. My views were purely prejudicial about Islam. I didn’t even know they had the same prophets, I didn’t even know there was only one God, I didn’t know it was a monotheistic religion. I saw it as this Oriental religion that probably has lots of Gods. Which is quite funny really, considering I come from an Eastern family’.

Despite the fact that her best friend in childhood was Muslim of Iranian descent, they never seemed to touch on the topic of religion too much, so Jane only started to learn about Islam once she entered college.

¹⁰ See her description of the family’s expulsion from Lahore in chapter two.

‘I never really learnt anything on the theological level about Islam before the time I got to college and started having those debates. I think when I started having these debates I said some pretty offensive things to people. They were so patient with me. It’s like they understood that there are many people who are ignorant about Islam so we have to be patient and have the debate with her. They did and it was really interesting and I learnt quite a lot. Over time I started to learn that the prophets in Islam are the same and they also believe in Jesus and that he’s also special within that religion. I got to know that all my stereotypes about them being barbaric and all the rest of it started to shed away as well [...]’

Jane started off her forays into Islam with a lot of hostility and little knowledge about the teachings of Islam. The discovery that the two religions shared the same prophets and many other elements of faith consequently came as an eye-opener. While the kindness and patience with which her Muslim peers answered her questions certainly also impressed her, she emphasised that it was the continuity on the level of belief that convinced her of Islam’s truth.

‘As they allowed me to have these debates, they weren’t super conservative Muslims, we would go to nightclubs together, they used to drink and yet we’d have these religious debates. It’s quite nice because culturally we were all on the same level. At the time those debates led me to the point where I felt that Islam was the answer to the problems I had with my Christianity, or the gaps in my Christianity. Jesus is a prophet of God, he’s not the son of God, that’s brilliant. God is one and he’s only. All the other prophets are still there. I kind of got to the point where I was like – It’s difficult to say I converted because it’s almost like I had to *rename* myself. I couldn’t be in a situation where I call myself a Christian, but actually everything I believe *and everything I’ve ever believed* fits within the framework of Islam and not within the framework of Christianity, so it was almost like I had to name myself correctly rather than continue to be named incorrectly. I kind of got to the juncture where I was like, “Well, I can’t really justify calling myself a Christian anymore.”’

Jane described the dispute inside herself that went on as she discovered her beliefs to be Muslim rather than Christian. Significantly, she realised that ‘everything I’ve ever believed’ fitted within Islam and not Christianity. In this totalising statement she positions her beliefs in a spatial imaginary as belonging to the eternal – forever – which is the epitome of continuity. ‘Conversion’, in her narrative, amounts to the profanity of ‘re-naming’ oneself, or rather – of naming oneself correctly for the first time. While arguments pushed her increasingly into the direction of conversion, she also felt a deep loyalty toward Christianity, which she did not want to betray:

‘On the spiritual side I did start to feel guilt and there was a six month period leading up to my final conversion where I was just praying every day saying “God, guide me to the right religion. If I’m sinning by asking you for this then please forgive me for sinning”. There were logical merits but I still felt like I might be betraying Christianity if I – it’s almost like putting a rubber stamp on my theory that God is one and Jesus is a prophet and not the son of God’.

For a period of one and a half years Jane gradually became convinced that she should correctly ‘label’ herself a Muslim because she held the theological beliefs of Islam. Her Christian upbringing, the expectations of her becoming a vicar, social implications, but also her belief in God’s guidance were holding her back. If God wanted her to be Muslim, he would guide her in that direction through unmistakable signs:

‘I started the conversations when I was sixteen, so for about a year I was having these debates. Then by the time I was seventeen and we were in a new school year I was seriously contemplating becoming Muslim. For one reason or another I was praying about it, I wasn’t sure, like I told you I was praying every day about it. Then I gave up praying because I was like, “Well, I’ve been praying about this for a long time and nothing’s happened so I’ll just remain a Christian for the time being, better safe than sorry.” Then I came across a Qur’an in English and so it was actually a spiritual decision in the end. I opened up the Qur’an on the first page, it’s the story of the cow and in English it read, “This is a book of which there is no doubt, a guide for those who are pious.” I felt so confident in that one statement that I just could not

ignore it. It felt more true to me than saying, “This is a table”, or “this is a cup”. It was very profoundly spiritual that moment. From then on I considered myself a Muslim’.

Narrating Continuity

Jane narrates nearly flawless continuity. The testimony of her conversion to Islam entailed no outburst of emotion, no physical displays of being moved. The story is a sober one and it was narrated in a sober manner. Unlike testimonies of conversion in other contexts, hers did not mention the experience of a crisis or the eternal gratitude she now felt for being ‘saved’. Webster’s study of Protestant conversions in a Scottish fishing village entail all the drama – both in content and in the way testimonies are narrated – that is seen as part of being ‘born again’ (Webster, 2013:101-123). Webster’s informants would regularly weep while narrating the story of their being saved by Jesus Christ. They regarded their conversion as such a profound experience that ‘changing religion’ would fall short of describing what happened to them. Rather, being ‘born again’ would mean moving from ‘Satan’s kingdom of darkness’ into ‘God’s glorious kingdom of light’ (ibid.:102). This narrative, revolving around the trope of extreme change, could not be more contrary to the testimonies that I witnessed. Jane went into detail to show that, in terms of belief, nothing had changed. In her narrative, the doubts and questions concerning Christianity were already there. Islam was nothing but an answer to the ‘gaps in my Christianity’. Here, the change of ‘conversion’ boils down to ‘renaming’ oneself, or rather, ‘labelling’ oneself *correctly*. It is not a change in reality (moving from one kingdom to another), it is rather the correction of a mistake that was made in describing reality, along the lines of ‘I now realise that I have been a Muslim all along but have mistakenly been called – and called myself – a Christian’. No public proclamation of faith occurs, no witnesses are there when she converts, no break with the past is claimed, and instead the past, the present and the future appear as one uninterrupted, coherent continuum.

The cosmetic change in ‘label’ implies that no single moment can be identified as a significant event that caused a change of heart. As Benny, a white

convert from Leeds in his thirties, put it: ‘Often when people request the conversion story they want a sentence-long sound bite, a road to Damascus moment that explains how you came to Islam. For me, from a theological level it began with guidance from God. That guidance is pre-ordained, *hidayah* as we would say in Arabic.’ It is precisely that expected ‘Road to Damascus’ experience, which is absent from narratives of conversion to Islam. The dramatic character of the Road to Damascus story is mirrored in many Christian conversion narratives like the ones that Webster recounts. However, the narratives I encountered lacked experiences of that kind, and were instead characterised by initial questions that sprung up, ensuing research, study and a final resolution of the questioning and doubting, as Islam offered answers to all questions and gave certainty to doubt.

This ‘journey’ often takes time and never happens abruptly. Jane’s conversion took a year and a half; Benny’s even took ten years. The minimum I have come across was six months. In Jane’s narrative there is a moment which may be seen as the ultimate ‘spark’ that caused her to ‘rename’ herself as Muslim. That is the moment where she opens the English translation of the Qur’an and reads the story of ‘The Cow’. She describes it as a ‘profoundly spiritual moment’, which gave her ‘confidence’ and made her feel that what she was reading was indeed ‘true’. While this moment is certainly a significant component of her conversion narrative, it can hardly be seen as a ‘Road to Damascus’ kind of experience. It was preceded by one and a half years of questioning, debating, reading and praying about the decision to convert. By the time Jane read the *sura* she was already convinced that Islam was the truth and that she would more accurately be called a Muslim. But because she never knew anything about Islam she gradually learned that her beliefs and Islamic beliefs were one and the same.

The trajectory of knowledge, which is marked by continuity, was retold in almost every conversion testimony I heard. Amira, who also came from an Indian Hindu family had lost her parents as a young child, and was consequently raised by her grandparents. Her aunt, uncle and cousins also lived in the same house in south London. Amira was raised as a Hindu both culturally and religiously, and she would pray together with her family and observe religious rituals. When Amira was in her late teens, a Hindu friend of hers had got hold of a book called *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims* by Suzanne Hanif, an Afro-American convert. Amira had taken the book from her friend with a similarly antagonistic mindset as that which

Jane had described. Sharing the Indian family background meant that Jane and Amira also shared the negative perception of Islam, shaped by the violent partition of India and Pakistan. Amira's intention when taking the book was to defeat her friend's argument *for* Islam:

'I took it off her. I said "Give me that book. Stop reading it!" In fact, I thought, I'd read the book and then I'd have an interesting conversation with her about how it's really bad [...] My perceptions about Islam were that they're terrorists, they marry their own cousins which to a Hindu is disgusting. As part of the Hindu religion your cousins are like your brothers. You tie a friendship type band, it's called a *Rakhi*. They have a religious practice called *Raksha Bandhan* and I'd grown up with that. I thought it [*marrying one's cousin*] was disgusting [...] That was my perception at the time.'

However, in a very similar way to that described by Jane, Amira started to realise that Islam captured her beliefs much better than Hinduism had ever done once she engaged with it:

'As I was reading and I was thinking [...] "Oh, this is already what I believe. Yeah, I believe this too. I believe that too. Oh, that makes sense. Oh I see, yes. I can see why that would work." Then I had a moment on the tube when I felt like I was in darkness and, you know those lights where you pull the string? Somebody just did that to me. Just pulled this string and the light was on and I could see. I felt like that on the tube, in the tunnel [...] This is the truth. So I had the truth [...] Then, I went to uni, and I thought, "I'm not really going to do anything with this. This is the truth. Maybe after I've got my degree and I have a job I might think about converting. To do it at this time would kill my family.'"

In Jane's and Amira's narratives, the trope of continuity is central with respect to matters of faith. However, there is also continuity on the level of 'culture'. Belonging to a coloured minority in a predominantly white country allowed Jane to identify very easily, almost naturally, with Muslims who had a similar colour and came from the same geographical region as her father's family. During the interview

it seemed that Jane used the words ‘ethnically’ and ‘culturally’ almost interchangeably. While she was talking about similar skin colours, she also meant the general experience of being a minority in a predominantly white society. She also mentioned the words ‘worldview’ and ‘understanding of the world’ in order to describe what she perceived as a broader horizon than somebody who had grown up in an all white English household. Here again, conversion comes close to correcting something which was uneasy all along and which should have been otherwise. Islam came to Jane through Muslims who were ‘culturally’ much nearer to her than her fellow Christian believers who were white English. She made clear that her initial contact with Islam came through the ‘cultural’ and ethnic similarity she experienced with many of her Muslim friends at school. On this basis she was able to relate to these Muslim students much more than she had ever done with respect to the white Christian English children at her previous school:

‘the reason most of my friends at college were Muslim was actually because *culturally* we had a lot of similarities. They were Arabic, they were Turkish in origin. Within our group we also had Africans. It was a really nice mix *ethnically* and I’d never had that before. When I was in Christian education I was usually the only coloured person. I always felt quite different because I’m a diaspora community still. Even though I’m mixed race so I know the English culture, I’m also Indian and I have that within my understanding of the world. I always found it desperately difficult at school because I had lots of very English, staid, middle class people who’d never really experienced a culture outside of their own in any meaningful way. When I got to college I loved being around these people who were just like me. It just brought down all of those preconceptions I had about Muslims. The politicised idea that I learnt from my grandfather’

This echoes all the converts of colour that I met for whom conversion was easy, in the sense that they were invisible *as converts*. Inside the Muslim community people would assume that these converts had been Muslims all their lives. Because of their invisibility as converts they were never treated like ‘trophies’ in the way that many white converts were – introduced into the community but ultimately often remaining very lonely and isolated (Suleiman, 2013:73).

Basem, too, narrated continuity in terms of what he called ‘urban culture’. While growing up in the Afro-Caribbean community of south London, Basem, who came from a Christian family, was mainly surrounded by Muslims. As a teenager he drifted into the criminal scene surrounding drug dealing, theft and robbery. As a consequence he ended up spending some of his teenage years in prison, where he started reading for the first time. His mother used to send him books and one of those books was the autobiography of Malcolm X. Coming out of a disadvantaged black community and having landed in prison for his criminal activity, Basem was hugely impressed with Malcolm X’s transformation, which he saw as exemplary and aspired to follow. Basem recognized so many ‘parallels’ concerning the background that he found it easy to identify with Malcolm X, and consequently conversion appeared as something natural in that situation he found himself in – being black, excluded and in prison. Basem’s case makes clear that when Islam is racialised, ‘Muslim’ can resonate as an underdog identity in a Muslim-minority setting. His interest in Islam resulted from his identification with Malcolm X:

‘Absolutely. For no reason other than that [...] It was clearly one of my mum’s old books that she just had at home. There were so many parallels in the story between myself and him. What he’d been known as then was Detroit Red. That was his name that he was very much known by. I thought this beautiful transformation, he’d been hugely articulate, very emotionally intelligent, very measured, and had a huge impact on driving social culture in the 60s at that time. I just wanted to know what was behind it. I found out that he used Islam as a central referencing point to everything he was doing, so I wanted to get an indication and understanding of Islam to see what it was about. Again, I’d always gone to church whilst I was there [*in prison*]. When I was at home, very rarely. I grew up going to Sunday school.’

Malcolm X was the initial starting point of Basem’s identification with the Muslim community, but he quickly extrapolated to the black Muslims he had known while growing up. Again, continuity is a central trope, where Islam offers a comprehensive framework for everything there has ever been in the convert’s life. In Inge’s (2016) study of Salafi women in south London, she points out that there had been a ‘fashion’ for converting to Islam in the early-2000s among Afro-Caribbean

youth around Brixton Mosque. While the reason for this ‘Muslim Chic’ remains unclear, it ‘seems to have originated in the early 1990s, when Spike Lee’s film *Malcolm X* (1992) was released’, and regular worshippers at Brixton Mosque recalled ‘scores of teenagers mainly from Afro-Caribbean backgrounds’ coming into the mosque to convert (ibid.:70). In the 1970s, before Islam, Rastafarism had become popular in Brixton mainly among youth with Jamaican backgrounds. With the iconic Bob Marley joining the Rastafari movement, young people suddenly experienced religiosity on the one hand and ‘street credibility’ on the other as being compatible. ‘Like the Rastafari Movement’, Inge observes, ‘Islam had come to be perceived as at odds with white British culture and “middle England”’ (ibid.). While Basem converted in 1991, just before the emergence of the ‘Muslim Chic’, his story resonates with Inge’s description of other black youths converting to Islam in south London from the early 90s onwards. In Basem’s account, Islam links him to both Malcolm X and the young Muslims he hung out with as a teenager. The feeling of exclusion in particular – coming from an underprivileged community – seemed remedied by the ‘equality’ that Islam offered¹¹:

‘When I began to develop more understanding of Islam I began to see that the level of equality was something that I felt very drawn to. I’d felt ostracised by mainstream society in many ways and I found it very difficult to reconnect with them [...] The thing about being a revert and especially coming from a Black Caribbean background is that you find a lot of people piggy back off the back of urban culture and find it easier to connect with younger people who are from that. It was a lot easier for me to get an understanding of their position [...] I was in that age bracket and all my friends were mostly from Muslim households. They would come and smoke a joint and that was how we developed a lot of our relationships. I had a healthy respect for Islam because I understood it’.

¹¹ It is worth pointing out that during my research I encountered several black male converts who had chosen the name *Bilal* as their Islamic name, and thereby linked themselves explicitly to Bilal, the companion of the prophet who was freed from slavery and became the first black Muslim, as well as the community’s first *Muezzin*. In this, I again saw an appeal to emancipation from an underprivileged position by virtue of Islam’s egalitarian teachings.

After finishing Malcolm X's autobiography, Basem then asked his mother to also send him a copy of the Qur'an to prison:

'It's the Yusuf Islam translation with a green cover and a little note that she left in there. I read up to maybe *Surat-Baqara*, maybe *Aya* a hundred and something. I've still got all of the pieces of paper I had at the time in that book. Just as a reminder of the early steps that I took into Islam [...] When I began reading, when I began to develop a further understanding of Islam and what I was calling to, it immediately spoke to the same things, which you explained as having affected your brother. I was hugely suspicious about the Trinity.'

In Basem's case, identification with Malcolm X and the black underprivileged community came first and, as the result, via engagement with Islam, religious doubts were answered that had been there all along. Although Basem may have come at Islam from another direction, the central trope of continuity and of establishing something that should have been there all along is unmistakable. His use of the word 'revert' instead of 'convert' in describing himself mirrors his conviction that being Muslim is the natural condition that he was born in. He was raised in a different way than he should have been and came to *revert*, meaning to 'turn back to' the original, natural state of 'Muslim'. In the cases of Jane and Amira, identifying as Muslim did not involve a personal rupture, but rather the discovery of a consonance with what they had believed all along. Basem, too, said he had always struggled to believe in the Trinity, but the emphasis in his narrative is that he found it easy to relate to Muslims he knew and read about because he identified with their underprivileged background as racially marginalized persons, and with the accompanying urban subculture. In all three cases, there is the question of racial identification with others and a common position in relation to a dominant whiteness. Inasmuch, the two analytical objects of this chapter – narrations of conversion and social repositioning – may be related in the following way: while conversion may be narrated in theological terms, its driving factors are sociological, rather than only theological.

While Basem was aware of the socio-ethnic reasons that had attracted him to Malcolm X first and then to Islam, he also recognised the relative ease with which his conversion happened when compared to other white inmates who also converted:

‘The white experience is massively different, and I’ll tell you why. I saw white convert guys who have made that transition who were treated a lot worse than I was in the prison system. By the guards. It was like, “How could you betray us in this way?” It was crystallised times five or times ten to what a Caribbean person would have got. It was like, “Yes, we can understand your position and why you would gravitate towards this as a faith.” It would be almost like a slap in the face for them because of the whole issue of white privilege. It’s actually just been sniffed at and said, “You know what, I couldn’t care less about it. This is what I’m inclined towards, this is a religion of truth” [...] That’s their experience from my perception, amongst even their own family.’

Basem described a sense of social continuity with respect to his conversion, also in the perception of white prison guards that he was moving from one marginalized racial category to another. In her study of German converts to Islam, Özyürek (2015) introduced the concept of Islam as a racialised category. ‘Muslim identity’, she writes, ‘is something that is scripted on the bodies of immigrant Muslims’ (ibid.:3). Consequently, Özyürek observes that ‘mainstream society marginalizes German converts to Islam, and questions their Germanness and Europeanness, based on the belief that one cannot be a German or European and a Muslim at the same time’ (ibid.). While the comparison between Germany and the UK is not straightforward, the argument that Muslims are perceived as ‘outsiders’ of Europe has been made for the whole continent, possibly with the exception of the Balkans (Asad, 2003:171). Therefore, because Islam as a racialised category is seen at odds with an indigenous – that is white – European identity, it is readily accepted for converts of colour. Basem’s conversion to Islam was seen as a natural step by himself and others such as the prison guards. It was almost expected of him, while his white co-inmates were seen as traitors and punished for it.

Other non-white converts confirmed this lessened effect of otherisation, based on an already existent racial otherness. For instance, Zahra, a Jewish woman whose grandparents had immigrated to England from Eastern Europe, articulated her already existing alienation in the following terms: ‘When I grew up in England, people thought I was foreign anyway [...] Because I have dark skin and dark hair. They thought I was Greek or Italian. They would always ask me where I came from. So it is

no different now than it was in my teens. I didn't feel at home in Britain either when I was growing up. I felt alienated.' Samira, a black woman of Kenyan origin, did not feel that conversion had significantly altered her position as 'other' in society and described her transition from one racialised category into another:

'Before I converted I felt people saw me as a black person in Britain. As an immigrant. Now I'm sure they still think I'm foreign, but I don't really care any more [...] I was never white [...] If I was white maybe it would be very different for me. If I'd been white before I probably would be in a lot of pain, but I was always a black person living in Britain [...] My children have been born and bred here. For all intents and purposes we are British. I know that, but I'm never going to be white. Nothing is ever going to change that. I'll always be a foreigner. Even my son who is second generation. Even when he has kids they will still be foreign. You know Polish immigrants come here, they have one kid and immediately that kid is British because they're white. They get a British accent and nobody will remember that they're Polish. With a black person we'll be foreigners even five generations down. We're still black.'

Samira's account testifies to her otherness being inscribed in her body. Converting to Islam put her in a very difficult situation family-wise, but from a societal perspective it was somehow seen as congruent with her skin colour. She was already foreign and, after conversion, possibly a little more so, but this is a completely different situation from the 'white experience', in which the convert is 'othered' as foreign for the very first time in a white country.

When Familiarity Replaces Otherness

Irrespective of the ethnic and religious background, many converts started off their journey to Islam with very hostile attitudes, informed by Orientalist stereotypes of the kind outlined by Amira or Jane ('Why are you so barbaric? Why do you treat women the way you do?'). The starting point was the ambition to prove Islam wrong vis-à-vis peers who were Muslim. As these converts learned that their Orientalist stereotypes

about Islam were untrue, they seemed to realise the continuity that was, instead, at stake. In many testimonies the form is the same: as Orientalist stereotypes dissolve they are simultaneously replaced by continuity thinking, as in ‘this is what I have believed all along’. It is a movement from strangeness to familiarity.

Usman, a white Welsh convert in his mid-forties, converted at the age of seventeen. He grew up as a member of the Church of England, not particularly religious but believing in God and considering himself a Christian. His prejudices led him into dialogue with Muslim students at his school:

‘It was around the time of the Salman Rushdie affair so it was all on the news with the books being burnt and all the rest of it. It wasn’t bullying, but I used to argue with the Muslim kids in the school a lot about this. I couldn’t get my head around it. “Why are you people so violent? Why do you oppress women? Why do you hijack aircrafts?” Nothing’s really changed. The religion has the same image [...] They weren’t from particularly religious families either. They would just say, “Don’t insult my religion”, but they had no arguments to offer back. The brother [*of a girl he was later to marry*] gave me a leaflet that someone had left in his house and said, “I can’t explain things, why don’t you read this?” I read it and I was a bit more interested because I realised how ignorant I was. My understanding of Islam was like Carry On films and Lawrence of Arabia. I didn’t have a proper reference point’.

Usman’s description of his initial hostility vis-à-vis Islam is not at all unique, as I have previously shown in the accounts of Jane and Amira. Inge, too, points out that Islam’s heightened public profile, particularly following 9/11 and 7/7, led many to inquire and ask questions about Islam. ‘The media attention that followed led people – including non-observant Muslims – to ask questions about one of the world’s most widely practiced religions, adhered to by friends, relatives, colleagues, and neighbours, and some were pleasantly surprised by the answers and attracted to the faith.’ (Inge, 2016:70). It has thus been a widespread pattern that – perhaps paradoxically – negative publicity triggered curiosity about Islam and often resulted in positive interest and a sense of familiarity. Usman described the realisation of his own ignorance as the door opener:

‘I thought it was an Arab or Indian religion and I certainly didn’t think it had anything to do with Christianity or Judaism or the Abrahamic faiths at all [...] Once I’d read this I felt quite ignorant. I wanted to meet somebody so they arranged for me to go to an Islamic awareness week in Swansea mosque. I didn’t even know we had a mosque in Swansea [...] That’s what prompted it. The brother was supposed to meet me there and he didn’t show up. I was waiting outside on a Saturday for over an hour thinking, “Is this guy coming or not?” I nearly just decided to go home. I thought, “I’ve come here now, and I’ve got all these questions. If I go home I’ll probably not come back again.” I walked through the door and that was it then. The rest was history.’

This episode raises an important point that appeared in many of the narratives: Usman described how discarding his prejudices towards Islam as ‘foreign’ went hand in hand with being surprised by the extent to which it appeared to be culturally and doctrinally familiar and comfortable. Although Basem’s case is slightly different because his narrative centers around shared non-whiteness and non-privilege that enabled him to identify with Islam and Muslims respectively, in all the cases presented in this chapter, narratives about adopting Islam are shaped by the way that ‘Islam’ has been positioned as ‘other’ by structures of racial and cultural privilege. It is the general perception of Islam as ‘other’ that is the very precondition for the experiences narrated by my interlocutors.

Realising that his preconceptions about Islam were wrong made Usman want to know more. ‘I was standing there for a few minutes wondering why all the shoes were there. Someone came down the stairs and looked Chinese and that really threw me and I thought, “I’m definitely in the wrong place.” He said, “Can I help you?” I found out he was Indonesian eventually. I didn’t know that people from that part of the world were Muslims’. Like Jane, Usman, for the first time in his life experienced diversity and a sense of internationality in the Muslim community that he encountered in the mosque. Here, Islam takes its meaning and appeal in relation to whiteness experienced as dominant and overpowering. In this context, Usman was not talking about ‘whiteness’ in the sense of ‘white privilege’ but rather about ‘whiteness’ as a homogenising familiarity. In this context, the socially rich world of Islam offers an escape from bland whiteness while still encompassing whiteness. ‘There were old guys and everything. It was like the United Nations of people. I didn’t assume they

were all Muslim either. I thought, “It must be international students from the uni and they’ve heard about this.” Then I found out I was the only white guy in the room, including the one who was speaking, who wasn’t Muslim.’ The experience of a new social world and the simultaneous escape from an overpowering bland whiteness is experienced as socially fulfilling. In Usman’s narrative, like in Jane’s before, Islam is portrayed as a route to universalism, rendering the converts’ experiences up to that point as parochial.

As is the case with many converts, the first contact with Muslims in the form of debates sparked an interest in the Qur’an. So Usman, too, read the Qur’an explicitly to find continuity. His way of approaching it was to look for names that he knew from the bible and see how much the Qur’an and the bible would coalesce on these topics:

‘In the school library I picked up a copy of the Qur’an in English and didn’t know where to begin. If you read it in English it doesn’t make any sense. There’s no beginning, middle and end like a story. I just picked the surah called, “Mary” because I thought, “I wonder if this is the same Mary?” and it was. Chapter nineteen was the first one I read. The story was just so familiar. I used to carry it around in the school then. Not in any kind of order, but trying to see the names and think, ‘I wonder if that’s the one that appears in the Bible?’.

There is familiarity and continuity in Usman’s narrative, but also a curiosity about and desire to experience diversity and a new social world that is not exclusively white. Usman narrates the appeal of Islam through the interplay of continuity and newness, rather than just as continuity. Thereafter, Usman described a short period of questioning (himself and Muslims) and researching to be sure that conversion was the right thing to do. In Usman’s case this period was particularly short:

‘It didn’t really take long for me to make the decision. It was quite fast. I just had to be sure in my own mind. I did believe in God, as long as I’m convinced it’s the same God – I had no interest in becoming a Buddhist, a Hare Krishna or a Sikh or anything else, or even a Jew. As long as I was convinced that

Islam was the continuation and the most up to date version of this message and it's the same God that I believe in anyway'.

In Usman's narrative Islam appears as the natural continuation of Christianity. The trope of continuity is explicit and central. As a Christian, the natural development in his faith was Islam as the continuation and improved version of what he already believed. 'It's the same God. From my point of view I wouldn't go backwards. If Christianity was the updated message then I wouldn't go back to Judaism and say "That's a purer form of the religion". I'd want to follow what is the most up to date message.' Conversion thus appears as a teleological project. To be properly 'up to date' in terms of belief, he converts to Islam.

At this point I would like to point out an observation regarding converts' narratives in general, Usman's narrative in particular, and what I will call 'Islam's autobiography'. The idea of continuity is part of Islamic doctrine about its relation to the older monotheisms of Judaism and Christianity; we might say it is part of 'Islam's autobiography' as written by authoritative Muslim scholars. The data I gathered and compared to other cases of conversion, especially in a Christian context, suggest that religions' autobiographies (the authorized accounts of how these religions emerged and position themselves in relation to other religions, e.g. Christianity as a New Covenant, rupturing in significant theological ways from the Old Covenant) get reflected in socially authorized individual autobiographies (Christian conversion is experienced as a rupture with an old way of life). The same appears to hold for Islam in my study: the theological claim in the autobiography of Islam is that it represents continuity – not rupture – in relation to earlier monotheisms. The doctrine of *tahṛīf* posits that Islam is the rediscovery and confirmation of a truer, authentic self that had been there all along but obscured by later deviations (Lazarus-Yafeh, 2012). I found this doctrine reflected in socially authorized individual autobiographies where conversion is narrated as a rediscovery of something that had been there all along. In some individual autobiographies such as Jane's and Basem's, this narration of continuity, or rediscovery of the authentic identity, is racially inflected and shaped by contemporary power relations of privilege and marginalization where Orientalist tropes of Islam as foreign or 'Eastern' map onto this authorized biography, becoming the 'deviations' which obscure the familiarity or authenticity that had been there all along.

Conversion is thus narrated on an individual level as an affirmation of already held beliefs rather than an adoption of new ones, in a way that reflects Islam's own authorised biography. One may now ask how that relates to the argument about racialization. In the case of non-white converts the argument may present itself in the following way: Islam is recognised as a racialised, non-white religion in a Muslim-minority context, which appeals as 'culturally' familiar, and not just as theologically familiar, to converts of colour generally and to those who find themselves in disadvantageous social positions by virtue of the intersection of their class and ethnicity particularly. In these cases, recognition of theological familiarity and sociological familiarity are mutually imbricated. In the case of white converts, the casting off of Orientalist prejudice goes hand in hand with the discovery of an already existing theological familiarity. At the same time, there is also a sociological movement from otherness to familiarity, though not in the same way as was the case for non-white converts: Usman's discovery that the Swansea Muslim community looked like the 'United Nations of people' means that it is all-inclusive socially. In sociological terms, Islam is capable of internationalism by encompassing people of all colours and backgrounds, including white people. In Usman's narrative Islam appears as encompassing the earlier monotheisms theologically, and as encompassing people of all ethnicities sociologically, which he experiences as exciting and fulfilling. Again, these two discoveries seem mutually imbricated.

At different times during interviews and conversations I found it hard to discern whether the narrative I was hearing was still the convert's or whether it had turned into a narrative of Islam itself. The boundary between the two, it seemed, is porous so that the converts' narratives easily slipped into the doctrinal discourse of Islam as 'continuation'. This observation extends beyond my own research (cf. Zebiri, 2008). In Özyürek's study of German converts to Islam she cites one speaker at the 'German-speaking Muslim circle' as he explains his conversion: 'When I converted to Islam twenty years ago, I was convinced with the clarity and comprehensibility of this belief [...] It appeared so rational, so reasonable, so close to the reality that I never had the impression that I was taking on a new belief. Rather, I felt that I was rediscovering my own innate belief, the belief I always carried in me.' (Özyürek, 2015:32). Here again, the speaker narrates continuity, naturalness and re-discovery of an authentic original belief, tapping into the discourse of *tahrīf*, which will be dealt with in more detail in chapter four. Suffice it to point out for now that there is a whole

discourse in Islamic modernism about the role of reason and rationality in Islam. And while Özyürek brings up this quote specifically in the context of German converts' efforts to position Islam as congruent with the German Enlightenment (and specifically the role of 'reason'), there is also a striking similarity between the speaker's autobiographical account and 'Islam's autobiography'. I therefore suggest that these authorized doctrines are one source of my interlocutors' narrations of continuity in their own lives in the sense that they biographise this doctrinal claim in their own individual life stories, experiencing continuity in their own life histories.¹²

This argument that individual autobiographies of conversion pattern themselves on socially authorized biographies of the religion, strengthens the case for challenging theoretical models of conversion as rupture. While there will always be elements of both rupture and continuity, why give the former theoretical primacy over the latter? There seems to be a markedly Christian element in this tendency. The accounts I present overwhelmingly narrate continuity. Rupture enters the narrative particularly with respect to the converts' close social networks but not where belief and the inner orientation are concerned. This data therefore supports the argument that it is not religious doctrines of *salvation* that shape conversion accounts (which is generally the assumption – salvation as rupture with the old way of life in Christianity; salvation as acquisition of textual or mystical knowledge in Islam) but that conversion accounts are shaped by religions' own *autobiographies*, the doctrines of their relation to other religions (Christianity as rupture with Judaism; Islam as continuity with previous monotheisms).

Usman made clear that he was not looking for religion when he encountered Islam. He had a Christian identity and was not searching spiritually. But as his prejudices crumbled he realized – much like Jane – that he should more appropriately call himself 'Muslim' purely based on the theological content of his beliefs.

¹² Other studies have also found that a certain religious language comes to inscribe itself in conversion accounts. For instance, Rambo points out that the language of converts changes sometimes quite drastically with first contact of a new religious group so that converts in many Christian groups refer to themselves as "sinners" (Rambo, 1993:119). Likewise, Zebiri noticed in her interviews that converts frequently used phrases and concepts from the Qur'an and Sunna to describe their conversion. She thus suggests 'a high level of internalisation of a Qur'anic "worldview"' among British converts (Zebiri, 2008:103).

‘I wasn’t looking for anything [...] I didn’t have an intention to [*convert*] anyway. I had some prejudices, I’d been given something which I read which made me realise I was quite ignorant and should perhaps eat a bit of humble pie or be more informed before I start having these arguments with people, but I wasn’t looking for a religion. I felt, “I’m a Christian.” I was brought up in that faith. I had no need or desire to change but it’s just when confronted with what I’d read it was, “Having been exposed to this and read this now I can’t pretend that I haven’t read it. I can’t pretend I don’t know this.” I had to make a decision [...] For me I couldn’t continue as if I hadn’t been exposed to this material or read this. I had to make a decision about it. That was it. It was quite quick and it was *purely based on what I already believed* and that this seemed to make sense. The cultural stuff is weird, so it seemed like a very alien religion on the surface because all the people around me who were practising couldn’t be more different from me in terms of their physical appearance, lifestyle, language, everything. When you boil down what the beliefs are you could practise it anywhere in the world as long as you adhere to your own culture.’

This description is very far from accounts that narrate some sort of crisis. It is, rather, the narration of a conversion that grew out of the mundane, out of everyday life, and out of an already existent belief. Usman’s story was so saturated with the theme of continuity and even sameness that I ended up asking him whether he considered his conversion a ‘conversion’ at all. He answered that he did because he previously did not practice Islamic rituals and did not know the faith. But once he did know, he realised that these beliefs were his, and that he only needed to change his practice. Conversion then amounts to appropriating something which one should have had – or been – all along:

‘That’s not to say I was walking around being a Muslim and not knowing it. Obviously I didn’t know any of the rituals and things. In terms of the core belief I was a unitarian Christian. A Christian who believed in the message, in the stories, in the morals in terms of how people should treat others. I didn’t believe in God as a human being, but as a force that you can’t really describe. Even though I would say the words, “Jesus is the son of God,” it didn’t mean

anything other than maybe something allegorical. I didn't associate this with being the child of God. It was more like this was a super version of a prophet and his stories were part of a continuation of stories in the Bible from Noah and Abraham and so on. His was the final chapter. I didn't think of Christianity in a trinitarian sense. I didn't have to wrestle with that. I had a very simplistic idea of God and it seemed to fit perfectly with the Islamic description of God. Yet it wasn't something different. The story and everything was a continuation'.

For Usman it was as if he had found in Islam an accurate description of his beliefs that provided him with a framework for practice. As in Jane's account, conversion for Usman amounted to labelling himself correctly and following suit in terms of practice. Even his upbringing seemed almost like a preparation for eventually converting to Islam, because the manners he had learnt were the same and only became refined by 'labelling' himself 'Muslim'. 'Generally the upbringing that I had in terms of how you treat people and how you behave, having manners and queuing and being polite and a sense of justice and fair play, they'd already been established. All you've got now is something that keeps you a bit more on the straight and narrow because you've got a label as a religious person.' As Usman looked back at different aspects of his life the framework of Islam allowed him to make sense of his whole life in terms of Islam. More than continuity, conversion offers a sense of wholeness where different life events appear as connected to one another and where everything that happened pre-conversion is understood as a preparation for the corrective measure, which is a necessary part in the teleological project aimed at Islam.

The Testimony

In this chapter I have let my informants speak about their conversion experience to Islam. While it may seem trivial to do so, it is worth pointing out that the object of analysis here has not been the conversion experience itself but rather the convert's narrative account *of* the conversion experience. Among the studies of 'testimonies' I have found Stromberg's (1993) publication about language and self-transformation in narrative conversion accounts particularly insightful. As Stromberg rightly points out,

social scientists by and large do not record conversion experiences. The observable event, which is then recorded in one way or another, is the conversion *narrative* and the analyst cannot assume that the conversion narrative unproblematically reflects the historical events and the person's immediate reactions to those events as they happened (ibid.:14-5). Hence, the object of study is not the experience itself but the testimony of that experience. These accounts as analysed by Stromberg display some relevant features that I will discuss subsequently. In brief, narrative conversion accounts are highly conventionalized linguistic performances invested with intense personal meaning. In being performed, narrative conversion accounts must not merely be seen as a retelling of the original event but as constitutive acts akin to rituals that create a social reality by allowing the believer to make sense of the otherwise inarticulable through the use of canonical language.

Narrative conversion accounts have been the object of numerous anthropological studies. The literature is particularly rich within the context of conversion to forms of Evangelical Christianity (Engelke, 2004; Meyer, 1998; Robbins, 2004; Webster, 2013). While conversion to Evangelical Christianity certainly differs from conversion to Islam in important aspects, the comparative material still helps to shed light on the narrative accounts presented here. Conversion narratives are not only a particular genre of speech, but giving testimony is 'a distinct linguistic practice' (Webster, 2013:105), which does not only recount conversion to a certain religious orthodoxy but which uses a specific religious language, which Stromberg calls the 'canonical language' (Stromberg, 1993:12). Moreover, the conversion narrative expressed in canonical language is a constitutive act in so far as it creates or brings about a certain social reality – in Webster's or Stromberg's case, this social reality is the identity of an Evangelical Christian and in my case it is the identity of a Muslim believer. Offering a narrative conversion account is a constitutive act as the believer redefines the self. Therefore, Webster asserts, there is nothing more 'sincere' or 'deeper' to be had. Prejudiced against the shallow in favour of that which is to be sought beneath the surface, Webster, like Stromberg, focuses on the act of retelling because it is 'through the standardised performance of rehearsing the self to the other [...] that one is known and made knowable as a sincere and committed Christian' (Webster, 2013:106-7) or, in my study, Muslim.

In Stromberg's and Webster's analysis, the canonical language serves as a bridge that allows the believer to connect his own particular situation with the religion

and to understand an experience and the Word of God in the same terms (Stromberg, 1993:11). Because believers do not only convert to a new religion but also to a specific religious language – the canonical language – we come to understand why testimonies display a ‘highly conventionalized’ form while describing intensely personal and idiosyncratic experiences (Crapanzano, 2000:32). Engelke, Webster and Stromberg respectively have taken note that the performance of testifying by converts to Evangelical Christianity has in their experience ‘relied on the reproduction of predictable forms of narrative’ where the conversion account takes on a particular and conventional – that is shared – linguistic structure (Webster, 2013:103). Engelke describes how the conversion stories presented by converts in Zimbabwe are all much alike: a misfortune of some kind happens and is followed by a series of ameliorative efforts, which do not work until the person meets an apostolic prophet (Engelke, 2004: 92). Webster’s fishermen in Scottish Gamrie are ‘born-again’ in strikingly similar ways, where emotional and bodily acts of self-revelation, such as sobbing, crying, trembling and covering one’s face, are performed to show one’s commitment to the faith, to celebrate one’s transformation and – Webster adds to Stromberg’s analysis – to stir the listener and also to convert him to that faith. Inasmuch, Webster sees the conversion narrative not only as a constitutive act but also as an ‘explicitly evangelistic exercise’ (Webster, 2013:102) to transform the self and the other.

While the strong displays of emotion described by Engelke, Haynes and Webster are markedly absent from the narrative accounts I collected, they did display a high level of conventionality in that they tapped into a pre-existent linguistic structure. This structure, in the case of converts to Islam took approximately the shape of feeling an initial scepticism and sometimes hostility toward Islam, which in one way or another led the convert into arguments with Muslims. The becoming aware of one’s own ignorance was frequently described as a humbling experience and an eye-opener, which then sparked an inquisitive interest in Islam. As the convert learned about Islam he realized the overlap and even sameness between the original beliefs and Islam’s teachings. Islamic teachings are appropriated as belonging to oneself and conversion occurs as the ‘natural’ and ‘logical’ consequence of ‘updating’ of an older, already existent belief. Continuity is emphasised and life events re-evaluated in terms of Islam as everything the convert did and was led him to conversion. As pointed out earlier, this linguistic structure mirrors Islam’s autobiography as the last and most ‘up-to-date’ of the Abrahamic religions.

Instead of following Stromberg in his psychological interpretation of the narrative accounts he gathered, I would like to point in a different direction, for which Stromberg's identification of 'canonical language' is key. While Stromberg recognises the 'conventional' nature of conversion narratives as well as the use of a shared 'canonical language', there is a missing link between the two. In my view the connection between these two key elements is what I have called the religion's own autobiography. Put differently, the religion's autobiography inscribes itself in the convert's autobiography through the use of canonical language, which is why idiosyncratic experiences of conversion appear as conventional in conversion narratives. The convert comes to understand his own conversion in a paradigmatic way, which is consonant with the overarching paradigm of the religion he adopted. The canonical language (in Christianity, rupture from the old covenant; in Islam, the completion of earlier monotheisms) is the language that is used in authorised sources of the religion at hand (e.g. the doctrine of *tahrīf*), and is reflected in the narrative accounts offered.

Because Stromberg was studying Christian narrative accounts, his conclusion – that narrative accounts always revolve around underlying contradictions and hence narrate 'rupture' – seemed plausible. But conceding that he observed 'rupture' in the accounts he gathered *because* he was dealing with Christian narrative accounts, which are based on Christianity's self-perception as 'ruptured' (from the old covenant), troubles his finding that conversion narratives should *always* revolve around rupture. Rather, I contend, the linguistic form that a narrative takes will necessarily depend on the religion at hand. In the case of Islam, with its self-perception as an 'update' to earlier monotheisms, Islamic conversion narratives will mostly feature continuity. The lesson to be drawn from Stromberg is that the narration of 'continuity', which was so dominant, shared, and hence conventional in the accounts I gathered, must be seen as 'canonical language' – as a specific religious language, which creates a tangency between the convert's idiosyncratic experience and the religion at large.

From the Anthropology of Conversion

In the anthropology of Christianity, studies of conversion have emphasised the importance of rupture. Authors like Robbins (2004, 2007) and Engelke (2004) have,

in their studies of conversion to Christianity in Papua New Guinea and Zimbabwe, respectively emphasised the rupture that conversion introduces into the convert's life, writing against what they perceived as the anthropological pitfall of 'continuity thinking' (Robbins, 2007:5). Anthropology as a 'science of continuity' (ibid.:6) had in their view suggested socio-cultural continuity in different forms of syncretism when in fact conversion frequently involved a complete break with the past. They take issue with anthropology's failure to theorise discontinuity, which is central in some forms of conversion to Christianity. As a 'science' of continuity which has by and large assumed that the objects of study (symbols, meanings, structures) have 'an enduring quality' and do not lend themselves to change anthropology as a discipline has failed to recognise that radical change is possible. 'Christian converts tend to represent the process of becoming Christian as one of radical change. One does not evolve into a convert. One does not convert by slow, almost imperceptible steps such that one might become Christian without even knowing it.' (ibid.:11). While Engelke and Robbins refer to non-Western Christians, Webster reaches the same conclusion for his Scottish informants in Gamrie (Webster, 2013). Yet, Robbins' description of how conversion to Christianity does *not* work, is simultaneously a good description of how conversion to Islam can work.

Indeed, the narrative of rupture, primarily in terms of *inner belief*, seems to be characteristic of Christian conversion accounts, as evidenced in numerous anthropological studies of conversion. When Harris (2009:53) points out that 'as a conversion religion, Christianity creates an absolute break between a pre-Christian past and the present, with its hope of salvation', Cannell (2006:38) confirms the view that 'the dominant Christian ideas of personal conversion depend on a break in time. Conversion changes the individual, and however much he might backslide, the event itself cannot be undone. We might say that the hierarchical relation of the "world beyond" and the "world of the here and now" established in a salvationist Christianity has a temporal dimension. Time following conversion is not just time after but time beyond'. Even ethnographies that are hesitant to use the term 'conversion', such as Haynes' (2017) study of 'alternation' from other forms of Christianity to Pentecostalism on the Zambian copperbelt, resemble the model of Pauline conversion in that they entail drastic change. Such 'alternation' stories begin with an intractable problem, such as the inability to conceive a child or an inheritance dispute. Believers go to lengths for relief and nothing changes until they hear about a particular

Pentecostal leader through neighbours or relatives. Only after meeting this particular leader does the 'stubborn situation' change (Haynes, 2017:60). Drastic change ensues with physical signs of relief, such as crying and relief from tightness in the chest, as believers achieve 'breakthroughs such as deliverance, resolution of a conflict, or the miraculous provision of a job, a spouse, or a child.' (ibid.:61). While Haynes, in following Travisano (1981), does not call the process 'conversion', it does entail the drastic character of a Christian conversion.

The trope of extreme change and the narrative of 'being saved' in conversion to Christianity is so dominant that studies, which highlight other forms of conversion, appear as an exception. Gow's (2006) study of the Piro in Peruvian Amazonia is such a rare instance where large scale conversion ensued the missionary encounter with the Summer Institute of Linguistics. However, as his interlocutors recount the period of conversion, they maintain that Evangelical Christianity explained more accurately what they had believed all along and did not really constitute conversion in the Protestant sense. Indeed, the Piro seem to have 'forgotten' that they converted at all:

'First, it would seem that Piro people did not experience Evangelical Christianity to be a new religion, in the sense of a new set of beliefs or as a cosmology. Evangelical Christianity was simply their own cosmology better explained by people who knew more about it. They were already believing Christians when they converted, and conversion was not a radically interior spiritual or mental transformation, but a new way of living out an already extant cosmology.' (ibid.:221-2).

This account of Christian conversion is, of course, at odds with the Protestant tradition, wherein 'conversion and faith are radically interiorized states. Conversion is being born again, coming to experience salvation as an exclusively personal transformation in relationship to the world and to God.' (ibid.:218). Rutherford's (2006) is another example of an anthropological study of Christian conversion as continuity, where the Biaks of Irian Jaya (Indonesia) fit the arrival of Christianity into their cosmology of adopting 'foreign' things as part of their identity, seeing conversion as natural continuity in a 'genealogy of alien sources of identity' (ibid.:254).

While studies that contradict the Pauline model of drastic inner reorientation exist even within the anthropology of Christianity, they are the rare exception to a rule, and Cannell points out that ‘societies that recount conversion as part of a narrative of traumatic change [...] are much more readily comprehensible from a Christian perspective than those that “forget” it has happened, or which construe it as just one in a series of similar foreign arrivals in the past and the future’ (Cannell, 2006:38). This is in line with my contention that conversion narratives – of groups or of individuals – model themselves on the religion’s own autobiography. Thus, notwithstanding Gow and Rutherford, it is in line with the Christian autobiography, in which the new covenant is a cut from the old covenant and derives its meaning from the drastic change of ‘being saved’, that Christian conversion narratives follow this pattern, in which pre- and post-conversion time is mirrored in the Christian time of BC and AD.

For the most part, I saw the portrayal of drastic change replicated in the studies of conversion to Islam that exist to date in the social sciences. While Köse recognizes that a previous belief in Christianity was ‘helpful in understanding Islam’ (1994:198), he still maintains that conversion to Islam entailed ‘profound change’ in beliefs, practices and life style (ibid.:196). ‘Converts to Islam’, Köse explains, ‘by the act of pronouncing the *shahdda* (declaration of faith), accepted the oneness of God, and the Prophet Muhammad as His last messenger. The idea of Jesus being God or the Son of God was dropped and the doctrine of the Trinity was refused.’ (ibid.:198). This of course, is at odds with my interlocutors’ narrations, in which they explained having believed in the oneness of God and Jesus’ status as prophet all along. Likewise, Inge’s study of conversion to Salafism highlights the drastic change involved in the process: ‘Such was the transformative and all-encompassing nature of this process that even some of the women with Muslim backgrounds described it using conversionist language. A few referred to ‘becoming Muslim’ or ‘reverting’, striking an interesting similarity with ‘born-again’ Christian narratives’ (2016:62). Some of the women described themselves as having been ‘blind’ before embracing Salafism while others referred to their pre-Salafi days as ‘jahiliyya’, referring to the pre-Islamic age of ignorance. ‘Salafi teachings’, Inge explains, ‘actually encourage followers to understand their journey into Salafism as a radical identity renegotiation’ (ibid.). Inasmuch, the experience Inge describes probably does come closer to the

born-again accounts from the anthropology of Christianity, owing to the extreme nature with which Salafism demands a return to the roots.

For the converts I met, conversion was a slow, almost imperceptible process. However, Robbins points out ‘conversion itself, however long it takes to get there, is always an event, a rupture in the time line of a person’s life that cleaves it into a before and after between which there is a moment of disconnection’ (Robbins, 2007:10-1). In other words, every conversion entails a moment – however subtle or ostentatious it may be – which can be seen as the boundary at which a non-member is turned into a member. In becoming a Christian baptism is an obvious ritual, which performs the duty of delineating membership. While in the accounts I gathered becoming a Muslim did not entail the ‘drama’ of being ‘born again’, there was always a moment, after which a believer considered himself a Muslim as the testimonies I presented show. As Engelke points out, in conversion there is a ‘clear distinction between being and not being’ and this difference ‘is indicative of a break’ (Engelke, 2004:104). There is a distinct ‘before’ and a distinct ‘after’, which Usman honoured when he rejected my suggestion that he might not have converted at all by saying ‘That’s not to say I was walking around being a Muslim and not knowing it. Obviously I didn’t know any of the rituals and things.’ For him – as for many others – converting meant learning a new praxis for an existent belief, rather than an inner re-orientation. Taking the *shahada* was often – but not always – referred to as the moment, which divided one’s life into ‘before’ and ‘after’, which in the context of conversion to Islam had the heightened significance of having all one’s sins forgiven and being able to start with a ‘clean slate’ or a ‘white vest’.

Asad’s (1993) critique of Geertz’s (1966) definition of belief targets its character as a ‘modern, privatised Christian one’ in prioritising ‘belief’ as a ‘state of mind rather than as a constituting activity in the world’ (Robbins, 2007:14). In order to illuminate this said modern and private character of belief as discussed in Geertz, Robbins distinguishes between two broad senses of the verb ‘to believe’: ‘to believe in’ and ‘to believe that’. The first (‘to believe in God’) implies trust and commitment to act in a certain way as well as certainty about what one is saying and how one acts in consequence. ‘To believe that’ is applied to propositional statements (‘to believe that God exists’) and implies – contrary to ‘to know that’ – uncertainty. Because by ‘believing in God’ a believer pledges himself to God, belief in this sense is ‘an act’ rather than a ‘state of mind’. ‘It is probably only moderns, and perhaps only elite

moderns, who have understood themselves primarily to be engaged in believing that certain propositions are true about the world.’ (ibid.). While for Robbins’ informants in Papua New Guinea, ‘believing’ meant ‘trusting God to do what he promised’ and acting accordingly (ibid.:15) and was ‘not about mentally assenting to a set of propositions about him’, the latter summarises what believing is largely about for modern Muslim converts.

“‘Belief that’ models of religions and cultures lend themselves to continuity thinking. They do this by encouraging those who use them to treat religions and cultures as made up of a wide assortment of different propositions to which people assent. Radical change would, such models have it, require the elimination of most older propositions. Since such wholesale elimination of older propositions rarely or never occurs, it is not difficult from the point of view of these models to find continuity lurking in almost all cases of apparent change.’ (ibid.:15)

The converts’ narratives take an explicitly modern form by narrating continuity, as they narrate conversion in ‘belief that’ terms, a theme that will be dealt with in detail in the next chapter. Through the elimination of only some propositional statements of belief, the converts are able to maintain most of their faith framework and thus establish continuity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the narratives of conversion to Islam that I gathered during my fieldwork were mainly shaped by two forces. The first force was the way that Islam was positioned as ‘other’, which for some converts – especially where ethnicity came into the equation – was very appealing. But even white converts like Usman narrated their conversion in relation to an overpowering but homogenising whiteness, from which Islam offered an exit. In these accounts, Islam appeared as a route to universalism, rendering all experiences to date as provincial and somehow ignorant. The second force that shaped the narratives were what I called Islam’s ‘autobiography’ as an update to and a continuation of the older monotheisms. In line

with this socially sanctioned account of the religion itself, converts narrated nearly flawless continuity in terms of belief. In fact, they often discovered, Islam better described what they had believed all along. There was no rupture in terms of belief and in so far my data challenges how conversion is generally theorised, precisely as ‘rupture’ primarily in terms of belief. The kind of inner rerouting, the individual ‘turning’ or the interior cognitive reorientation envisioned in the Pauline conversion model does not feature in the accounts that my interlocutors offered. Rather, the sense of familiarity on the level of belief stands in stark contrast to the sense of alienation and rupture experienced vis-à-vis the family, as was evident in the first two chapters.

My informants came to Islam via very different routes. While some took an explicitly intellectual approach, almost ‘scanning’ different religions and being convinced through ‘reason’, others had profoundly spiritual experiences including dreams that led them to embrace Islam. Many converts had been spiritual seekers for a while and narrated their conversion as a ‘natural development’ and the culmination of a ‘spiritual journey’. Jacob explained how he had explored different spiritual paths, practiced yoga, learned meditation, studied psychology and dream analysis and finally got acquainted with non-Islamic Sufism before converting. As he put it, Islam offered an ‘outer manifestation to an inner belief’ he already had and as such conversion was not a rupture or identity crisis but a ‘natural’ development along his spiritual path. Many converts recounted similar stories of continuity – and even ‘sameness’ – often using the metaphor of a ‘journey’ to describe their experiences of conversion.

However, the theme of continuity was not confined to active spiritual seekers. Among my informants some converts emphasised that they had not been looking for religion when they came across Islam. In these narrations, too, continuity resurfaced where an interest in Islamic art could lead to close contact with Muslims, and conversion could eventually ensue purely through ‘art, food, and friendship’, as one convert put it. These accounts by converts who had not explicitly been looking for religion, but who had arrived at Islam through a certain milieu or interest, hint at a trajectory where continuity is experienced not only on a spiritual level. The narratives introduced through Jane, Amira and Basem all testify to the experience of continuity in conversion with respect to the ‘cultural’ and social milieu.

Chapter Four – The Religious Modern: Rationalism and Mysticism in Conversion to Islam

'I think I was probably always more of a rationalist, shall we say. I could never reconcile my old faith — I probably did it out of culture but when somebody pinned you down about the mysticism of the faith I never bought into it because it didn't quite make sense. Birth, rebirth, an animal and you try to do good deeds and you become a human, if you're a good human your eventual aim was nothingness. I remember thinking, 'What's the point? You do all this hard work and then nothing. If I come back as an animal, what's the point? I probably won't have a brain to think about it.'

– Ismael, Birmingham, convert from Hinduism –

A Religion of Logic

Farida had contacted me through a mutual acquaintance that told her about my research. She and her husband Cosmo, who converted, volunteered to participate in my research, and they invited me to their house in Cardiff in November 2016. Both Cosmo and Farida were educated as medics and come from a well-situated middle class background. Farida is an outgoing, warm woman in her mid-forties who greets me cordially as she picks me up from the station. Arriving at their home, I meet Cosmo, who is a few years younger than Farida, and their three teenage children. We sit down with tea and biscuits and I introduce myself in the usual way, outlining the purpose of my research broadly and explaining my interest in conversion. After some conversation, we start the interview, with Cosmo narrating his upbringing. Born to a Greek Orthodox mother and an atheist Welsh father, Cosmo remembers that early on as a child and adolescent he was impressed by his father's scientific interests. Explaining why he followed his father in his scientific interests rather than his mother in her religious pursuit, he states plainly: 'Logic. Logical sense. It made logical sense to me that, you know, you had good scientific explanations for the universe and that's

what we should follow rather than something which is blind and doesn't make sense [...] So there I was as an eighteen-year-old very driven by logic and science and out to get anyone with religious beliefs I think, with poorly formed arguments'. At the time religion and science seemed irreconcilable to Cosmo. He felt attracted by his father's approach because he saw him as an intellectual, something he aspired to and starkly contrasted with his mother's lack of education: 'my mother didn't have a university degree'.

Throughout the day I spend with Cosmo and his family, the themes of 'rationality', 'logic' and 'science' resurface time and again. It is important to Cosmo to be seen as 'a rationalist'. As he narrates his journey to Islam I am surprised that he presents 'science' and 'rationality' as the driving forces behind his conversion. Even though I am not unfamiliar with this line of argumentation, it is the first time – if not the last – that someone so clearly portrays his conversion through the rationalist lens. It wasn't until university that Cosmo really came into contact with Muslims, including Farida who was enrolled in his medical degree programme:

'I tried to challenge these people [his Muslim fellow students at medical school] as I had challenged other people before, in particular one of my Pakistani friends and Farida. When I found out about their religious beliefs I was determined to crush it and refute and argue [...] I'd always had this idea that science and religion were mutually exclusive although what I found with all the Muslims that I knew was that they were quite happy to accept both of these spheres as having plenty of crossover. And my initial forays into Islam, the Qur'an and trying to understand these things in greater depth was in that context. "Ok, I'm a scientist, what does the Qur'an say about science?" [...] we were using an anatomy book in our first year in medical school that was written by Keith Moore and Keith Moore is a famous embryologist and Keith Moore in his foreword to the embryology book starts talking about the Qur'anic verses that he was amazed that someone like Muhammad, peace be upon him, would have known the things that he knew 1400 years ago. He never said that he was Muslim but he was making a very strong statement in the foreword to his book and that was the anatomy book that we used, the embryology book that we were using. So again I was confused: this man is a scientist, he's being put up there on the pedestal as you know 'this is the book

we are using in anatomy’, yet he is saying that he is amazed that a man who lived 1400 years ago could have had this knowledge and I think that pushed me more and more into reading more and more about what was in the Qur’an related to science’.

In Cosmo’s narrative – as in many other convert testimonies that I came across during my fieldwork – ‘science’, ‘logic’ and ‘rationality’ feature strongly as descriptive adjectives of Islam and as driving motivators for conversion. A recurring trope in my informants’ narratives, and thus the empirical issue of this chapter, is the rationalistic presentation of conversion to Islam. This issue in turn is linked to the question of how converts test the truth of Islam. The argumentative shape of this recurring trope is always similar: I am a scientist / a rationalist. I found that the Qur’an contains scientific truths that had not been discovered at the time of Muhammad and therefore it must be of divine origin. Islam as a religion is logical in its teachings. Hence, the ultimate step of being a rational, science-oriented person is conversion to Islam. The excerpt above outlining Cosmo’s upbringing, his admiration for a science-oriented atheist father and his very explicit portrayal of conversion for the sake of rationality is not unique. Laura portrayed her conversion in a similar fashion, emphasising the amazing scientific truths in the Qur’an as ‘clincher’. Coming from a lower-to-middle class, non-religious background in Birmingham the twenty-nine-year-old woman described her ‘love’ of science and the workings of her inquisitive mind when she first encountered Amjad, who was later to become her husband:

‘Like when you go to the bathroom you have to wash yourself. I thought, “But why?” I don’t understand why you have to do that. Why do you have to pray five times a day? Why can you only eat certain meats? Why can’t you drink? I didn’t understand. At the time I thought, “I’m not comfortable just asking him why you do this. I’ll read into it a bit more myself first.” That’s really where I went from. I’m quite science-y. I love science, so I started looking into that. The Qur’an is 1500 years old and there’s revelations in this book that’s that old that have only been proved by science in the last 100 years [...] For me it’s the way they described the stages of pregnancy. They’re very specific. It’s

not like, “They’re this big and this big.” It’s specific, “It looks like a blood clot, it looks like a leech.” I thought, “That’s very accurate.” Then how it describes the shape of the world as being like an ostrich egg. When I looked up an ostrich egg I thought, “Yes, that’s what it’s like.” I was having a conversation with Wardan [Laura’s brother in law] about it. One thing you could be like, “It’s a lucky guess.” But when it’s more and more things it’s harder to say, “This is just a coincidence that this has happened.” It really went from there.’

Throughout our conversation Laura depicted her conversion as being propelled by critical inquiry. Asking about Islamic rituals and prescription, she came to accept them based on the Qur’anic ‘scientific truths’ that she found as a warrant for Islam’s validity. The questioning of heritage Muslims about their practice is also a common theme among many converts and often offers a first entry point into engagement with Islam. Like Laura, Hannah, a woman in her early forties from east London, started her first inquiries by talking to Muslims in her immediate surroundings. She, too, found their answers reasonable and logically satisfactory. Hannah, too, used her rational faculties to convince herself of the truth of Islam. But for her rationality meant internal coherence of arguments and the non-contradictory character of Islamic teachings, more than scientific discoveries that had been preceded by Islamic revelation. She saw the urgency of a creator in the Aristotelian sense (there has to be an origin to everything, an ‘uncaused causer’) and found Islam to be a ‘logical’ religion. When converts talked about ‘rationalism’, ‘reason’ or even ‘science’, they meant slightly different things by it¹³, hence these terms, which are used alternatively and sometimes as synonyms, need unpacking. Converts use the fuzzy concept ‘science’ as a *rhetoric* or *mode of persuasion* (something by which one is

¹³ Converts never defined ‘science’ clearly but rather used it as a fuzzy concept (see Nguyen & Walker, 2006). Coming out of a Mathematics background ‘fuzzy concepts’ impart imprecise or vague information in our use of language (e.g. ‘John is old’) and are contrasted with clearly defined concepts (‘John is 40 years old’). So when my informants use the term ‘science’ it should be understood as such a fuzzy concept, which may include information or knowledge, which would not necessarily be considered ‘scientific’ in a strict sense. Membership in a fuzzy category is a matter of degree rather than certainty (ibid:11). Neslihan’s call to apply logical reasoning is a good illustration of the kind of fuzziness at work: ‘*Islam is a religion of logic*, really. Put it through your logic as well. It’s fine, your logic is a little bit different from mine. It’s fine. I’m sure Allah will accept it because we’re all different, genetically. Do we share exactly the same genetics? No. Remember the spectrum, every individual, like snowflakes are all different. Let’s take it easy with each other. Be tolerant.’

‘convinced’). The description ‘science-y’ used by Laura, expresses this fuzziness. Some converts, like Cosmo, found the arguments and examples of Muslim believers coherent and consonant with scientific thinking. Others, like Laura, were explicitly convinced by those *suras* in the Qur’an that relate to natural phenomena. Yet others, like Hannah, followed a rational, philosophical inquiry into the origin of all things. After determining that there had to be a God, they went on to screen different religions for their power of conviction by rational argument. Coming from an atheist background with a culturally Jewish mother Hannah had been to Catholic school and had thus been somewhat familiar with the teachings of Christianity. Asked whether she saw herself as science minded, she described the kind of rationality at work:

‘Yes, that's what I had been raised with at school and there was no idea of a God at home. But when this idea of there being a God came into my mind I started to question it and ask, “What if?” After a few months I started to think that it actually makes sense. A Big Bang doesn't come from anywhere, there has to be an origin even to that. I thought, I'm OK to accept that there is a God. That was the first step. After that I was unsure what to do with it. Up until that point I had studied Christianity and that was a “No”. *The idea that God was a trinity and he had a son that walked on the earth sounded preposterous, crazy and illogical to me.* I didn't understand why such a powerful and magnificent God would send a human in the form of a man to earth. I knew Christianity was certainly not the one. Judaism did strike a chord with me in terms of the idea that they believe in one God. This wasn't because of my mum or my aunties, as I had the opportunity to choose my own religion.’

On screening different religions for their validity, Hannah elaborated:

‘*To me Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism were all illogical.* The idea that God comes in the form of an idol, something that man has made out of clay seemed *illogical*. God doesn't need to come into these idols; he's too great for that. There was a bit of warmth towards Judaism but at the same time I had Muslim friends around me. They were not practicing Muslims but they wore a scarf, fasted at Ramadan. They were young teenage Muslim girls. I had Pakistani

neighbours who were not a practising Muslim family but they fasted and prayed. Sometimes I'd go in and ask questions such as "Why do you fast" and "Why do you pray". They gave me basic answers but the answers they gave me seemed to make sense. But to me, Islam was still very alien and foreign [...] I was searching for God and I wanted the truth and the real path to him, so I was exploring different paths to him. I used to live locally here so I would hear the call to prayer from East London Mosque and I once asked a Muslim what that noise was. Over these years a lot of points about Islam were adding up in my mind and there wasn't much that didn't make sense. I then asked a Muslim friend to get me a Qur'an in English and once I started reading it that was it, that was the clincher [...] I read the first few chapters and the more I read the more it convinced me that this was the word of God. The prior questions I had were all answered and *the answers I got were logical and made sense to me*. I had an issue with covering up because I have gorgeous long wavy hair, but that didn't mean that I didn't acknowledge that this was the truth. When I became Muslim at sixteen I didn't tell my family.'

Here again, the prominent use of the words, 'logical' and 'made sense' is contrasted with that which is 'illogical', even 'crazy' and 'preposterous' (Christianity). In line with the insights from the previous chapter, Hannah's rhetoric ('something that man has made out of clay', 'God doesn't need to come into these idols', 'he's too great for that') mirrors the language of the Qur'an and mainstream Islamic apologetics. Those languages may blur one another, making actual motivations and post-hoc constructions of motivation difficult to distinguish. The converts' emphasis on 'rationality' and 'logic' shows that they gesture towards a discourse in which modern science is the meta-value. To my mind, this narrative form raises two major issues, which I will discuss subsequently. The first one is the social and historical context, in which this rationalist discourse about Islam exists and that is the context of Islamic modernism. The second issue at stake relates to the bigger theme of modernity and in how far the converts' portrayal of the conversion as a rational, science-minded process entails the self-positioning as essentially modern subjects. What follows is an attempt to illuminate the empirical objects at stake.

The rationalistic and science-oriented presentation of Islam in the converts' narratives needs to be viewed in a larger socio-historical context. These narratives do not stand in isolation – neither within the convert community nor within the Muslim community(-ies) across the world. The origins of this kind of rhetoric and thinking can be traced to the Islamic modernist movement of the 19th-century. With the onset of the 19th-century, Arab intellectual circles used translations or direct contact with European scientific institutions to acquire modern knowledge. For Arab writers, this process went hand in hand with the attempt of a historical and sociological enquiry into their own societies' backwardness. With a view to remedying cultural and social stagnation, reformist writers concentrated on the situation of Islam in the modern world and tried to arouse in the community the will to change for the better, to bring about improvement (*islāh*) of the existing situation. Although the term *islāh* (reform) can be traced to the very beginning of Islam and also appears in the Qur'an itself, it gained a particular meaning in the reformist trend at the beginning of the modern period. The teachings of Muḥammad 'Abduh, Rashīd Riḍā, and other Muslim authors who considered themselves disciples of *al-salaf*¹⁴ are often thought the founders of this influential school of thought. Broadly translated as 'reform' in modern Arabic and used in the sense of 'improvement' in modernist writings, from the beginning *islāh* was devised to protect the *sunna* (the Prophet's tradition) against unwarranted innovations (*bid'a*) and the different manifestations of *islāh* throughout the centuries need to be seen in this tradition of allegiance to the Prophet's tradition. Reformists have drawn support of their work from the Prophet's hint that Islam would need to be revitalized periodically as a matter of moral and religious regeneration (Merad, Algar, Berkes, & Ahmad, 2012).

In the writings of Islamic modernists apologetics of Islam form an important part of the reformist project. Originally, reformist apologetics were principally addressed to a Muslim audience and only in the second instance to 'adversaries' of Islam. In an attempt to prove Islam's excellence and perfection both in terms of its spiritual, ethical, legal and social teachings, and in terms of its eternal and universal relevance, Islamic modernists have exalted the place of 'reason' (*aql*) in Islamic teachings.

¹⁴ *Al-Salaf* means 'the pious predecessors' in Arabic and refers to the first three generations of Muslims that include the Prophet's companions (*sahaba*), their successors (*al-tabi'in*), and the successors' successors (*tabi' al-tabi'in*) (Inge, 2016:1).

Bridging the divide between faith and reason, reformists maintain that the Qur'an addresses both conscience and mind. Moreover, they assert that understanding the Qur'anic message requires not only acceptance of revelation by faith but 'understanding by means of reason'. Within the bounds of moderation, reformists explicitly encourage a 'modern mind' in the sense of thinking rationally, understanding and persuading through empirical proofs. Reformists stress those parts of the revelation, which encourage man to cultivate his 'intelligence'. Because modernist scholars believed in the unitary nature of truth they sought for ways to reconcile reason and revelation as consonant paths to that single truth (Ringer & Shissler, 2015:XLIV). By emphasising the importance of human reason in Islam they portray Islam as a religion that is compatible with and even exalts science, free research and civilization.

In an attempt to synthesise being Muslim, rationalist and progressive at the same time 'Abduh and other reformists endorsed a 'scientific' worldview, in which miraculous understandings of Qur'anic events would be replaced by naturalistic explanations (Sedgwick, 2010:64-86). Although Islamic modernists did not primarily concern themselves with the defence of Islam against its adversaries but rather focused on internal reform, the apologetic elements of their writings were consciously geared at refuting attacks on Islam from Western Orientalists. Ernest Renan's¹⁵ lecture given at the Sorbonne in 1883, which carried the title *Islam and Science* is a prime example of such a Western attack in line with a long tradition of Orientalist assaults, which prompted a response by Islamic modernists and effectively came to shape their arguments. After this infamous lecture one of the reformists' primary concern became the refutation of the thesis that Islam was to blame for the backwardness of Muslim societies due to its hostility towards the scientific spirit. In his lecture Renan presented civilizational arguments against Islam, which very much resemble Huntington's assertions in 'Clash of Civilisations' (1993) published more than 110 years later. In essence, Renan argued, the backwardness of Islamic societies could be blamed on Islam itself (Ringer & Shissler, 2015:2). He metaphorically called Islam as a religion an 'iron band' on the heads of its Muslim followers, one that prevented them from thinking rationally or scientifically and therefore barred them from progress. Right at the beginning of his lecture, Renan laid out his thesis:

¹⁵ French religious scholar.

‘Anyone with even the slightest education in matters of our time sees clearly the current inferiority of Muslim countries, the decadence of states governed by Islam, the intellectual sterility of races that derive their culture and education from that religion alone. All who have been to the Orient or to Africa are struck by what is the inevitably narrow-mindedness of a true believer, of that kind of iron ring around his head, making it absolutely closed to science, incapable of learning anything or of opening itself up to any new idea.’ (Renan, 1883:2-3)

This argument prompted reactions from Muslim intellectual circles, the most famous of which is Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī’s. Like ‘Abduh, Ridā and other Islamic modernists al-Afghānī saw the state of affairs in Islamic societies critically and was bound to rid Islam of superstition and stifling tradition. He therefore agreed with Renan’s fundamental premise that freedom of thought and critical inquiry were prerequisites for progress. Like Renan, the modernists were concerned with finding a place for religion in modern society that would allow believers to harness religion for social progress. Reformist authors aimed at the popularization of scientific disciplines and modern techniques in order to achieve intellectual progress of the Muslim peoples. Moreover, the Islamic reform movement of the nineteenth century saw itself confronted with the task of counteracting European imperialism and adopting reform principles that would enable political sovereignty. In an attempt to define their own modernities, Islamic reformers were in a process of reconsidering political, social, and religious traditions and institutions with the aim of forming citizens from colonial subjects (Merad et al., 2012). Therefore, the modernists concurred with Renan’s fundamental endeavour to rationalise religious dogma and practice for the benefit of society’s modernisation. What the modernists – and al-Afghānī in particular – took issue with was Renan’s claim to European exceptionalism, which posited that Christianity could be rationalised through critical inquiry but Islam could not. Al-Afghānī insisted that Islam could be a potent ‘motor of civilisation, rationalism, and scientific progress’ (Ringer & Shissler, 2015:XXX). While Renan systematically denied the possibility of rationalisation and scientific progress – and thus modernity – to Islamic societies, al-Afghānī’s response aimed at showing a pathway to reconcile religion and science, to debunk Renan’s Christian exceptionalism, and to replace it

with Islamic exceptionalism. Science, which al-Afghānī understood as ‘a methodology premised on empiricism and rationalisation expressed as critical enquiry’ (ibid.:XXXIV), was in no way contrary to or incompatible with Islam.

In the context of this chapter Renan’s lecture and al-Afghānī’s response can serve as a window through which to understand the 19th-century attempts to reconcile science and religion. The context of European colonialism along with a reconceptualization of individual spirituality influenced modern conceptions of religion, of humanity and of socio-political ideals (ibid.:XLIII), all of which form a history to the contemporary discourse and which feature in my converts’ rationalistic portrayals of conversion. Unwittingly, my informants share in a narrative, to which there is a history as these rationalistic portrayals stem from the heritage of Islamic modernists and nineteenth century Western scholars. What both Renan on the one hand, and Islamic modernists on the other, hoped to do was to modernise by reshaping religion in a way that would make it supportive of progress. The rejection of rigid dogma, stifling tradition and superstitious practice all aimed at opening the path to a critical mind that was forward-looking and inquisitive. Therefore, the concern with empiricism, with rational thinking and with science must be understood as pointing to the larger goal of modernity and a form of religion that would be consonant with that modernity (Merad et al., 2012), an ‘enchanted modern’ of sorts (Deeb, 2006). Likewise, the converts’ rationalistic portrayal of Islam uses ‘science’ and ‘rationalism’ as a tool to position themselves as modern individuals. Being rational and science-oriented – so the argument goes – is evidence of being modern (despite being Muslim). But the parallel goes even further: the modernist idea of an evolution of religion – first propounded by ‘Abduh – in which Islam represented ‘the culmination of a series of messages revealed at a time when man had reached the final stage of rational development’ (Zebiri, 1993:46) is mirrored by the converts’ rationalistic portrayal of conversion, in which conversion happens *as a result of maximum rational thought*.

Of course, Renan in particular but also the Islamic modernists of the Middle East had been deeply influenced by the scholars of the enlightenment period who stressed the human use of reason. Writing in the 20th-century Weber predicted that the concomitant processes of rationalisation and intellectualisation would lead to the disenchantment of the modern world: ‘The fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the "disenchantment of the

world" (Weber, 2009b[1958]:155). According to Weber, the process of 'rationalization' that served to disenchant the world had as its consequence the relegation of the religious to the realm of the 'irrational'. For Weber, rationalization was closely linked to the progress of time and science and can thus be seen as a feature of modernity itself: 'The general result of the modern form of thoroughly rationalizing the conception of the world and of the way of life, theoretically and practically, in a purposive manner, has been that religion has been shifted into the realm of the irrational. This has been the more the case the further the purposive type of rationalization has progressed' (Weber, 2009[1917]:281). While disenchantment and rationalisation for the purpose of progress were certainly on the mind of the modernists, they wanted to resist what Weber theorised almost a century later by rationalising religion, rather than relegating it to the realm of the irrational. For them, religious reform through rationalisation was precisely a shield against irreligion (as relegating religion to the realm of the irrational was only one step away from irreligion). It is as if Weber's hypothesis of the disenchantment of the world categorised human experiences into two classes – rational and irrational – the latter of which was systematically barred from modernity, and was essentially non-modern. This epistemological distinction has apparently been transported into our times, for it is precisely this differentiation that was reproduced by my informants.

Rationality is Modernity

After having explored the socio-historical context of the language revolving around the concepts of 'reason', 'logic' and 'science' I would like to place the converts' concern with rationalism within the wider context of the meta-theme of modernity. When Islam was portrayed as backward, irrational, non-secular and essentially non-modern in the Orientalist tradition and often continues to be seen that way (Asad 1993, 2003; Gilliat-Ray 2010; Zebiri 2008, 2011), converts were concerned with presenting themselves as the living refutation of all these characteristics and as essentially modern individuals. By insisting on their science-driven approach, converts would actually make a statement about themselves as modern subjects, which allowed them to communicate on equal footing with the rest of rationalist society, as they perceived it. When Renan described the symbolic 'iron band' around

Muslims' heads that prevented them from rational thought, the converts I met recalled being seen by their families as 'backward', 'nuts' and 'irrational'. Such Islamophobic sentiments remain widespread and powerful in popular culture and British media outlets (Poole, 2002; *The Search for Common Ground: Muslims, non-Muslims, and the UK Media*, 2007). Some of the family members I met also used these or similar terms ('outdated') to describe the convert's belief in Islam. Lennart, who came from a strictly atheist family, recalled his grandfather as initially ignoring his conversion. As the grandfather's health declined, Lennart remembers a dispute with him in which he proclaimed 'I can't talk with you about the weather and pretend like nothing is there. I can't talk to you unless you *convert back to rationalism*'. Thereafter, Lennart was no longer welcome in his grandfather's house.

This kind of rhetoric is reminiscent of the phenomenon of 'New Atheism' as expounded by Jaede (2016). Taking reference to Sam Harris' *The End of Faith – Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, Jaede illustrates how the 'end of faith programme' propagated by Harris' 'New Atheism' classes Islam as the most irrational and thus the most violent among all the religions. The basic argument, which aims at promulgating 'rationalism, scientism, and a particular brand of atheism', takes roughly the following shape: because religions hold on to unfounded beliefs (as opposed to the evidence-based beliefs found in science), religions are irrational by definition. Their resistance to reason results in the rejection of utilitarian consequentialism, the only rational guarantee for the wellbeing of the maximum number of people. Because religions are also exclusive in their truth claims, they are intolerant towards other religions. As a consequence, religions are inherently prone to violence. While this general faith-disparaging hypothesis is part of Harris' rhetoric, Jaede illustrates the singling out of Islam as uniquely irrational and thus violent among all the religions. While Harris' 'New Atheism' aims at emancipating humanity from any kind of belief, Islam is solely positioned as 'the antagonist to both Atheism and the West' (Jaede, 2016:62).

Given that there are significant differences between the Orientalism described in Said's work and the contemporary Islamophobic prejudice described by Zebiri and others (Abbas, 2005; Moosavi, 2011; Saeed, 2007), I do not aim to establish a link of continuity between the two. Rather, I show a parallel between the defence of the Islamic modernists against the Orientalist prejudice and the defence of my convert interlocutors against the Islamophobic prejudice they experienced in British society,

and which filtered through into families. When Hannah described her initial image of Islam as ‘foreign’ and ‘very alien’, followed by a very rationalist portrayal of her path to conversion, it seems that the discourses of Islam’s rationality and of its alterity are related. Converts mobilise discourses of rationality to mitigate the ways in which Islam and Muslims are positioned as backward and ‘other’ by family influenced by an Islamophobic climate, which in turn is shaped by postcoloniality, war on terror, immigration and integration dynamics. Much like the Islamic modernists of the nineteenth century were responding in the form of apologetics to Orientalist accusations of irrationality and backwardness, the converts I met saw themselves as managing a similar set of discourses 150 years later.

Like Renan and the Islamic modernists, converts did not talk about ‘rationalism’, ‘science’ and ‘freedom of thought’ for its own sake. Rather, critical inquiry was seen as a vehicle through which both an individual and entire societies could become modern. As Ben, a white convert from Leeds, remarked in reference to the divide between religious orthodoxy and a modern lifestyle: ‘You are not going to have any Orthodox religious people also being an avant-garde artist or expressionist painter [...] I think it’s a product of a conservatism which is an evolutionary mechanism of survival. I think it’s a trait that manifests in a postmodern industrialised society where religious people don’t want to know about the other society as it may threaten theirs.’ Here, religious orthodoxy and modernity are portrayed as mutually exclusive. Hence, the aim of all the apologetics of Islam and the rationalistic portrayal of conversion was modernity itself, of which rationalism was perceived to be a key, defining characteristic. Renan, Al-Afghani and Weber refer explicitly to progress into modernity, though converts rarely do. Yet, in the narratives they construct, modernity is consciously or unconsciously at stake. When converts lament being seen as regressive or ‘backward’ (as opposed to modern, which is forward, progressive) by their families because of having converted to Islam, they are implicitly talking about the modern project, from which they feel unjustly excluded. Ayshe expressed the consternation and injury she felt at the accusation of backwardness by her family: ‘They say, “*Why did you become backwards?*” Really they are saying, “We used to be proud of you, you are intelligent, you were the first to go to Europe in the family on your own, what happened to your intelligence?” That question really brought me down. How can you think that my intelligence has gone? What do you mean, I have become stupid?’ As explained in chapter two, Ayshe came from Turkey to England as

a post-graduate student. She described her family as militantly atheist and communist, but attributed their hostility toward Islam to the widespread irreligiosity in Turkish society. According to Ayshe, Atatürk's Turkey had become a place where religion in general, and Islam in particular were seen as backward and objectionable. Under Atatürk, Turks had learned to turn their backs on the Ottoman past, towards a bright and modern Europe. Islam, which was associated with that Ottoman past, thus became the antithesis of modernity, much like Renan had put it. The time and energy converts spend on stressing their rationalism and their love for science is a way of distancing themselves from that perceived backwardness and positioning themselves as modern. Rather than viewing 'modernity' as the natural outcome of the passage of time, like 'antiquity', it has come to stand for an entire epoch, one defining element of which is the process of 'rationalisation'. But other contexts, too, produced an association of irrationality with traditionalism, which stood in contrast to rational modern-ness. Noah, came from an Eritrean family and converted to Islam at the age of nineteen. Talking about how his family had reacted to his conversion, he contrasted his mother who was 'emotional' and 'attached to religion' (Eritrean Orthodox) with his aunt who was not so attached to the family's Orthodox belief, thus more rational and thus more modern. While he was a devout believer himself, he replicated the idea that religiosity implied irrationality, which barred one from modernity:

'My mother had a very emotional reaction. That's what I know from her and that's what's so difficult. Only God knows. You're in a dead end, you don't know what to do. The only option I have now is to let time heal the wounds. *She has a sister who is much more rational. She's not that connected to religion.* My mum is. She's one of the oldest. The other sister is the youngest one. She has much more *modern thinking*. My mum is much more traditional. Maybe because of that bond she can help her understand. Of course I don't know but I'm not in a position where I'm supposed to give up. That's something I've learnt from Islam, you shouldn't give up.'

Noah is very clear in his distinction: his mother is 'emotional', attached to religion, and thus 'traditional' – i.e. *not modern*. Her younger sister, on the other hand, is 'more rational', 'not that connected to religion', and thus more modern. From his point of view, a strong Christian belief is in the way of his mother's rationality,

thus modernity. Islam, on the other hand is rational and capable of being modern. At a different point during the interview, Noah explained that it was simply unreasonable to believe in Christianity when ‘Christianity has been changed so much [...] [Christians have] changed everything. It’s gone. *There’s no logic*. I had an issue with that. I had an issue with Jesus being much more than a human, like he was God, but he was still... he did still eat [...] I didn’t feel comfortable about Jesus being God. I believe in him as a Prophet, as something really great, one of the five. Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad. Those five are the five big Prophets’. When Noah talked about there being no ‘logic’ in Christianity, he meant two different things. On the one hand, he referred to the alteration of the bible as scripture over time. This doctrine is a claim to authenticity – that is, faithfulness to the original monotheistic creed – as well as modernity, which is different from a western Enlightenment conception of modernity. On the other hand, he refers to the status of Jesus as the son of God rather than as a prophet. These are two common stumbling blocks that converts often talk about under the umbrella of ‘rationality’ or ‘logic’ and that appear in the Muslim polemic genre of *tahrīf* [‘change’, ‘alteration’, ‘forgery’]. Since Islam’s early days, Jews and Christians – whose scriptures the Qur’an recognizes as divine revelations – have been accused of deliberately falsifying these scriptures, either by distorting the meaning of the text (*tahrīf al-ma’nā*) or by falsifying the text itself (*tahrīf al-naṣṣ*)¹⁶ (Lazarus-Yafeh, 2012). The ostensible unreasonableness of Christians makes them less modern from the perspective of converts.

Modern Compared to Whom?

‘Modernity’ has been the object of innumerable studies in the social sciences in the past fifty years (see Bruce, 1996; Casanova, 1994; Latour, 1993; Orsi, 2012). While the topic is vast and generates much disagreement among authors, one agreed upon feature of this amorphous creature seems to be its hegemonic status as a ‘Western’ concept (Asad, 2003:13). Deeb describes it as follows: ‘Despite academic disagreement on the actual unity, singularity, and definition of western modernit(ies),

¹⁶Although *tahrīf* is a theme in the Qur’an itself, it does not specify exactly how Jews and Christians are supposed to have tampered with their scriptures. *Tahrīf* is a central theme in the Medinan suras and is used to account for the contradictions between the Qur’an, the Torah and the Bible and to show that the prophet Muhammad and the rise of Islam had been prophesied by the ‘true bible’.

there is no escaping the global dominance of these ideas and judgment about what is modern. They emanate from various media and are backed by political, economic, and military power. This is what I mean by western discursive power.’ (Deeb, 2006:25). Thus ‘modernity’ is not coherent or clearly bounded – it is a series of interlinked projects¹⁷. Asad’s critique that ‘modernity’ infers “disenchantment” – implying a direct access to reality, a stripping away of myth, magic, and the sacred – is a salient feature of the modern epoch’ (Asad, 2003b:13), leads him to encourage the analysis of secularism – and by extension its alter ego, religion – in the ‘West’ in order to understand the possibility that the world does not display the significant binary features of modern / non-modern, secular / religious that the modern imaginary suggests.

Authors inspired by Asad’s work argue for the notion of ‘multiple modernities’ and criticise the Eurocentric definition of modernity. Deeb’s (2006) study of Shi’i piety in Beirut exemplifies such a critique in its attempt to break up the seeming inextricability of ‘secularism’ and ‘modernity’. Deeb takes issue with the widespread view of Islamism as static and monolithic, and of Islam and modernity as incompatible. She points to the value-laden discourse in both academia and the media that views the West as the universal epitome of all that is modern – a modernity primarily defined by technological development, consumer capitalism, secularization with its concomitant disenchantment, and an emphasis on individual subjectivities. In this discourse, ‘the West is positioned at the center of a universal modernity that radiates or seeps outward to the rest of the world, where its various characteristics are adopted with some local amendment’ (Deeb, 2006:14). Against this backdrop, Deeb puts forward the idea that it is very well possible to imagine various modernities as enchanted in the Weberian sense, and as simultaneously compatible with religious piety. The core of the enchanted modern that she found among the pious Shi’i community is ‘a dual emphasis on both material and spiritual progress as necessary to modern-ness’ (ibid.:5). Although her informants were keen to point to the material development that their neighbourhood had undergone, it was the spiritual progress that was viewed as key in shielding pious Shi’is against the perceived emptiness of Western modernity.

¹⁷ Deeb describes modernity as aiming at institutionalising a number of principles (constitutionalism, democracy, human rights, industry, consumerism), and employs proliferating technologies (production, warfare, entertainment, medicine) that generate new experiences of space and time, cruelty and health, consumption and knowledge.

The concept of *relationality* features strongly in Deeb's research: 'A person, community, place, or thing is always modern *as compared to some other thing*, an other that is defined in the comparison as not modern or less modern' (emphasis added, *ibid*:17). Contrary to the conventional use of the term 'progress', her informants used this concept to describe material and spiritual transformation. The pious Shi'is did not struggle to reconcile their spiritual search with being modern; rather, their spiritual progress constituted an important aspect of the modern. Relationally speaking, progress is always measured against some inferior past: it is the 'now' versus the 'then'. What do we progress *from*? To Deeb's informants progress meant progress *from* the material underdevelopment and spiritual ignorance of their parents' generation and 'the West'. 'By including the West in the backwardness that must be left behind through progress, pious Shi'is inverted western valuations of the Islamic world as nonmodern' (*ibid*:24). While for Weber the process of rationalisation was one of the forces that brought about secularisation and disenchantment, for the pious Shi'i community rationalisation instead implicated authenticated Islam. By virtue of its perceived accuracy in interpretation, its use of '*aql* (reason, mind) and its emphasis on personal knowledge-seeking, authenticated Islam was seen as particularly 'modern' (*ibid*:23). They were therefore not trying to be 'Islamist' *and* 'modern', but rather they asserted that their form of Islam *was* modern (see also Orsi, 2012:149-54). Deeb's interlocutors imagined modern-ness without disenchantment: 'This notion of a nonsecular modern rests upon a particular understanding of science within Islam, one of compatibility and even necessity. Seeking knowledge – including scientific knowledge – is an obligation, provided that the seeker's intent lies within the bounds of Islamic morality' (*ibid*:27).

My own findings resemble Deeb's work on many levels. As discussed earlier, the emphasis on scientific knowledge is one of the parallels. Further, relationality plays a key role in my own research. Both converts and their families defined themselves as modern – 'more rational', 'better arguments', 'not quite as mad' – *in relation* to each other or in relation to someone else. While family members often pointed out that the convert's newfound religiosity was 'a thing of the past' and 'outdated', converts would present themselves as 'more rational' than believers who followed other religions. Christianity and Hinduism in particular were portrayed as 'mystical' and 'illogical' compared to Islam. For instance, Cosmo contrasted his rationalism directly with Christianity's alleged blindness to science:

‘I’ve argued with a lot of people since about a lot of these things and the fact that you will get a church leader who says the world was created in 4000BC, that didn’t make any sense to me, I’d tear that to pieces. If you just look at the fossil record that doesn’t make sense, if you look at how long this planet has been here by the roughest of estimates that doesn’t make sense. So how can a Christian say that?’

Here Cosmo portrays his conversion to Islam as a natural consequence of his rationality, where modernity becomes a teleological project: increasing rationality will lead you to Islam. In relation to both his pre-Islamic and his Muslim experiences of being rational and progressive – that is, in tune with modern science – the perceived lack of scientific rigour in Christianity appeared to him as irrational and backward. Ismael, who came to Islam out of Hinduism, brought forth a strikingly similar argument:

‘I read a little book by Maurice Bucaille, *Bible, Qur’an and Science*. This was a French Surgeon General. He was quite high up in the government. He’s not a believer but he wrote a book comparing the scientific things mentioned in the Qur’an and the Bible and what the possibilities of them are, which one was more true to modern science. Although he’s not a believer, he says the Qur’an describes things much better, like the Big Bang [...] so this is someone who doesn’t believe in God but he has tried to make a *rational* attempt at things, not really with regards to the unseen but to *rationally comprehend* the world around us through scripture perhaps and I think that started to appeal to me as well [...] Those were the startings of my taking Islam seriously. It was the scientific aspects of it, whether it’s embryology, geology, the big bang, the story of creation. It fitted in much better than the mystical nature that perhaps I’d believed in previously [...] The thing that clinched it was a little booklet by Abu Ameenah Bilal Phillips, who is a convert himself. It was a very short booklet about the true nature of Islam. It was about *tawhid*, the oneness of God. I thought, “Wow, this is quite succinct. It’s not philosophising, just by using evidence from the Qur’an to describe how unique God is, whether it’s in His number, His attributes and characteristics.” If God did exist, the way Islam

describes God in His purity and His oneness I hadn't come across before. In Hinduism yes you have the one God, but actually it manifests in many different ways. There's all these mental arithmetics you have to do where it's three into one or one into three or millions into one.'

Here again, conversion to Islam is portrayed as the natural consequence of being a rational person. Hinduism is pitted against Islam as irrational, mystical and somewhat backward. Moreover, like in Cosmo's case, modern science – or rather, a Western scholar – is used as the benchmark against which the truth of Islam is evaluated. It is the secular, the non-religious that defines the religious and says which religion is better – because more scientific and more rational – than all others. The non-religious is the authority to judge the religious. Western scholars like Keith Moore and Maurice Bucaille are introduced to support the argument that, even to a non-Muslim person, pure reason would reveal Islam as more true than any other religion. Thus, the truth of Islam is tested by recourse to Western science, or rather to Western scholars who become the arbiters of truth¹⁸. The converts' emphasis on their rationality and religious strife for rationality's sake serves as an example of how converts reconfigure religion to make it fit the rationalistic paradigm. In Asad's eyes this would be an instance where 'the secular' reconfigures and defines 'the religious'. Later on, Ismael elaborated:

'They [his family] would take me to priests, saying can you talk this out of him [...] unfortunately they weren't very fruitful because I felt their English wasn't very good because a lot of them were from back home, so they were almost like pointless exercises... there was one guy who was from the British High Commission or something and he started talking to me, and then within five minutes he said to my dad "leave this guy". He said "what?"; "just don't have anything to do with him cause if you keep contact with him your whole family will become Muslim, just don't have anything to do with this guy"... he said "he's just so far into it", and I think my dad took that to heart so that

¹⁸ This rhetoric echoes the Modernist celebration of testimonies (*shahadat*) of European scientists as in the introduction to 'Abduh's Quran commentary (edited by Raschīd Ridā: *Tafsir al-Manar*). For Ridā and 'Abduh, the *shahada* of such scientists consists not in the proclamation of faith in a monotheistic God and in Muhammad's status as a prophet, but in bearing witness to some remarkable aspect of early Islamic society which they cast as unique in all of human history.

those contacts that I used to have became even less and less frequent... I can't remember exactly what I said that would have given that impression, but that was the outcome of the meeting... so yeah [voice fades away]... I had such firm things and, perhaps, I think I was more rational cause that was it: I hadn't done it for love, I hadn't done it for money, I hadn't done it for that spiritual awakening but it was very much a *rationalistic thought process* that led me to it and I think for, well in my mind I divide religions into the mystical ones like Hinduism, Buddhism and then maybe the Western ones, Christianity, Islam and I found the rationalistic much more attractive than perhaps the mystical. Although, there is mysticism in Islam and you have to believe in angels and the unseen and all these weird and wonderful strange things, but it's more intellectual so I think that's what I felt they felt very threatened by, my approach, and perhaps I could have handled it differently, but I think I was probably eighteen, nineteen, twenty at that time... I always scratch my head...'

Here again Ismael portrays the incompatibility between his family and himself essentially as a conflict of modernity. 'Their' English is not good enough to speak on an equal level, and their arguments are irrational. He is, in contrast to that, so convincing in his rationality and argumentative power that the priest advises the father to sever contact or else the whole family might end up converting to Islam as a consequence of natural reason. It is worth noticing that Ismael classes Islam as 'Western', which he then equates with 'rational'. It seems that for him – coming from an Indian immigrant family background – conversion is also a process of distancing himself from his parents' culture, which in turn is construed as traditional, 'Eastern', and 'mystical'.

While non-religious family members perceived religiosity (and Muslim piety in particular) as 'a thing of the past' it seemed that converts were invoking multiple pasts in their relational positioning as 'modern'. On the one hand they situated themselves as modern compared to an ignorant past, which did not recognize modern scientific explanations, for instance about the age of this planet or the universe. This past is not necessarily a temporal past but may still be inhabited by contemporary Christians or Hindus who lack rationalism. On the other hand, there is the idea of a pristine past of the age of Muhammad, which brought progress (towards modernity)

to a primitive time and place in the Arabian peninsula. The progress that converts talk about in relation to Muhammad is both scientific progress (people understood aspects of embryology or geology, which they could previously not have understood), but also social progress, in that Muhammad built the Medinan community – an emblem of solidarity and equality in the minds of many converts. Implied in this narrative of the pristine past of the age of Muhammad is a primitivism with respect to times preceding that epoch and places surrounding the Arabian peninsula.

Of course, this reasoning is problematic on a number of levels. On the one hand, the converts' implied primitivism about the time of Muhammad can be questioned. While Mecca was certainly not a hub for scientific research at the time, there were universities in the Mediterranean area where scholars studied and wrote about the natural sciences such as embryology and geology. It is also well-known that, as a tradesman, Muhammad travelled to those areas in caravans and hence could have learned about these scientific insights. On another level and as mentioned earlier, the 'science' these converts invoke is quite fuzzy and the 'facts' cited may not be considered scientific. Amanda, a woman in her forties, converted to Islam at the age of seventeen. More than twenty years later she left Islam. She, too, mentioned Bucaille's book but reflected upon it critically and outlined the fuzziness of the term 'science' as used by converts. She emphasised that the Qur'an is 'not specific about things that are scientific. It's vague and poetic about things that are scientific which lends itself to credibility because you can take something and be amazed at how it fits the science that you know [...] that is actually quite convincing because, well, if humans are just working this stuff out and the Prophet (PBUH) could not have known this, then surely this message came from God.' This 'twisting' of religion needs to be seen as an attempt to remodel Islam to make it fit 'modern science'.

'T'jaz 'Ilmiy'

In *Islam's Quantum Question* Guessoum (2011) makes an attempt at unravelling the fuzzy logic of 'sciencing' the Qur'an. In a very similar fashion to that of my informants who reportedly converted after being struck by the accuracy of the embryology and other 'science' presented in the Qur'an, Guessoum cites the famous case of British Dawood Musa Pitcock's conversion to Islam. Pitcock, too, was deeply

impressed by the Qur’anic chapter on the moon-splitting, which seemed to correspond with geologists’ explanations to the effect that the moon’s band of rocks must be evidence of a reassembly collision. Not only did Pitcock – like my informants – use modern scientific discoveries as a yardstick for Islam’s truth but, Guessoum continues, there is no actual scientific evidence that the moon ever split (ibid.:10).

According to Guessoum, the ‘fuzziness’ of the Arabic concept of *‘ilm*, with up to 1200 definitions of *‘ilm* in Islamic literature and which has come to be translated as ‘science’, has abetted the uprising of a whole industry of ‘scientific content in the Qur’an’, which is absolutely baseless from a science perspective,¹⁹ but which has resulted in claims to the effect that the Qur’an contains all knowledge (ibid.:146-7). Guessoum traces this view of the Qur’an to the school of *‘I’jaz ‘Ilmiy’*, or the ‘scientific miraculous content of the Qur’an’ movement, which ‘claims that many verses of the Qur’an, if read and interpreted “scientifically”, express in semi-explicit ways scientific truths that were discovered only recently, and *therefore the Qur’an is scientifically miraculous and points to a divine origin*’ (ibid.:148). This precisely reflects the line of thought used by converts who claim to be convinced by the Qur’an’s science and which is different from – though related to – the Islamic reform movement (e.g. Muhammad Abduh), which promotes ‘scientific exegesis’ in an attempt to prove Islam’s modern potential vis-à-vis the West, and to produce a revival movement among Muslims built on modern attitudes of reason and progress. Because the Qur’an carries a multiplicity of meanings, Guessoum explains, it can speak to a wide range of readers whether rationally- or spiritually-minded, based on their prior knowledge (ibid.:152). But, Guessoum contends, ‘the Qur’an cannot be turned into an encyclopaedia of any sort, least of all of science’, and rejects the idea of ‘scientific content’ in the Qur’an (ibid.:64).

Guessoum further attributes the explosion of *I’jaz* at least partly to Maurice Bucaille and his aforementioned book from 1976 titled *The Bible, the Qur’an and Science: The Holy Scriptures Examined in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (ibid.:153). The message of his book states that the Qur’an contains no statement that can be contradicted by modern science and that the Qur’an includes facts that could not have been known to anyone fourteen centuries ago. Next to Bucaille, Guessoum

¹⁹ I here follow Ziauddin Sardar’s definition of science as ‘an organised, systematic and disciplined mode of inquiry based on experimentation and empiricism that produces repeatable and applicable results universally, across all cultures’ (cited in Guessoum, 2011:72).

also mentions Keith Moore²⁰ and his 1986 article titled ‘A scientist’s interpretation of references to embryology in the Qur’an’. Moore’s conclusion concerning the Qur’an’s description of human embryo development is as follows: ‘The interpretation of the verses in the Qur’an referring to human development would not have been possible in the 7th-century A.D., or even a hundred years ago. We can interpret them now because the science of modern Embryology affords us new understanding. Undoubtedly there are other verses in the Qur’an related to human development that will be understood in the future as our knowledge increases’ (ibid.:155). However, as Guessoum points out, Moore referred to only one specific translation of the Qur’an across his whole analysis, and that is the translation of Abdelmajid az-Zandani, a strong proponent of *I’jaz*. Inviting the reader to take an objective look at the verses in question,²¹ Guessoum comes to the conclusion

‘that these descriptions are both general and correct enough to be understood at different levels by people of different knowledge across the ages [...] It quickly becomes clear that the proponents of this approach let themselves gradually slide from a position of using the scientific knowledge at one’s disposal to better understand some Qur’anic verses dealing with natural phenomena, a method suggested and practiced by ‘Abduh and other careful thinkers, to impressed readings and fanciful interpretations of verses that are claimed to refer to space exploration, radio, relativity, black holes and the speed of light.’ (ibid.:156).

Some of my interlocutors evidently subscribed to this *I’jazi* reading of Qur’anic verses. While there may be multiple explanations for why they might have done so, I surmise that the dominance of a rationalistic Weberian discourse at best, and a new atheist polemic discourse *a la* Harris at worst, is related to converts’ efforts to engage in a ‘scientific’ discourse, even if unduly so. The following section will illustrate the

²⁰ Moore was then professor of anatomy and associate dean of basic sciences in the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Toronto. Moore soon also ended up a celebrity in the Muslim world (to much less of an extent than Bucaille, though) for what he had proclaimed (Guessoum, 2011:155).

²¹ ‘Then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood; then of that clot We made a (foetus) lump; then we made out of that lump bones and clothed the bones with flesh; then we developed out of it another creature. So blessed be Allah, the best to create’ (Q 23:14); ‘He makes you, in the wombs of your mothers, in stages, one after another, in three veils of darkness’ (Q 39:6); and a few others (e.g. Q 22:5), which are similar to these two.

point that because of the rationalist paradigm that contemporary British society seems to exist in, converts are reluctant to engage in a mystical discourse about Islam and about their conversion for the fear of being ridiculed.

Dreams that Matter

It is the end of February 2015 and registration for the symposium is almost complete. It is the first in a series of three weekends on male narratives of conversion organised by the Centre of Islamic Studies in Cambridge. Twenty-one converts, all men, are gathering in the conference room for a day of presentations, discussion, lunch and coffee breaks. After the first presentation, by one convert who described his ‘decade-long journey to Islam’ with an initial contact through the hip-hop scene, the second presenter goes on to narrate in a very personal manner his own conversion to Islam, which was the culmination of a long spiritual search. The ultimate revelation that Islam was the truth came to him in the form of a significant dream, which he describes vividly to the audience. The report that was later published on the symposia recounts Jacob’s presentation as follows:

‘[...] 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 from 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”[...].

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’ (Suleiman, 2015:42-3).

After Jacob finishes his presentation and despite his initial reservations over revealing something so personal, other participants rush to share their spiritual experiences, which frequently entail revelatory dreams such as the one narrated by Jacob. After several participants have shared their dreams, the discussion shifts to ‘the Western mind-set’, which refuses to acknowledge dreams as a source of knowledge. Because of what participants pejoratively call the ‘rationalist mind-set’ dominant in Western societies, many converts feel reluctant to share their dreams in other contexts, especially in their own families, for the fear of having the validity of their conversion questioned.

The stark contrast between the previous rationalist and scientifically-oriented portrayals of conversion and Jacob’s mystical experience, which calls into question precisely this kind of rationalism, is striking. On the surface the two narratives testify to the many different paths that lead converts to Islam. However, neither of these two cases is exceptional. During my fieldwork I came across numerous people – both men and women – who stressed that they had converted due to ‘reason’. However, I have

met many others who presented their mystical experiences as the ‘clinchier’ that convinced them that Islam was ‘the truth’. More curiously yet, in some instances the same people foregrounded either the ‘rational’ or the ‘mystical’ aspects of their conversions, depending on the context.

One question that arises out of these observations is whether there are certain times or situations in which converts emphasise ‘rationality’ over other aspects of their faith. This question led me to review my own positionality as a researcher in the field. The ‘science-argument’ frequently came up in interviews where it seemed like the converts were justifying their conversion vis-à-vis a non-Muslim researcher. Even though they knew that I was sympathetic towards Islam, talking to a non-Muslim post-graduate student who was ‘studying’ them still seemed to bring out the urge of positioning themselves as rational, science-minded individuals (see also Özyürek, 2015:Ch.1-2). Aware that religion in general and Islam in particular were often associated with irrationality and backwardness (Johns & Saeed, 2002: 209; Köse, 1996: 138; Zebiri, 2011), it makes sense that converts stressed this aspect of their conversion, even if unduly so. It seems that they deployed discourses of scientific reason to mitigate their relations with non-Muslims, but not with each other. What struck me as significant was the absence of a discussion of ‘science’ and ‘rationality’ from the symposia that made up the male *Narratives of Conversion* project. A vast range of topics was discussed during these meetings, ranging from dreams and spirituality, to architecture, homosexuality, inheritance, death and many more. ‘Science’ or ‘rationality’, however, never appeared as a topic in its own right, and only featured as a *hindrance* to conversion. So the report explains with respect to one convert who had presented his journey to the other participants that ‘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*’ (emphasis added) and states elsewhere that ‘it was the head that resisted’ (Suleiman, 2015:24, 28). Here we see an inversion of the previous portrayal: the convert accepts Islam as the truth ‘in his heart’ – a place of *feeling*. The intellectual, rational conviction was not there; rather, his rational faculties were speaking *against* the conversion. Here, conversion to Islam is constructed as a ‘formula’ involving ‘head’ and ‘heart’, taking for granted that what should be involved in the recognition of the self as Muslim is a ‘rational’ assessment of the Quran and intellectual assent to

its ‘truth’ plus its implied counterpart: an ‘embrace’ of Islam in the ‘heart’. Other constructions of Muslim identity might place the emphasis not on ‘intellectual-assent-plus-embrace-by-the-heart’, but on recognition of a *fiqh* tradition and its carriers as authoritative or practical observance of the customs and traditions of a community.

Considering the extent to which ‘rationality’ was talked about during interviews, its explicit absence²² during the symposia struck me. At these occasions, as Jacob’s story from the beginning shows, it was rather the case that converts cultivated a shared ‘cultural intimacy’ (and possibly superiority) in reference to the ‘Western rationalist mind-set’, which excluded dreams and spiritual experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. Herzfeld (2005) defines ‘cultural intimacy’ as the ‘recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality’ (ibid.:3). Usman confirmed this sense of cultural intimacy when he told the group after Jacob’s presentation that he, too, had experienced a lot of guiding dreams, but that he would not share them with any non-Muslim relatives because of the ‘predominant rationalistic paradigm’. Though he asserted that ‘dreams know more than we do’ he explained that they ‘are not taken seriously’ and would thus be a source of embarrassment in front of his family. It is the sense of being an insider, as produced by a shared recognition of those aspects of their common sociality, that it would be embarrassing to expose in front of outsiders by revealing the experience of mystical dreams or visions. At the same time, the self-stereotype of the spiritual and mystically capable truth-seeker seemed to offer them a sense of pride and possibly superiority vis-à-vis an intellectually driven, a-spiritual ‘West’.

The difference between the two settings was not the group of informants. My informants and the project’s participants shared similar levels of education, and in some instances I interviewed the same converts in private who had previously participated in the project. To my mind, the difference lay in the settings, which produced different discourses. Unlike the interviews, the symposia were primarily composed of converts to Islam. The project leader and project manager – both Muslims themselves – were also present, as well as three non-Muslim graduate students, including myself. In this predominantly Muslim setting it seemed that converts did not need to justify themselves, as they were quite literally ‘preaching to

²² It was only mentioned implicitly, as a negative, and a hindrance to conversion. It was never talked about in a positive way, as a facilitator of conversion.

the converted'. The symposia seemed to produce an atmosphere of great trust and a sense of commonality where spiritual, mystical and often very personal experiences seemed more legitimate and were attributed great importance. Converts also commented on the trust between themselves and their ability to talk to like-minded people who had been through similar experiences in coffee breaks and private conversations. With a few notable exceptions, converts did not talk about dreams extensively during interviews. Dina, a seventy-two-year-old medical doctor, who had converted out of a practicing Catholic family, was exceptionally open about the mysticism in her conversion. For many years she had attended the mother of the Sultan of Oman as a medical practitioner and Dina had 'fallen in love' with her. While she expressed her deep admiration for this extraordinary woman, who had been a 'role model' for her, she made clear that she was *not* the cause for her conversion. 'I was happy with what I had', Dina explained, '[But] I kept on thinking, "It's not enough". I don't know why I didn't think it was enough. Then I got dreams. After being introduced I still saw Islam as the Other. However much I respected it, however much I loved Bibi [the Sultan's mother], I did not see myself as a Muslim. Then I had dreams. The dreams were pretty clear.' Dina described her dreams in detail. They were varied but ultimately always revolved around a bright light that she yearned for. In the last of her dreams she saw the light again. It was 'the same light. I thought, "I really have got to know what this light is."' By the time I got to the twin tracks there was nothing between me and the light. I saw a pattern forming. By the time I saw the pattern it was "Allah". Then I woke up. The dream was saying, "You can say goodbye to what you've been, that is your future"'.

Answering the question of 'when' converts would bring up the 'rationality-argument', then, seems to boil down to a matter of power differentials, a point which practice theory may help to illuminate. For De Certeau, the difference between 'strategies' and 'tactics' is constituted precisely by such power differentials. Where strategies are able to 'produce, tabulate, and impose [...] tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert' (De Certeau, 1988:30). He distinguishes between such modes of action which are able to shape a certain space according to the actor's wishes and such modes of action which rather navigate a space that has already been defined. Whereas the symposia allowed converts to engage in strategies of producing their own discourse, interviews with a non-Muslim researcher seemed to throw them into the terrain of modern science, in which they felt the need to assert their own

rationality – thus their modernity – and justify their conversion to Islam in that dominant language. As I believe the converts' rationalist explanations to be meaningful in their deployment, I do not mean to discount them as purely instrumental. However, I do mean to propose that the rationalist aspects of conversion have been exaggerated in the converts' accounts in order to fit into a societally predominant, rationalist paradigm. Mystical experiences have evidently played a key role in some conversion stories but were not usually highlighted in a non-Muslim setting. Their importance became apparent primarily during the conversion symposia, which offered a 'culturally intimate' setting. De Certeau characterises the working mechanisms when he explains that 'a tactic boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order suddenly to produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place and to strike the hearer' (ibid.:37–8), which is exactly what converts did when they brought forth the argument of science in a religious – and thus unexpected – context. In that sense, a tactic as deployed in moments of private interviews needs to be very much seen as a reaction which is determined by a dominant discourse, and quite unlike the strategic actions deployed during the symposia.

As 'tactics', justifications for conversion in the name of rationality often had the side-effect of engaging in a race of superiority, in which converts capitalized on the perceived irrationality and mysticism of other religions. In these explanations, converts would position Islam as superior to other religions because it was 'more logical' and not as mystical as Christianity or Hinduism. The paradigm of modern secularity seems to favour non-religious arguments. By joining into this discourse of non-religious arguments, which lends immense ideological power to 'science', the converts reaffirmed that paradigm, possibly contrary to their beliefs. In Mahmood's (2009:82) short excursion into the history of European empiricist epistemology, she explains that material matters and concomitantly empirical proofs have come to take precedence in civic order since the time of John Locke. Religion in general is assigned to the immaterial realm and therefore seen as less exigent. The paradoxical result of the empiricist epistemology is that defenders of religion – like the converts I met – try to ground their religion's truth on empirical proofs, thereby reinforcing the existent paradigm. The converts' citation of 'scientific truths in the Qur'an' as well as their reference to the authority of Moore and Bucaille as guarantors for the validity of Islam are prime examples of this paradoxical mechanism. Unwittingly, these converts engaged in the same argument that their non-religious family members would direct

against them and in which a modern, rational, mature self is positioned in opposition to an irrational, mystical and backward other (Zebiri, 2011:187). Curiously, there seemed to exist one legitimate case of irrationality from the point of view of the family. As several converts related during the symposia their parents thought their convert son or daughter had converted for love and in order to get married to a Muslim. In some cases families continued to recall the conversion in this way even where the converts had only met their partner long after they had already converted and assured that their conversion had nothing to do with love or marriage. But, so it seems, romantic love – unlike dreams – was a legitimate and possibly a necessarily modern instance of irrationality which families were ready to accept and adopt as their narrative (cf. Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017: 4).

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed two questions: what are the historical reasons why this genre of testimony is available to the converts? And what are the social and familial reasons why it might appeal – notably when it did not appeal in the symposia? I have answered the first question by recourse to the Islamic Modernist school of thought from the nineteenth century and its response to Orientalist accusations, exemplified by the Renan/ Al-Afghani debate, which is given continuing resonance by the prominence of popular polemics against Islam by scientific atheists. The Modernist defense against the Orientalist portrayal of Islam as backward and irrational has produced the genre of apologetics, which aims at debunking the myth of Western superiority and replacing it with Islamic superiority, especially with regards to what could be termed ‘scientificity’. This genre of rhetoric is still widely available today among Muslim and convert circles. In a similar fashion to the Islamic modernists vis-à-vis Orientalism, converts appeared to be managing their relations with non-Muslims in a ‘new atheist’ climate.

With respect to the second question it appears that there is considerable diversity in converts’ portrayals of conversion. On the one hand, this diversity stems from very different family backgrounds, which shape the converts’ claims to modernity amidst family reactions to the conversion, which are shaped by neo-Orientalist notions of Islam. While Ismael classed Islam as a ‘Western’ religion and

saw conversion as a way of distancing himself from the parents' traditionalist Hindu convictions, Cosmo used the rationalistic portrayal of conversion as a way of articulating family continuity. Being deeply impressed with his scientifically minded atheist father – who used to present his atheism in terms of pure rationalism – conversion for reason's sake allowed Cosmo to reconcile his father's atheist rationality with a belief in God, rather than battling it. For Noah, it was a way of breaking with what he saw as the emotionally charged lineage thinking of a proud Eritrean family and Ayshe sought to demonstrate that rational modernity could also be a spiritual one to an atheist, post-Atatürk Turkish family. On the other hand, scientificity as a rhetoric or mode of persuasion is itself an umbrella for diverse claims, ranging from the logical coherence of the Qur'an to miraculousness of Qur'anic 'science', to the persuasiveness of Muslim friends to claims of authenticity and accusations of *tahrīf*.

The comparative material from two different fieldwork 'sites' – interviews and the *Narratives of Conversion* symposia – showed that converts resort to different rhetorics at different times. The interview context seemed to invite a defence of the faith while the symposia fostered 'cultural intimacy', which brought forth discussions about mystical experiences such as dreams, and which would have been considered embarrassing in front of non-Muslims. 'Western Rationalism', on the other hand appeared – if it did at all – as an obstacle on the way to truth. Therefore, the different modes of persuasion appealed alongside one another in different moments, relationships, and spaces. The preceding discussion of rationality, modernity and dreams shows that the rationalistic portrayal of conversion only partly describes what is at stake. The discussions of dreams point to alternative modes of persuasion that can go *alongside* the rationalistic portrayal of conversion. Christine's example illustrates this circumstance. Like many of the other converts, she portrayed her conversion in a rationalistic way:

'I actually went and started researching it myself at home [...] When I was looking online I started to get more convinced by the things that are more science-y in the Qur'an [...] Like when it talks about the Big Bang and everything being made of water. Like the mountains and the sea with the two different waters. I kept thinking to myself when it said about the prophet Muhammad who was an illiterate man in the middle of the desert 1400 years

ago. I was like, “How must he have known all of this?” It just made me really think. I started to consider things like I know that in almost every culture they have some idea of creation, that they believe in a God of some sort, whether it’s polytheistic or whatnot. I thought to myself, “If this is an experience that humans have all over the world, how come nobody gives it that much credit? Maybe it deserves a bit more credit than I give it.” I guess growing up in society now I always considered it to be right here, when this is the society that seems to have changed a lot compared to other ones.’

This was Christine’s initial description of her search and information-gathering leading up to conversion. In it she focused on the Qur’an’s ‘sciencey’ aspects and religion’s worldwide ubiquity, possibly with the sole exception of ‘the West’. But then she continued to reflect on the process and relativized her rationalistic account in the following way:

‘I remember one day I was just sitting on the computer reading something. I thought, “Oh my God, it’s actually real, isn’t it.” I don’t completely think that it was down to everything I read. It was like *there was a feeling inside me that I actually couldn’t explain*. I just felt like I believed it. I could say, “I’ve read this and it makes a lot of sense” but ultimately I think there were a lot of things that just made it *feel* right. I think there’s a difference between *feeling* the truth and *believing* the truth. My family can all see the things in the Qur’an that convinced me, but they are not convinced by it. Although they can see, “Yes, in the Qur’an everything is made by water. We do believe that.” That doesn’t make them believe in God. There’s still a difference there, they don’t have the *feeling* that it’s true. It’s difficult to explain.’

To my mind, this reflection captures the very essence of conversion as a process that can ultimately not be articulated. Christine – an otherwise eloquent young woman – found it perceptibly difficult to enunciate what exactly had convinced her that Islam was the truth. The inarticulable relates to the mystical aspects of her conversion. She solves the dilemma by introducing the ontologically different categories of ‘believing’ (that is, rationally understanding) and ‘feeling’ the truth; the seat of the former in its propositional form (believing *that*) being the head and the seat of the latter being the

heart. While her family could believe the same facts that had rationally convinced her and that were in accordance with modern scientific discoveries, they could not – for one reason or another – *feel* the truth as she did. Her description of that feeling inevitably reminded me of the ‘oceanic feeling’ that Romain Rolland, a friend of Sigmund Freud’s, first mentioned in a letter to Freud as the source of all religiosity. According to Rolland, so Freud explains in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (2007[1929]), this source of all religious energy is a particular feeling which never left Rolland, which he had confirmed by many others, and which he could presuppose for millions of people. Rolland tried to describe this feeling as a ‘sensation of eternity’, something unbounded, limitless – ‘oceanic’. Rolland further pronounced this feeling a ‘subjective fact’, not an ‘article of belief’ (Freud, 2007[1929]:31).

Christine’s description was mirrored by Zahra who differentiated the intellectual understanding of a religion from ‘the eyes of belief’. Coming out of Judaism, Zahra voiced her dismay over the way that non-believers and believers of other religions tended to write about ‘alien’ religions:

‘Yes, the way Jewish people were writing about Jesus... I wasn’t Muslim at the time but I just thought it was so disrespectful and I was really shocked. So it didn’t surprise me that Christian people would write about Islam in a similar way; how could they possibly understand what Islam is about because you are always seeing it from an intellectual point of view. *Seeing from the eyes of belief is completely different. You can’t rationalise it with somebody, or intellectualise it.* It’s like looking over the bars and saying it beautiful and someone picking it to pieces, but I still find it beautiful. That person is not going to take that vision away.’

As I understand it, Zahra described the same phenomenon as Christine, and perhaps both refer to what Rolland called the ‘oceanic feeling’. To her, the intellectual or rationalist understanding of religion was contrasted by seeing religion with ‘the eyes of belief’, a vision of beauty, which has a similar affective character as the ‘feeling of truth’ described by Christine. While some converts stuck to their rationalistic portrayal of conversion more than others, mystical experiences frequently played a role. Rationality alone never seemed to have been the entry into Islam, even where converts portrayed it in that way. For lack of a better description I will borrow the

term ‘oceanic feeling’ from Rolland as something in-articulable, mystical, which is the source of the religious energy that converts develop. While I believe that the rationalistic aspects of conversion are real, they seem to have been exaggerated in many narratives. Alongside mystical experiences, the rationalistic portrayal of conversion needs to be seen as a rhetoric, which is deployed at different times in different spaces and usually aims at a non-Muslim audience. Significant dreams, on the other hand, seem to be mainly reserved for other converts (and possibly Muslims) as a form of cultural intimacy, which is only rarely articulated vis-à-vis an outsider.

Chapter Five – Material Culture and Materiality

'I was slowly detaching myself from Hinduism [...] so there's a journey going on in my head. I went to McDonald's and I got a cheeseburger, with beef. You know, Hindu people don't eat beef. Well, people who are attached to the religion [...] we never ate beef because, you know, beef is quite a holy animal.'

– Amira, Birmingham, convert from Hinduism –

I met Gwendolyn in September 2016, during an 'Introduction to Islam Day' at the London Central Mosque where she had come with her husband, Ranim. She was a city planner in her early thirties who worked in central London. Like most of the other women there she wore a scarf around her head, which covered her hair but apparently lacked the finesse that would characterise the way in which more experienced Muslim women would tighten their headwear. It was the typical look of a woman who had covered her hair out of respect for the sacred space she found herself in but who probably would not wear a headscarf outside of the mosque. We started talking and she told me that she had converted to Islam only a few weeks ago, and that she really wanted to learn more about her new religion. At the time she hadn't told her friends or family about her conversion and wanted to give it some more time. She wanted to be more confident about her new faith when the time for that conversation had arrived. Like so many other converts, she had been struck by the 'scientific facts' contained in the Qur'an, such as its explanation of embryology. More than anything, though Gwendolyn felt that the Qur'an had spoken to her directly: 'I was reading it on the tube and it was as if it had written in there "Gwendolyn, I am talking about you."'

We stayed in touch, and when we met again shortly before Christmas for a cup of tea after she had finished work, she talked about the small and big challenges of conversion. She wasn't wearing a headscarf now, nor any other piece of clothing that would have marked her as a Muslim. Her style was professional and looked like the kind of clothing that any young employee in a similar job would have worn. She still hadn't told her family about the conversion, which increasingly became a source of anxiety as time went by. The fast-approaching Christmas holiday made the wretchedness of wanting to tell her family, but fearing it too much to actually do it, all the more acute. Her family also didn't know that she was married to Ranim. They

only knew that the two were ‘dating’, but since they had gotten married in South Africa in an Islamic religious ceremony, she couldn’t tell them, of course. As in the case of many converts, they had married to be able to live together and continue their relationship but had not followed up with a civil marriage. Her family was also just getting to know Ranim and would be shocked to find out they were married already. But besides these big question marks in her life, Gwendolyn was overwhelmingly concerned with everyday practicalities and technicalities that would help her implement her faith correctly. Questions like ‘how can I pray in Arabic and know what I am saying at the same time?’, ‘do I have to remove my make-up for *wudhu* [the ritualistic partial ablution before prayer]?’ and ‘what am I allowed to eat?’ kept coming up and demanded answers. As it turned out, eating *halal* consists not only in the avoidance of pork and alcohol. As Gwendolyn explained to me, many kinds of cheese were actually considered *haram* (forbidden) because they contained rennet gained from young animals or because the rind contained lard, wine, beer or other types of alcohol or had been wiped on or bathed in it. Laughingly, she elaborated: ‘So I spend a lot of time reading cheese labels at the supermarket these days [...] it’s weird, I know, but I have to make sure the cheese is *halal* [...] And then when someone at work comes in and offers sandwiches for lunch I don’t know what to do [...] then they have cheese or tuna [sandwiches] and I don’t really like tuna but I’ll take it because I don’t really know what’s in that cheese’. Like family and friends, her colleagues at work still did not know about Gwendolyn having become Muslim. This was usually not a problem, but it did make her realise how much English culture is connected to alcohol, where people at work would laugh about one another’s drunk stories.

Besides these problems mainly related to what she could eat and how she should handle her make-up during pre-prayer cleansing five times a day, Gwendolyn had also had her first headscarf experience, which did not exactly feel like the most natural thing in the world. While she had always worn a headscarf at the mosque, she had not hitherto started wearing one outside of the mosque. One Friday though, she told me, she wanted to avoid repeating the *wudhu* and so she went from her house to the mosque for Friday prayer wearing her hijab. The experience left a profound and confusing impression on her: ‘It’s not about the other people on the street, they were fine with it... I mean, no one stared or anything but I felt so weird. I sound so shallow when I say this but I realised how much my hair is part of my identity. It made me

feel very awkward, inward focussed and more pious but very strange... it's not an easy thing to do'.

When it was time to leave, I asked her how she was going to 'handle' Christmas this year. We had come full circle and the elephant was still in the room. Every year, Gwendolyn and her siblings celebrated Christmas at their parents' house outside of London and stayed there for a couple of days. Although the family was fairly religious and her parents and sister practicing Anglicans, attending Christmas service was not the primary challenge: 'I can avoid church, that's easy... I just stay at home and say I'm looking after my sister's children, nobody will mind that. But it will be really hard to navigate the dinner table... I've been coming up with excuses for a while now why I'm not drinking "Oh, I'm not in the mood" or "I'm on antibiotics" but now I can't eat the Turkey [since it is not halal meat] so it will be really odd just picking out the vegetables'. While the scenario of her navigating the dinner table made her laugh, the whole thing was a source of immense distress, as she felt that, the longer she kept the truth from her family, the harder it got.

From the World of Things

Gwendolyn's seemingly strange preoccupation with make-up, her hair and cheese labels do not immediately seem to make sense in the context of religious conversion. While conversion falls into the realm of 'the spiritual' in most people's minds, her concerns are overwhelmingly of an everyday, material and mundane character. In this chapter I will focus on the theme of material culture in the context of conversion and show why 'the spiritual' and 'the material' cannot usefully be separated into two different domains. Rather than simply establishing that the spiritual, the social and the material are intricately intertwined with one another, I will elaborate and illustrate by way of ethnography the idea that the objects we surround us with can tell the stories of our social and spiritual life where verbal articulation fails. Yet another step further, I maintain that our material artefacts can become the very battlegrounds, on which the unarticulated is being fought over or – in a more positive instance – they can become the grounds of accommodation, where care is expressed in the absence of conversation.

Contrary to widespread common sense, the study of material culture within social anthropology and neighbouring disciplines has, for some time now established that the dualistic separation of our social world into realms ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’, ‘inert’ and ‘transcendent’, of ‘things’ and of ‘words’ (Appadurai, 1988:12) is an unhelpful one when it comes to understanding the makeup and dynamics of our social world. As Douglas & Isherwood (1996:72) have urged: ‘Let us put an end to the widespread and misleading distinction between goods that sustain life and health and others that service the mind and heart – spiritual goods’. Rather than viewing the material world as a superstructure to the social world, anthropologists have come to understand that the world of goods and artefacts is, in fact, part of our sociality (Miller, 1998:3). Beyond this insight, anthropologists have also established that material artefacts are not only vectors of communication between people but that they are transformative agents themselves and constituent parts of the social system; social worlds are as much constituted by materiality as the other way around. *Value Regimes* have been used as heuristics to better understand the social life of things and the nature of material things in different value trajectories (Appadurai, 1988). Thus, I set out to understand material artefacts in conversion not merely as vectors but in the sense of Miller’s material culture studies as constituents of a particular culture/sociality that we live in and recreate through our use of certain objects such as food, clothing, architecture and home decorations.

Despite these insights, the study of material culture remains relatively niche within anthropology and, although the modern person in post-industrial society is perhaps disproportionately concerned with material goods day in day out – or as Miller (1987:3) puts it, ‘our culture has become to an increasing degree a material culture based on an object form’ – social anthropologists still pay relatively little attention to material artefacts. As Appadurai (1988:4) explains that, ‘though this was not always the case even in the West, as Mauss noted in his famous work *The Gift*, the powerful contemporary tendency is to regard the world of things as inert and mute, set in motion and animated, indeed knowable, only by persons and their words’. Thus, even though some insight has been gained into the connectedness of the world of goods and the world of social relations, it is generally assumed that it is the latter which imbues the former with any meaning at all. In this perspective, social beings encode things with meaning, value and significance. While this may be so, in this chapter I will advocate a methodology for analysis which is just the opposite of what

the mainstream conception of knowing the material world is. In her study of textured soundscapes and the use of radios in homes Tacchi (1998: 26) explains that ‘one of the problems with material culture is that it’s meaning is not experienced linguistically, and therefore any attempt to explain its significance which relies on language as a communicative medium, is bound to fall short of full explanation.’ Although her observation is certainly true, I put forward the idea that the linguistic shortcoming in the exploration of the world of goods can be turned into a useful tool rather than an obstacle. The benefits of Tacchi’s ‘problem’ can be reaped precisely in moments where linguistic experience, that is, communication, fails. It is in cases where people refuse to talk about something or cannot articulate it that material objects can tell a story, which would otherwise remain untold. As conversion to Islam contains many such ‘silences’ it is the material world that offers insight into fraught relationships.

This is a methodological perspective, not an ontological one. Much as I agree with Appadurai that the world of things is thought to be knowable ‘only by persons and their words’ I suggest that, often, persons only become knowable methodologically through the world of things. In following Appadurai, I maintain that ‘even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context’ (1988:5). Through converts to Islam and their family relations, we come to realize that material artefacts tell stories where verbal communication fails. Therefore, beginning analysis with an object stems from a methodological consideration, not an ontological one. While it is true that human actors endow things with meaning through different trajectories, it is often the things that illuminate the social relations around them where verbal articulation is either not possible or not desirable. Material artefacts should therefore be seen as a powerful heuristic for explaining to us our social world. Beyond the expressive function, material things can also serve as transformative agents. In this chapter I will first analyse the role of objects as expressions of the self and the group one belongs to – both past and present – and then move on to positioning material artefacts as ‘sites’. In this second function material objects can become either the battlegrounds on which conversion is contested or sites of accommodation where relatives and converts alike are able to express their care for one another in face of their inability to articulate it otherwise.

Material Statements

On the most basic level, material objects can be used to make statements about ourselves both personally and socially, a notion that has been elaborated extensively in social psychology (Dittmar, 1992:11). For instance: I wear a headscarf and this is an expression of a) my being a Muslim and b) my affiliation with a larger group of Muslims and even the *ummah*. As Dittmar further explains, possessions in general are not merely an expressive tool but must even be considered extensions of the self. With respect to clothing she elaborates: ‘Clothes are seen as the outer skin of our personality and identity [...] In everyday social life, people are adept judges of what the social and personal layers of this outer skin tell you about the wearer. Clothing provides information about social and occupational standing, sex-role identification, political orientation, ethnicity and personal qualities and preferences [...] Clothes clearly form part of an *extended* sense of self’ (ibid.:41). Converts – like anybody else – are also involved in this process of self-formation through the consumption and display of certain material things. Men often wear beards with the upper lip shaved and sometimes even don foreign dress codes or wear the ankle-length trousers typically associated with the *Salaf*²³ (Inge, 2016:12). The overwhelming majority of women I met started wearing the hijab relatively soon after they had converted. In both cases these pieces of clothing express a personal belief. Of course, they are also seen as a religious duty or at least as something which is recommended by the religion but often enough converts quite consciously embrace the new dress code to mark their new religious identity and possibly also to express associated beliefs. Many women also saw their wearing of the hijab as a feminist statement and as a means for evading the ‘male gaze’ (Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017:5). While the specific expression of the material object depended on the individual, it became apparent that these objects did serve as expressions about, and extensions of, the self for all of my informants (cf. Cullum-Swan & Manning, 1994). Rather than merely serving as a means of communication, these goods have to be seen as a tool for making sense of the world we live in. This is so because communication and meaning are inseparable from one another – or, as Douglas & Isherwood (1996:95) would have it: ‘Man needs goods for

²³ First three generations of Muslims

communicating with others and for making sense of what is going on around him. The two needs are but one, for communication can only be formed in a structured system of meanings.’

Since human beings do not exist isolated in space and time, their personal statements also almost automatically translate into a group affiliation. Several women talked about the fact that the *hijab* made Muslim women recognisable to one another and that they would sometimes greet complete strangers with a warm *Assalaamu Alaikum* (Peace be upon you) purely on the basis of recognition through the *hijab*. But converts in general – both men and women – talked quite a bit about their belonging to the *ummah* and some referred to it as a kind of ‘family’. It is precisely this interpersonal, social aspect of expressive religious objects (particularly clothes), which often troubles family members. While relatives do not necessarily think of the converts’ association with the *ummah* – a social group different to their own – they do recognise a certain estrangement in the person they are close to (cf. Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017). In several conversations, parents voiced concern about their child becoming an outsider with that outsidership inscribed into the clothing. As Usman’s stepfather put it: ‘One day he turned up with that little white Indian hat [*taqiyah*] [...] that was really strange. And our neighbours didn’t know what to make of it and they asked us: “has he become Jewish or something?”.’ In a similar vein, Sana’s father explained: ‘It’s up to her but it’s a pity because it means *in this country* she stands out as being, erm a Muslim, which is a minority. A lot of people feel animosity towards Muslims.’ While people may not always be able to place converts as Muslims (‘Has he become Jewish or something?’), in which case they simply become unintelligible, they do stand out as a ‘minority’ or as a stranger, which is a source of considerable discomfort and also anxiety for parents.

Far from being a coherently structured matrix of personal expression, though, one and the same person can express different things about himself simultaneously through different objects (see also Barley, 1989:43). These statements can be both factual statements and what I call aspirational or even nostalgic statements. While Usman wore the Indian *taqiyah* (a statement about his present personal and social state) and an ‘Islamic’ beard and also otherwise tried to follow the rules of Islam strictly, he also admitted in another conversation that he loves Christmas and the whole atmosphere around it. More than twenty years after his conversion he still decorates his house with fairy lights during Christmas time and is upset with Muslims

who take issue with that. He spoke about Christmas in a nostalgic manner, expressive of an emotive association with a past he has had and which was markedly different from the present he had consciously chosen for himself. Jane, too, insisted on putting up a Christmas tree. Jason, another young convert of Afro-Caribbean background said that the mosque as such provided him with ‘no sense of belonging’. He said that – although he had embraced Islam as a religion – ‘Muslim architecture’ did not have the ‘emotional connection’ which he still had with churches and cathedrals; these, by contrast, were ‘places [he] visited as a child’ and that he ‘knew intimately’. He also used the word ‘familiarity’ to describe the way he perceived the architecture of churches compared with that of a mosque. Like Usman’s love for Christmas decorations, Jason’s emotional connection, familiarity and even intimacy with ‘the church’ as the sacred space of a religion he left behind, is anchored in childhood memories and reflects a certain intimacy with the community they left, at least partially.

Even though it might seem contradictory that someone who does not want to celebrate Christmas, enjoys Christmas decorations in his own house while wearing a visibly Muslim outfit or that someone who goes to pray in a mosque feels no emotional connection with it but says he feels that familiarity with a church, the ambivalent nature of these descriptions is emblematic for the person of the convert who carries within him more than one universe of reference. All converts to Islam, by definition, have a past outside of Islam, and it is not necessarily a bad one. In fact, they spent the formative years of their lives outside of Islam. When they move into Islam, they don’t fully leave that past behind. Having non-Muslim family and friends as well as having memories from a time outside of Islam which come to inform their feelings, wishes, and preferences in the present means that in some sense they inhabit two worlds simultaneously and hence also express different identities simultaneously. Many converts reaffirmed this interpretation by saying that they were not ashamed of their pasts and that it had made them the person they are today. Ben explained that these two worlds in one person brought with it a certain dilemma: ‘I identify with born Muslims in terms of their *dīn* [religion] but culturally I identify with non-Muslim liberals’. However, rather than trying to separate affiliations into ‘religious’ and ‘cultural’ ones, I maintain that different material objects in the lives of converts are expressive of the multiple universes they traverse, where a certain romanticised, pre-Islamic past is propelled into the present through childhood memories and enduring

relationships with non-Muslim friends and family. However, more than expressing dual aspects of an identity (Miller, 1998:17), Usman's Christmas decorations in his house – like Jane's Christmas tree – must be seen as a 'referencer of memories and feelings, of other places and other times' (Tacchi, 1998:26). It is 'referencers' of feelings and memories rooted in an imagined or real past (often childhood) that allow for the establishment and maintenance of relationships between the self and others. So, too, are Jane's and Usman's Christmas decorations more than an expressive statement about dual belonging; they constitute a tool, through which they connect with their non-Muslim friends and family. Taking away the Christmas decoration – as some Muslims demand it – would thus in a way amount to a severing of ties.

'You are what you eat' or: you eat what you want to become

Further to the role objects played in expressing something about the self and the social groups one belongs to, which can be rooted in different universes both past and present, material things were also ascribed a certain transformative power (Carsten, 2004:110). Rather than merely communicating something to the outside world, many people saw certain objects as transformative agents, which could create a certain spiritual inclination or aptitude. This potential of material things to change the spiritual state of a person became particularly relevant where willpower and faith alone could not evoke this change (cf. Laidlaw, 2005).

Amira talked about the difficulty she had in distancing herself from Hinduism on her journey to Islam. She is a forty-two-year-old schoolteacher and a mother of four. After being orphaned at a very young age, she and her two siblings grew up with her grandmother, aunt and uncle in Tooting, London. Her family was from Gujarat in India and they were practicing Hindus. They observed the *pooja* rituals, prayed together in the morning, and ate mainly vegetarian food. When Amira started reading the Qur'an, she realised that what was written in there was what she had actually believed in all along. It was 'a light bulb moment' and very soon thereafter she had the certain knowledge that 'this [Islam] is the truth'. Yet, conversion was not something she considered at first. As explained in chapter one, she did not want to hurt her family and put the whole thing out of her mind. When she started university a

year later she went to talks organised by the Islamic society and continued reading the Qur'an as well as other books about Islam. She explained:

‘And then, once I was at university, you know they would have these Islamic talks. The Islamic society was quite active and I thought, you know what, I’ll just go to the talk. So at the time, I was living with a Christian girl and I was living with another Hindu girl and there was me. And, you know, at university you explore and stuff so I was going to these lectures and you know just reading and accepting. I was accepting it in my heart slowly. And then, you know, that holy month of Ramadan was coming and I was thinking to myself “I would really like to fast” and experience that cause I had read so much about it, and then I got into a taxi with a Muslim man... big beard, looking really religious and we got talking about Islam [...] and he was looking at me quite... uhh... *guarded*, thinking “her hair is down low and she’s got a skirt probably down to here (points to a place just above her knee) above the knee and she looks quite trendy and she is like ‘Islam this, Islam that’... is she right in the head?” And then he just said something to me, he said “it’s all very well you know, you saying all of this and” – these are not the exact words but that’s more or less what he had said and intended – and he said “you know what, if you die tomorrow or today you would still die as a non-Muslim”, and that kind of hit me. And I thought to myself he’s right cause I had read that and that is when I thought, you know what, actually I will need to take that declaration of faith, you know, you’ve heard about the *shahada*, uhh, because, you know, that if I want to secure my afterlife that is something that you do need to do [...] and I had always been praying every day, you know, because that’s how I grew up [praying in the Hindu manner she had learned from her grandmother] and then I was slowly detaching myself from Hinduism [...] so there’s a journey going on in my head. I went to McDonald’s and I got a cheeseburger, with beef. You know, Hindu people don’t eat beef. Well, *people who are attached to the religion* [...] we never ate beef because you know beef is quite a holy animal [...] in my family mainly the women are vegetarian cause they seem to be a little bit more religious but that’s just in my family [...] I was vegetarian for four years, maybe I was tipping myself toward Hinduism in that way [...] during that process of reading about Islam and while learning I was

slowly detaching myself [...] and in my head that's what my thought was: well, actually it's ok if you wanna have a cheese burger because you don't really believe that anyway, do you?'

She thereafter participated in the fast during Ramadan, and converted to Islam at the end of a lecture organised by the Islamic society.

It might seem odd that something so profane as a cheeseburger should have such a profound impact on a person that it could even effect a change of heart. Of course, it is not the beef burger *eo ipso* that does the job. The meaning of an object is not static (Tacchi, 1998:26). Eating pork may be trivial until someone stops doing it for religious reasons (and not because he is vegetarian); in that moment it gains cultural meaning through its signified avoidance. In Amira's case the beef burger is imbued with a particular kind of meaning. Primarily, and most importantly it stands for something it is not. It is *not* Hindu. It is unacceptable to be Hindu and eat beef burgers at the same time. So by eating the beef burger she was severing her ties with Hinduism. She needed to take this physical step of consuming a certain material thing in order to transform her spiritual status. The idea that material things can have an impact on our spiritual state is, of course, not entirely new (see Hutchinson, 2000) but it certainly gains a new relevance in the context of conversion. Amira's eating of a cheeseburger reminded me of Fadil's (2009) informant Faiza, a non-practicing Muslim woman in Brussels. She explained how eating in front of practicing Muslims during daytime in Ramadan helped her affirm her secular self-conception and assert her identity. While Amira did not have to eat beef in front of practicing Hindus to affirm her identity, in both cases eating (a certain kind of meat or at a certain sacred time) was something, which was difficult for these informants but simultaneously necessary to assert a new identity. It is thus also related to boundary-drawing. As Fadil explains concerning Faiza: 'It is rather something she had to force herself to do – "*I had to go to the end of it*" – to be coherent with the doubts and interrogations which tormented her.' (ibid.:448). In Mahmood's 2005 study, women in the piety movement in Cairo accomplish their goal of becoming more pious through streamlining outward behaviour and inward disposition. The starting point of ethical self-formation is in the material world: it is the physical body and its accompanying *habitus*. The process of habituation means that through repeated bodily acts one trains one's memory, desires, and intellect to behave according to established standards. By

developing a certain *habitus* through the physical motion of prayer and other rituals one teaches oneself to be pious. In contrast to an understanding of religion in which the interior aspects of faith are separated from the exterior aspects of practice Mahmood explains: ‘the pious subjects of this book posit a very different relationship between outward bodily acts (including rituals, liturgies, and worship) and inward belief (state of the soul). Not only are the two inseparable in their conception, but, more importantly, belief is the product of outward practices, rituals, and acts of worship rather than simply an expression of them’ (Mahmood, 2005:XV).

In Janet Carsten’s study of the process of kinship on Pulau Langkawi, Malaysia, it is both cohabitation and consuming the same food together, which can create relatedness as kinship: ‘co-eating and sharing are as fundamental for kinship as are ideas about procreation’ (Carsten, 1991:425). Siblingship is established through shared consumption, and in particular the consumption of food. Carsten explains that ‘relatedness is not given at birth’ (ibid.) – at least not necessarily so – but it is rather ‘a process of becoming’ which centres around consumption under one roof. The effect of co-eating and sharing substances in the house is the conversion of affinal ties into consanguineal links: ‘although one is born with blood, one’s blood also becomes.’ (ibid.:426). Hence, foster children are turned into blood relations through their residence and co-eating for an extended period of time. While other studies have also explored the idea that children nursed by the same mother are considered blood relations (see Clarke, 2007), Carsten’s account goes even further in showing that consuming the same food in a house creates blood ties so that marriage between conception children and foster children would be considered incestuous even if the period of fostering started long after weaning. Rice in particular becomes a source of blood so much so that foster children are even thought to take on the physical attributes of their adoptive parents the same way that their ‘conception children’ do. Women who are at the centre of food preparation and shared consumption thus create kinship even in the absence of conceiving children of their own (Carsten, 1991:432-3). The idea is that, by eating the same food, the blood of the people sharing the food becomes increasingly similar so that consuming the same food actually turns people into blood relations: ‘Eating together implies having blood in common.’ (ibid.). This seems to be one physical thing affecting another: ‘Food, especially in the form of rice means, becomes blood. To a great extent shared cooking and consumption create the shared substance that is at the heart of kinship and co-residence.’ (ibid.:427).

However, the aspect of cohabitation adds another, non-blood related aspect to the idea of family and makes the connection more complex. It is through cohabitation – a mode of dwelling together in the physical world – that the social, non-material change of becoming family takes place.

Battlegrounds or sites of accommodation – Objects as Sites that ‘do’

While the first section of this chapter analysed objects in their expressive function, and the second section looked at objects as transformative agents, here I would like to illuminate the third function of material things that I came across in my fieldwork. In this last function I conceptualise objects as sites, in that they become platforms where things happen, where acceptance is voiced or rejection shouted, and where recognition is gestured. In this function, objects can potentially be a place where converts and their families come together in mute conversation. The reason for this is relatively straightforward. Topics of discussion can be avoided and I have shown elsewhere that discussion about conversion and religion more generally *is* usually shunned by family members of converts (Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017:1-2). As Cameron, a convert from the symposia, explained, converts are ‘strange’ primarily because they want to talk about religion, though not necessarily Islam. But talk about religion, according to him, was not well received inside the family. Through this process of exclusion relatives often foreclose any understanding at all of the convert and his motivations. They become estranged spiritually and it becomes harder to partake in the other’s life. However, there seems to be a narrow avenue consisting of material objects, which may not necessarily substitute understanding as such but which may lead to recognition or rejection respectively. Material things, whether they are food items, clothing or prayer mats –and unlike topics of conversation – demand some kind of ‘dealing with’. It is in this sense of demanding some degree of coming together and exchanging attitudes that material objects can become sites of communication where verbal communication is absent. What will become apparent in the subsequent two sections is that the very same objects that I will discuss, namely food/drink items and the *hijab*, can either become a site of accommodation or a battleground, depending on the specific context.

Spiritual Food Poisoning

Cosmo had been brought up in Wales by an agnostic Welsh father and a Greek Orthodox mother. He was baptized into the Greek Orthodox Church and grew up with a 'mild religious imprint', going to church around Easter and Christmas but not much more than that, except when the family was visiting relatives in Greece who were more practicing. During our conversation, his wife Farida would occasionally step in to remind Cosmo of certain details she felt were missing from the narrative or to offer her perspective on certain issues. As Cosmo talked about his mother's reaction to his conversion he became slightly agitated. He had met Farida in medical school, converted at the age of eighteen, and married at the age of nineteen. His mother had been very upset about both these developments, to such an extent that Farida had not been allowed to enter the parents' house for a couple of weeks after they got married. He recalled his mother being 'very antagonistic, deeply deeply hurt, very upset', and Farida added that 'she saw it as a rejection of her rather than a rejection of the faith'. Cosmo tried to explain her reaction by saying that his mother was incredibly caring and that she feared losing her son. Despite these evidently strong feelings about the conversion, his mother refused to discuss the topic. She did not ask any questions, did not try to understand what had happened, but instead refused to hear about it. The relationship continued, but rejection was voiced in silence where food was concerned. Cosmo recounted:

'The first time I went back to Greece following my conversion my mum had told my family that I had converted to Hinduism [...] so my family, they were ordering pizza and they asked me "we know you don't eat beef now". This is how bothered my mother was by this whole thing [...] she deliberately said that [...] she didn't want them to know that I had turned Turk... so converting to a polytheistic religion full of, you know, different kinds of symbols would have been more acceptable than converting to Islam.'

He elaborated that his mother must have felt deeply ashamed and did not want to be seen as a failure. Close to lunch we eventually started talking about food more generally, and how they would handle this sensitive topic when visiting his mother's place. Farida angrily stepped in: 'She would spike your food and drink'. Cosmo

nodded ‘She would try to’. Then Farida turned to me and explained: ‘She would put bits of pork into the food [...] hoping that, you know, like a magnetic field the pork would push Islam out.’

In Cosmo’s narrative food (and drink) becomes a site of conflict where his mother’s shame and anger finds expression and where her rejection manifests in her attempt to ‘bring him back’. In the first instance of Cosmo’s travelling to Greece, his relatives talk about his dietary requirements when ordering pizza in the assumption that he has converted to Hinduism. Here, food tells the story of a mother who experienced such intense feelings of shame and a sense of failure that she was not prepared to confront her own family with the truth about her son’s conversion. The issue of ordering pizza in this instance reveals not only her rejection but also her hierarchical thinking about religion. While surely opting out of the Greek orthodox religion would have been less than ideal in any case, it becomes clear that somehow Islam is worse than other religions (cf. Johns & Saeed, 2002). She would prefer her family to know that Cosmo had converted to a very distant religion, which had very little in common with Greek Orthodox Christianity rather than telling them the truth that he had converted to the religion of the Turkish enemy. Food in this instance becomes a site where personal feelings of shame and failure as well as societal animosities rooted in a historical conflict become amalgamated. More than anything his mother could articulate in words did the dealing with food items show Cosmo how his mother thought and felt about his conversion. It became a site of rejection. Food in this case is also a proxy: without the pizza delivery Cosmo might never have found out his relatives thought that he was Hindu. It served as a proxy for the conversation about religion that was not possible.

In the second instance where Cosmo’s mother put pork into a meal she had prepared for her guests, food is not only a site of rejection but it also transformed into a battleground – at least in the perception of Cosmo and his wife Farida. This idea that food items can effectuate a change of heart or transform one’s spiritual inclination has been elaborated, above, in Amira’s eating a cheeseburger. However, Amira used the transformative power of the cheeseburger to effect a change in her own spiritual state. The case of Cosmo’s mother is even more striking in that food is conceived as a tool,

able to transform the convert's attitude. In Amira's case she supplemented her efforts to move out of Hinduism and into Islam by eating a beef burger where willpower alone was not enough. In Cosmo's narrative, his mother used food like a weapon to effectuate a spiritual change *against* his will. In this instance then, material substance is not only ascribed the capacity to help transformation where personal will is not strong enough but it is even thought to bring about change against the will of someone, unconsciously, akin to witchcraft. Hence food becomes a site where a battle over both religious and filial association is fought. To the mother, pushing Islam out and winning her son back go hand in hand. Interestingly, Ismael reported something similar of his family. As in Cosmo's case, conversation about his conversion was impossible, his family would not hear of it.

Ismael, too, experienced a strong sense of rejection following his conversion to Islam from Hinduism and felt like an outcast within his own family. He recounts trying to reconnect without success:

'I tried so hard to make amends, I tried to visit them as regularly as I could, I tried to eat their food although I knew they were making food and they would offer it to the Gods and then that food they would mix it with the normal food and then serve it to us [him and his wife, Hamida] so [chuckles] that's fine but you know in the Quran it says the food that's offered to any other God – whether it's meat or other things – is not lawful for you.'

The idea is exactly the same as before: by infusing the food with the power of Hindu deities, they would try to pull him out of Islam and back to Hinduism. The reason I conceptualise food in these particular instances as 'sites', rather than simply expressions or agents as I have done in previous sections, is that several things seem to be at work simultaneously. What we see in these cases are complex dynamics where family members express strong feelings and thoughts and simultaneously try to reverse the process of conversion either by offering particular kinds of food or by infusing food with certain qualities.

The idea that foods had transformative powers with respect to the spiritual and even moral status of a person was further elaborated by Ismael regarding his father:

I think his big thing is to this day about meat. His moral compass says, “How can a religion be good that slaughters animals and eats meat?” [...] That’s his key thing and there’s nothing that I can try to do to rationalise it or try to explain it. Even though I might not personally eat it, I don’t have to eat beef and stuff, but it all stems from there. The fundamental nature of Islam is violence because it allows meat, slaughter and violence. That’s what a lot of the priests go on about, “They eat meat.” It’s the same old thing. They don’t move on beyond that in terms of the concept of God, prophethood, what the Qur’an might actually say. It’s very much on the superficial rituals and they build a whole mythology around that.’

In this specific instance the conflict between Ismael and his father seems to lie in their different ontologies regarding substances as religious items: what for Ismael is merely a ‘superficial ritual’, is for his father the key to being a morally intact, non-violent person.

Alcohol as the Men’s Hijab

Other material objects, in particular drinks and the hijab were also turned into battlegrounds albeit in a different way. In the case of drinks – and I am talking about alcoholic drinks one would usually have in a social context, like having a pint at a local pub – it was almost as if the drinks became a proxy for conversion. I did not realise how important alcohol was until I included men in my fieldwork. In the MPhil stage of my fieldwork I had only included female converts and in that context alcohol rarely came up. There was only one father who voiced his regret that his daughter would no longer go out socially for drinks. When including men it almost seemed as though alcohol was the men’s hijab in that it became *the* emblem of Muslim otherness and the estrangement that converts experience vis-à-vis their families and friends. It seems as though this was related to British pub culture, where bonding would happen over a pint of beer. Becoming mates and drinking socially are inextricably linked in this aspect of British culture. The place of the pub (or ‘public house’) is elaborated in Barley’s (1989:16) work on British villages and cities, which describes the pub as the place where

‘groups form for the exchange of drinks, persons taking turns to order a “round”. This social aspect of drinking is such a powerful element that some English students have regarded solitary drinking as automatically a sign of impending alcoholism. Inclusion in, or exclusion from, the round is a mark of offering, or withholding, of a social relationship. To dodge one’s round, to refuse an offered drink without good reason, to “forget” someone – all constitute eloquent statements about oneself in a public arena where judgments are made about the sort of person you are and where you stand in the community.’

It is thus not surprising that in the minds of many informants not participating in this kind of bonding exercise came close to an amputation of social ties, which clearly positioned the convert as an outsider. While several male converts reported that among their friends’ and families’ primary concerns had been the anxious question ‘Will you still drink?’, one convert at the symposia recounted his parents asking him angrily ‘Why can’t you be normal?’, and wanting him to go to the pub. It was in a similar vein that Usman’s stepfather Paul answered my questions about his thoughts on Islam: ‘I don’t like it [Islam] at all. There’s a lot of things I don’t like about it. All the laws. Like fasting is one, they don’t drink, and I don’t mean as in alcoholic but as in socialising, you know?’. In all of these cases, as has been previously established (Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017:10-1), families were not interested in the religion or the conversion and never talked about it, but, when asked, voiced very general, non-committal statements such as ‘whatever floats your boat’. So conversation about the conversion was never the battleground on which hostile opinions or understandable concerns would be voiced. Rather, it was through the proxy of ‘having a pint’, which in turn is a symbol for a certain way of ‘being together’, that confrontation took place. Arguments which would have been impossible to have over religion *per se* erupted frequently and agitatedly over ‘drinks’.

Checking Labels

Just as the previous section has shown how material objects can become sites of conflict as proxy where no communication about conversion takes place, in this

section I would like to show that material objects can just as readily become sites of accommodation where respect is expressed and where converts and their families come together. As already stated, most families avoided talking about the conversion of their relative and religion in general. Although never explicitly said, it appeared that most informants viewed conversations about religion as ‘bad form’. However, the way material objects featured in the interaction between the converts and their families testifies to very different attitudes held and efforts made by them. While the above section showed how intimates can use material things to convey a message of disapproval, or as sites for an alternative conflict which do not explicitly talk about religion but ultimately aim at it, this section shows quite the contrary: relatives who may not want to talk about the conversion still want to express their love and care for the convert. ‘Care’ then comes – at least partially – in the form of material objects.

The main form in which material objects were made into sites of accommodation was, again, through food. Although one convert reported that a family member had given him a prayer rug, and Christine’s mother told me that she had bought her a new hijab for her birthday, the overwhelming majority of people expressed their love and care for the convert – despite not understanding the conversion and often not wanting to understand – through the provision of *halal* food. Several relatives told me that they would make sure to provide the converts with *halal* food when they came to visit. Some would even make a considerable effort when doing so, as a *halal* butcher was not always near at hand. Providing *halal* food in these cases expressed love and care but also respect for the converts and their choices. When Douglas & Isherwood (1996:74-5) talk about material goods as ‘marking services’ where ‘goods are used for marking in the sense of classifying categories’ respecting *halal* rules can be considered a ‘marking service’ from the family to the convert. Needless to say, where *halal* food was provided as a means to reconcile the conversion, converts also felt respected to that extent. Laura, a twenty-nine-year-old convert from Birmingham, explained to me that her parents would sometimes act as babysitters for her in-laws’ children. Laura praised them for being so caring even with extended family (not their own grandchildren) but in particular she emphasised their reliability when it comes to *halal* food:

‘Mum and dad have been very accepting of Islam... we try hard not to impose anything, so for instance... cause obviously we eat halal food and if we’re

ever going to like come here for dinner we're always like "what do you want us to bring, bring our own food", cause I know that obviously we're the ones that need it... I don't want to impose on someone... but they said "no no no, we'll get your meat, that's fine" and I'm like "ok, fine", and actually you prefer halal meat, don't you dad? [...] For me it's been a really big life change because now I'm like right, I can't do that, I can't do this, like you can't drink, that wasn't really a problem, you can't smoke, I've never smoked... you can't eat pigs so I was a bit like hmm ok... it's quite amazing how quickly you adapt, you will just adapt to it and as I said to you in the car, the kids will be quite regularly with these two [her parents] and I'm like, it is really appreciated not just be me and Amjad [her husband] but by all of us how mum and dad are quite careful in if they give the children something they will check [whether it is halal].'

At this point Laura's mother, Elisabeth, interposed: 'cause some sweets and chocolate, you don't know what's in them, if that's something they can have... what's it called... gelatine, yeah, and then I don't give them that'. Her husband, John, added 'although it's only a sin if they know about it... you could give them something and it wouldn't be a sin because they wouldn't know about it'. Here Laura interrupted her father:

'yeah but that's the thing... for instance on Christmas dad had, I can't remember, was it your liquorice... and the kids wanted some, and it could have been quite easy for dad to just say "oh yeah, here you go have some", like he said "ignorance, he doesn't know, the kids don't know, hey ho they don't know", but dad took the time to like "oh hang on I need to check" and then you actually asked me "do you mind just checking the box and see what's in it", and I quickly checked and it did have gelatine in it so they couldn't have it, but it's just like little things like that that you're like actually they don't have to do that if they don't really want to but... they do, which [...] it's just so much easier, we leave the kids with them and are confident... so Amjad's brothers will happily leave their children with my mum and my dad, which is really strange considering it's not their grandparents... and a couple of weeks ago mum and dad came to our house and watched the kids... and there was

no, like – usually Izz is quite like “ok tell them they can’t have pork, check for gelatine, check this, this and this” – but like with you two he never says anything cause he knows they check, he knows that they’re not gonna give them and if they’re not sure they will just say “actually no, you can’t, because I don’t know what’s in it. Have this instead”.’

In this case, Laura expressed her immense gratitude for this form of respect offered by her parents and for the extra effort made by her parents in ensuring the children would eat *halal* food. Here ‘halal food’ becomes a site of accommodation from both sides. Laura and her husband don’t want to ‘impose’ and offer to bring their own food but her parents go out of their way to provide it instead. Her father also has some knowledge about Islam (“It’s only a sin if you know it”), which he mainly got through his Muslim co-workers. This shows that a certain degree of interest for the religion of his daughter is there. They go yet a step further in babysitting Laura’s in-law’s children: more than the babysitting itself it was the great care taken and the effort made to read labels and be extremely cautious with respect to halal food that earned the parents her feeling accepted and respected without reservation.

When Usman’s mother, Bettina, said to me ‘We now have halal turkey for Christmas’, she perhaps unknowingly tapped into a major topic in conversion narratives. Christmas in and of itself usually presented a family and the convert with obstacles. Some converts refused to celebrate Christmas altogether. To them, celebrating the birth of the son of God constituted *shirk* (attributing partners to Allah), which is considered one of the biggest sins in Islam. Hence, they would refuse to celebrate Christmas altogether. In other cases, however, converts did come together with the rest of the family for Christmas. In these instances the converts would emphasise that they celebrated Christmas exclusively as a family holiday and not in any religious way. Often, the families themselves did not celebrate it religiously but purely as a coming together of the family. As in the case of Bettina, then, the family would show their appreciation and respect for the convert by providing a ‘halal turkey’. The ‘halal turkey’ may seem somewhat odd in that the two seemingly incommensurable universes of Islam on the one hand and Christianity turned British culture on the other meet. Just as one may maintain that you cannot be a Muslim and a Christian at the same time, so a halal Turkey for Christmas may at first glance seem unintelligible. But Miller (1998:17) reminds us that consumption can sometimes be an

instrument that both expresses and resolves dual aspects of identity. So for Usman, eating halal turkey for Christmas – just like decorating his home with fairy lights – symbolizes his simultaneously being British (with a Christian upbringing) and also Muslim. In his case, his mother accommodates this multi-dimensionality of his identity by providing the halal turkey – a seemingly paradoxical syncretism – and turning Christmas into something that the Christian parents and their Muslim son can enjoy together as a family gathering.

Although *halal* food occupies a peripheral place in the sense that it is neither one of the six articles of faith²⁴ nor one of the five pillars of practice²⁵ of Islam, it is somehow elevated into a position of central importance in the life of many converts and in their relations with friends and family. Why food comes to occupy this pivotal place becomes obvious when food is no longer seen as a material substance only, but is understood as ‘a medium for discriminating values’ (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996:66). Hence Douglas & Isherwood’s (ibid) explanation that ‘the more numerous the discriminated ranks, the more varieties of food will be needed’ also makes sense. Providing *halal* food is therefore not simply a symbolic act; on a deeper level it means respecting values that are different from those held by the provider of *halal* food (Laura’s parents or Usman’s mother). Intriguingly and contradictorily, this is the case whether or not the person providing the halal food *understands* the convert’s values. While in all the cases where family members took that accommodating step of providing *halal* food communication about and understanding of Islam was lacking, these intimates nevertheless respected the converts and their choices and therefore – by extensions – their values. To state the central importance of such material consumption goods, Douglas & Isherwood (ibid.:72) further explain: ‘But consumption goods are most definitely not mere messages; they constitute the very system itself. Take them out of human intercourse and you have dismantled the whole thing. In being offered, accepted, or refused, they either reinforce or undermine existing boundaries.’ I therefore think it warranted to conceptualise the material goods I have discussed in this section as ‘sites’, where the offering and the rejection, acceptance, and refusal take place. It is thus also the site where the ‘existing

²⁴ The six articles of faith include the belief in one God, belief in the angels, belief in the books (Thora, Bible & Quran), belief in the prophets and messengers, belief in the day of judgement and the hereafter, and the supremacy of God’s will/ Predestination.

²⁵ The five pillars of practice include prayers, *zakat* (giving to charity), the proclamations of faith (‘There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah’), fasting and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca once in your life)

boundaries' of family, belonging and of 'insider-versus-outsider' status are being reinforced or undermined.

Conclusion

When Douglas & Isherwood (1996:60) assert that goods make and maintain social relationships they do so in the same vein that Mauss (1990[1950]) elaborates on the topic of the gift. While his groundbreaking book on the making and remaking of relationships is called *The Gift*, his central concern is with reciprocity. For Mauss (ibid.:59), the reciprocity inherent in the exchange of 'goods'²⁶ signals respect and is thus key to maintaining flourishing social relations. 'If one gives and returns... it is because one is giving and returning "respects"... Yet it is also because by giving one is giving *oneself*, and if one gives *oneself*, it is because one "owes" *oneself* – one's person and one's goods – to others'. The presentation and reciprocation of gifts is inherently linked to the communication between 'selves'. My fieldwork mirrors Mauss' assertions about the Maori in that it became very obvious that those relationships worked best that involved a reciprocal giving of sorts. It can be either the convert who initiates this dynamic of giving, as was the case with Laura and her husband, who would offer to bring their own food which was then reciprocated by her parents' accommodation. In other cases, it can also be the relatives who initiate this dynamic, as was the case with Usman's mother who offered to prepare halal turkey which in turn was reciprocated by Usman and his family by celebrating Christmas, which they would not have celebrated otherwise. For Mauss (ibid.:50), the three obligations of giving, receiving and reciprocating are equally important in the keeping together of this intricate social structure of exchange. He asserts that goods and services alike, 'everything [...] is there for passing on, and for balancing accounts.' (ibid.: 18). In this dynamic a failure to accept or to reciprocate comes close to a declaration of war, so that the things we offer and accept also fulfil the purpose of 'buying peace' (ibid.:21). While these are observations regarding the fostering of friendly feelings between two persons or groups through 'gift' exchange that Mauss makes with respect to societies as diverse as the Melanesian, Polynesian, North

²⁶ For Mauss (1990[1950]:58-9) the 'circulation of goods' ranges from men, women, and children to rituals, jokes, and even insults and thus encompasses the material as well as the immaterial sphere.

American, Roman, Germanic, Celtic, Chinese and Hindu society, he asserts that ‘this morality is eternal; it is common to the most advanced societies, to those of the immediate future, and to the lowest imaginable forms of society. We touch upon fundamentals.’ (ibid.:89). The study of the role of material objects in the context of conversion to Islam in contemporary Britain has yielded an insight into this proposed reciprocity.

Chapter Six – The Ethics of Conversion: Ritual Purification and the Care of the Self

‘We have weaknesses, but God is perfect and I take comfort in knowing him’

‘When we return to Allah we will return on our own’

– Hannah, London, convert from Judaism –

Between January and May 2017, I participated in the women’s ‘New Muslim Circle’ at a London Mosque. The class was designed to help new converts in all sorts of ways relating to their faith, but some born Muslims also regularly attended, to deepen their knowledge about Islam or to offer their help to new sisters. While classes always followed roughly the same structure, they also served as a loose forum for the exchange of experiences and for seeking advice from fellow converts or born Muslims during class or after it had finished. Many women used to stay on for informal conversation, prayer, or studying the Qur’an. The class was usually led by Hannah, a convert in her early forties. Having converted at the age of sixteen, Hannah used to be the only white Muslim at the mosque. ‘But now I am in a position to help other reverts’, she explained to me as her motivation for leading these classes. Occasionally Hannah brought in a Sheikh to answer the converts’ questions directly, and when she was ill or away she arranged for someone else to lead the class so it could take place every Saturday; generally, though, Hannah was there as the class teacher and as a mentor to newer converts.

Hannah usually started by explaining the meaning and relevance of one of Allah’s ninety-nine names. She encouraged the other converts to use the names, for instance by addressing Allah with that name in prayer: ‘ponder the names of Allah in order to know him better, to build a connection’. After this introductory section, some topic of interest for converts (and Muslims generally) was addressed and discussed with the help of sources from the Qur’an and Sunna. At the end of each class the women could choose between two different ‘workshops’ – one which would teach them how to pray, and the other relating to Qur’an recitation in Arabic. Hannah would

usually teach the converts how to pray while an Arabic speaker led the workshop on Qur'an recitation.

During my five months attending the New Muslim Circle, three weeks of classes were dedicated to the theme of 'purification'. The first of these classes at the end of February started, as was usual custom, with one of the names of Allah: *Al-Mu'min* – the one who gives belief and security. 'This is a logical path', one of the born Muslims attending the circle explained to the converts. 'By being a *mu'min* [believer] Allah puts *īmān* [faith] in your heart, which makes you *aman* [safe]'. A discussion unfolded where the converts talked about the merits of belief while still having to 'work for securing your place in *jenna*'. Hannah explained to her fellow converts: 'in our society we are constantly taught to put ourselves first, but Allah promises us his *jenna* for every struggle or hardship for his sake'. Struggling in the way of Allah when faced with hardship and following his commands was seen as constitutive of the kind of 'work' at stake. 'When Allah loves a person he will never throw them into the fire', and thus 'we have to love him in a way that he loves us back'. The participants of the circle were encouraged to keep in mind the hereafter constantly, in order to 'earn your place in eternity'. 'Ask Allah for *jenna* in every prayer', Hannah encouraged her sisters; 'our eternal home needs to be very much at the forefront of our minds'.

'Working' to secure one's place in *jenna* also had another meaning. This work, I suggest, is a kind of ethical work in the Foucauldian sense, one which aims at remembering God always and thus becoming a God-conscious person. One important aspect of making oneself into the God-conscious kind of creation that Allah could love and lift into paradise seemed to be a cluster of themes around the central point of 'purification', which is why I will focus on purification as a technique of the self in this chapter. What struck me was not only the minute detail, in which ritual purification – and this included the most banal aspect of bodily hygiene – was discussed but also how it was constantly connected to securing one's place in the hereafter. The question of interest in this chapter is what function ritual purification fulfils as a technique of the self. While technologies of the self in the Foucauldian sense are usually analysed as relating to the self only, I will show that the function in the context of conversion to Islam is in fact twofold: on the one hand, the techniques of the self taught in the New Muslim Circle can be seen as a mnemonic device which constantly reminds converts of the hereafter and moulds them into the kind of people

that have *taḳwā* (God-consciousness) and so will enter paradise. On the other hand, these techniques of the self have the social function of drawing boundaries between the converts and their families as well as society at large. The technologies of the self under scrutiny in this chapter constitute the community of ‘learners’ and therefore their relation to the unlearned; they provide a language for understanding the pure and the impure and the practices that draw boundaries with the unlearned. While this kind of learning could at times be pleasurable for the converts, as it positioned them in this world and gave them a place, it could also, at other times, be painful and difficult, as it created tensions with the ‘old self’. In this way, boundary-drawing occurred not only between the community of learners and the unlearned but also between the old self and the new self. The techniques of the self in question thus taught the converts not only to purify their bodies and souls but also to purify their old selves as well as the group. In the following paragraphs I will show how the ethical dimension of learning ‘purification’ as a technology of the self actually goes beyond the care of the self paradigm to also fulfil the function of boundary drawing.

Purification as a Technique of the Self

In the first out of the three weeks of classes that dealt with purification, Hannah started her lecture by introducing Sura 2:222 (Al-Baqara): ‘Allah loves those who turn to him constantly and those who keep themselves pure and clean’. She pointed out that, according to a *hadith*, cleanliness is half your faith. More precisely and to use the accurate term, Hannah was discussing the role of *ṭahāra* (ritual cleanliness), which refers to inward and outward cleanliness. The aim of *ṭahāra*, Hannah elaborated, is to purify inwardly from *shirk*, arrogance, jealousy, etc, and purify outwardly from dirt. ‘Washing’, she asserted, ‘puts worshippers into a state of spiritual purity’. As a consequence ‘The one who keeps himself clean is closest to Allah’.

Hannah then went on to talk about *istinja*’ and *wuḍū*’ as well as toilet etiquette more generally. ‘*Istinja*’, Hannah explained,

‘refers to cleaning – especially the private parts – with water [...] cleaning from urine and faeces, blood, and animal matter [...] The best form of cleaning the private parts is with water. Using paper tissues is ok but you need

to use three pieces of paper or more. Use the left hand for cleaning [...] enter the bathroom with the left foot first and seek refuge from male and female *jinn*. Exit with the right foot first. It is not allowed to answer the call of nature where it will offend somebody and never to face the *Qibla* when doing so [...].’

Next came *wuḍū’*, the partial ablution (usually before prayer), and later *ghusl*, the full body wash required before *khutba* (sermon) on Fridays, before *hajj* (pilgrimage), and after menstruation or sexual intercourse. Finally, *tayammum* (dry ablution with sand in case of water scarcity) was elaborated extensively although none of the women – or so I thought to myself – was really going to be in a situation where they might need it. ‘Invalidation of *wuḍū’*, *ghusl* or *tayammum*’, Hannah continued, ‘occurs through natural discharge, loss of consciousness, passing gas, urine or faeces, sex – which requires complete *ghusl* – touching the private parts lustfully and eating camel meat.’

Assuming that adult women in contemporary British society would have some idea of how to wash themselves, the detail with which such seemingly ordinary procedures were discussed appear surprising at first sight. However, they resonate with Clarke’s (2015) discussion on the legality of nail polish during *wuḍū’* and *ghusl*. In his book chapter on ‘*Legalism and the Care of the Self*’ he discusses ‘ruly’ settings and the use of rules in order to realise projects of ‘the good life’ (cf. Faubion, 2001; Laidlaw, 2014; MacIntyre, 1981). As Clarke rightly points out, in order to understand the prescriptive rules at stake ‘one needs to know what *wuḍū’* and *ghusl* are. One also needs to understand why they are important: if they are not properly completed, then uncleanness (*najāsah*) will not have been removed and ritual purity (*tahāra*) will not have been achieved, thus invalidating the prayers that a Muslim should perform five times a day’ (Clarke, 2015:238). Once the importance of ritual purification is understood, one can also start to understand the minute detail given over to making sure that *tahāra* is achieved. However, it seemed that the correct purification techniques were not only taught in order to secure the validation of prayer, but rather it appeared as if the techniques themselves served the mnemotechnical function of reminding believers of Allah. ‘Purification is ongoing’, Hannah explained. ‘It is a circle where you have to purify over and over again’. The declared aim of this continuous cycle of purification was to ‘get used to staying in a state of *wuḍū’*, of

ritual purity'. The emphasis placed on ongoing purification is an indication that we should think about this process in terms of ethical self-formation.

Like Mahmood, Deeb, or Hirschkind, Clarke places himself within the Foucauldian tradition (cf. Agrama, 2012; Asad, 1993, 2003; Deeb, 2006; Foucault, 1988; Hirschkind, 2006; Mahmood, 2005; Messick, 1997) of taking people's piety seriously and asking what it is that they are trying to achieve. He answers this question in ethical terms: the pious Shi'is he studied in contemporary Lebanon, and their debate about the legality of nail polish during *wuḍū'* and *ghusl* (for the validation of the ensuing prayer), have to be understood as being engaged in an ethical project of self improvement. Rather than looking at 'codes of conduct', Clarke looks explicitly at *practice* – that is, on ways 'in which people try to realise projects of the good life' (Clarke, 2015:245). Like Mahmood in her study of the piety movement among women in Cairo mosques, Clarke shows that the limitations imposed through the 'ruliness' of the *Sharī'ah* and its interpretation simultaneously offers – through the correct *practice* – the personal freedom of self improvement in order to live the desired life: 'Obeying rules is thus not a social imposition that constrains autonomy, but an exercise of personal freedom in so far as it is the means by which a desired self is realised' (Clarke, 2015:246). Clarke thus treats rules as what Foucault calls technologies or techniques of the self – that is, as tools for shaping the ideal self through 'repeated practice leading to internalisation, the cultivating of a set of "embodied" dispositions that will then determine conduct.' (ibid.:249). Insofar as this is the case, submission to rules and exercise of freedom (to form the desired self) are closely related.

Liberal Discontent with the Freedom of the Ethical Subject

All of the parents of converts who I spoke to voiced their uneasiness with Islam's apparent 'ruliness'. Veiling, the five daily prayers, fasting, and restricting oneself in terms of where and with whom to socialise were perceived as 'too restrictive' and 'a bit too much'. Because of Islam's 'ruly' character, it was perceived as 'fierce' and as a 'harsh religion'. The parents of female converts especially thought that Islam had taken freedom away from their daughters. 'Freedom', in turn, was seen as a prerequisite for 'being happy'. Time and again parents voiced their hope for their

children – ‘I just want her to be happy’ – while simultaneously fearing that being Muslim would not allow for this hope to materialize. It was important to relatives that ‘she could be whoever she wanted to be’, but to their minds choosing to be a Muslim imposed too many restrictions on the convert, thus jeopardising her freedom and happiness. Tellingly, while parents focussed on the converts’ foregone freedom and happiness, most of the converts I spoke to during the course of my fieldwork reported that Islam had greatly augmented their inner peace, made them feel freer, and left them with less fear and fewer material desires. The family’s concepts of ‘freedom’ and ‘happiness’ are also at odds with Sheikh Faisal Saleh’s explanation to the class that ‘life is a test. We are not here to be happy. People say they won’t be happy with prayer and fasting but we are not here for happiness or else Allah may have created us in a theme park. We are here to pass the test’. This highlights two very different perspectives on agency: while Islamic rituals are seen as problematic from the family’s side, they are constitutive of the desired life from the converts’ perspective, and are thus indispensable. This dispute about agency underscores the incommensurability of liberal and pious perceptions of ritual.

For the explanation of this apparent contradiction, we find a hint in Mahmood when, concerning the Cairo mosque movement she studied, she suggests that we have to look critically at our liberal and progressive understanding of agency, which ‘is understood as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)’ (Mahmood, 2005:8). As I encountered during my own research, so Mahmood too found that ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ were largely considered opposites of one another by liberals (ibid.:113). Mahmood argues that, rather than understanding agency as resistance to domination, we have to redefine it as ‘capacity for action’ and allow for more than one version of ‘agency’. In the case of the women she studied in the Cairo mosque movement, it was precisely their *subordination* that constituted the women’s agency and created the capacity for action. Their cultivation of a habitus that was ‘shy’, ‘modest’, and ‘humble’ enabled them to act in a way that would make them into the pious subjects they wanted to be.

While the women’s agency as ethical subjects may seem to be at odds with their cultivation of a docile disposition, Mahmood explains that precisely this paradox lies at the heart of Foucauldian ethics:

‘The paradox of subjectivation is central to Foucault’s formulation in that the capacity for action is enabled and created by specific relations of subordination. To clarify this paradox, we might consider the example of a virtuoso pianist who submits herself to the often painful regime of disciplinary practice, as well as to the hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability – the requisite agency – to play the instrument with mastery. Importantly, her agency is predicated upon her ability to be taught, a condition classically referred to as “docility”. Although we have come to associate docility with the abandonment of agency, the term literally implies the malleability required of someone in order for her to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge – a meaning that carries less a sense of passivity than one of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement.’ (ibid.: 29)

The example of the virtuoso is plausible, and perhaps in the non-politicised context of playing the piano it is easier to see how, subjecting oneself to a regime of practices, one eventually gains the freedom to play at a particular level. One gains the capacity to play in the way desired. It follows as a matter of logic that from this perspective there can be no universal conception of agency, which must always be idiosyncratic within a particular context, or, as Mahmood puts it, ‘the meaning of agency must be explored within the grammar of concepts within which it resides’ (ibid.:34).

As in my own research, Mahmood points out that in order to understand the programme of self-cultivation practiced by the women in the mosque movement, one has to recognise God’s will and its implications for human life. Mahmood explains:

‘The practices of these movements presuppose the existence of a divine plan for human life – embodied in the Qur’an, the exegetical literature, and the moral codes derived therefrom – that each individual is responsible for following. [...] the mosque movement has a strong individualising impetus that requires each person to adopt a set of ascetic practices for shaping moral conduct.’ (ibid.:30)

This is key for an in-depth understanding of the women’s motivation. As with the women I met at the New Muslim Circle, the cosmology of Mahmood’s interlocutors posited that the divine plan commands humans to live a certain kind of life and to *be*

in a certain kind of way, of which ‘piety’ is an important characteristic. Consequently, the pious Muslim – in order to fulfil God’s plan – has to struggle in order to effect the changes in himself so that he will become the desired being. Bodily acts like veiling, practicing a certain kind of gaze, and ritual purification should therefore not be seen as an outward presentation of faith but as tools by which the moral agent trains himself to be a certain way. Here, the relationship between embodied practice and belief is conceptualised in a way that ‘belief is the product of outward practices, rituals, and acts of worship rather than simply an expression of them’ (ibid.:xv). It is through repeated bodily acts that the subject trains her own memory, desire, affect and thought to form the desired *habitus*, which enables the achievement of the practice’s intrinsic goal – the creation of a particular kind of self. Rather than offering an abstract argument about agency, Mahmood helps to think through kinship relations. The opposing perspectives on agency in relation to ritual reveal the fragility of family relations fraught with tension. Foucauldian ethics prove to be a fruitful ground for analysis in both Mahmood’s and in my own study because he does not propose a universal theory of virtue ethics but sees ethics as always being local and particular. Certain dispositions are formed through certain practices. And as the goals change, so do the practices and the resulting dispositions.

Foucauldian Ethics

In order to understand the direction of authors who follow the Foucauldian approach to ethics, a brief recourse to Foucault seems warranted. For Foucault, ethics deals with the relationship one has with oneself. In the process of self formation – that is, the formation of the *desired* self – a subject resorts to various ‘technologies’ of the self, which Foucault also frames as ‘practical reason’ (Foucault, 2000:225). A particular focus of Foucault’s, and therefore also of this chapter, is the fourth category of the technologies of the self, those ‘which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.’ (ibid.). The subject modification which such technologies of the self aim at do not only relate to the acquisition of new skills but first and foremost at ‘acquiring certain attitudes’. As such, technologies of the self imply a process of self-formation whereby

certain dispositions in the individual are cultivated so that he acts and reacts in certain ways. These dispositions are subtle and include bodily practices, tuning one's emotions, sensibilities, and aesthetics.

Foucault derives his ethics of the techniques or technologies of the self from the ancient Greek principle of *epimeleisthai sautou* – 'to take care of the self' (ibid.:226). This principle goes beyond contemplation of the self to include very practical exercises, which is why Foucault terms his technologies of the self 'practical' or 'technical'. Although they aim to effect an inner change (to cultivate a certain disposition in the subject, a certain way of being) these technologies involve often very practical aspects: 'taking care of oneself constituted not only a principle but also a constant practice' (ibid.:227). While technologies of the self as envisioned by Socrates were initially thought to be pedagogical means to be applied in the educational years of one's life, Epicurus later establishes them as 'a task to be carried out throughout life' – an idea which resonates very much with Hannah's assertion that 'purification is ongoing'. What constitutes a certain conduct as a technique of the self is thus not whether one follows a particular rule in order to be congruent with a certain kind of behaviour but whether one acts in a certain way to train oneself to *become* a certain kind of person. As Hannah put it 'One name of Allah is 'Al-Quddus' (the holy), which also means purity [...] so aim for purification'. Converts are encouraged to purify not for the sake of ritual purification but for the sake of *becoming* pure ('aim for purification'). It is important to point out that, for Foucault, engaging in technologies of the self constitutes a process of self *formation*. This is different from the idea of 'uncovering' a hidden self. The self needs to be formed through care of the self and the engagement in different technologies of the self. It is a process of subject formation and 'just as there are different forms of care, there are different forms of self' (ibid.:228).

Although techniques of the self in ancient Greek philosophy could and did entail bodily practices, they did not aim at taking care of the body. Rather, Foucault explains that 'the self is not clothing, tools, or possessions; it is to be found in the principle that uses these tools, a principle not of the body but of the soul. You have to worry about your soul – that is the principal activity of caring for yourself. The care of the self is the care of the activity and not the care of the soul-as-substance' (ibid.:230-1). Here we come to understand that activity as a technique of the self – for Foucault as well as the ancient Greek philosophers from whom Foucault takes his

inspiration – is a means for impacting the state of one’s soul. What I observed at the New Muslim Circle resonates greatly with this Foucauldian explanation. The state of the soul (‘You always have to think about the afterlife’) was very much at the forefront of my interlocutors’ minds. The practices of bodily hygiene taught in the classes need to be seen in this context, as technologies of the self, as ways to work on the body in order to make the individual into a subject who is pleasing to God, and to secure one’s place in paradise.

Reading Marcus Aurelius’ letter to his friend Fronto Foucault shows that the description of daily life – including the most trivial details – is a technology of the self (ibid.:233-4). The importance of seemingly trivial details can be explained by the relation between body and mind: ‘Theoretically, the cultivation of the self is soul-oriented, but all the concerns of the body take on a considerable importance’ because it is the body that can be worked on. The substance of the soul, by contrast, is hardly tangible. But it is the work on the body through techniques of the self that are thought to effect changes in one’s character, in one’s dispositions and emotions, and in the soul. In exactly this way, the women I met in the New Muslim circle work on their bodies in order ‘to be close to God’, to mould themselves into God-pleasing subjects and ultimately to secure their place in the hereafter.

Bathroom Etiquette as a Mnemonic Device

As a final reference to ancient Greek ethics, I have found the Stoic technique of *askesis*, aimed at ‘remembering’, a relevant technique of the self in relation to the converts I studied. While Plato located truth within the self where it needed to be uncovered, the Stoics located truth in the *logoi*, the ‘teachings of the masters’ (ibid.:238). The subjectivation of truth happens when ‘one memorises what one has heard, converting the statement one hears into rules of conduct’ (ibid.). This technique aims at internalising codes of conduct in order to acquire and *assimilate* truth. By cultivating truth dispositions, one enables the self to develop the necessary sensibilities that allow the individual to act as he should in any kind of situation. Foucault’s description of the Stoic technique of *askesis* sounds very similar to Asad’s discussion of Abduh’s description of the good judge where ‘the [legal] injunctions must become an authoritative part of himself [...] the *sharī’a* must become part of the judge’s moral and physical formation, ceasing in that context to be mere “rules” –

although rules are what he deploys in his judgements' (Asad, 2003:249). Here too, injunctions of the *sharī'a* become part of a person and thus transcend their status as rules.

Taking an ethical approach to the women's learning of body hygiene and purification that centres around the principle of the 'care of the self' it seems adequate to think of what was happening in the mosque classes as the *morphology* of learning bathroom etiquette. Rather than seeing it in isolation, it needs to be understood in relation to the larger purpose of becoming good Muslims. For the women I met, bathroom etiquette – being much more than a tedious concern with trivial practices – serves as a mnemonic device. As Hannah kept pointing out, 'the hereafter always has to be at the very forefront of our minds'. In this sense, bathroom etiquette becomes a mnemonic device, which helps the pious Muslim to always remember God, even when entering the bathroom, when showering, or when cleaning up after using the toilet. So all the familiar actions of cleaning oneself have to be re-learned as a 'mnemotechnical formula' (Foucault, 2000:238) in order to always remember God. This – to the women at the classes – was the way to make themselves into the God-pleasing Muslims that they wanted to be. As Hannah once explained, the Arabic word for 'man' is *'insān*, which is derived from the root verb *nasaa* and means 'to forget'. According to her, this linguistic connection implied that forgetting was part and parcel of human nature. One's task as a pious Muslim was to free oneself from this state of forgetfulness, and, instead, to *remember*. The development of *taḳwā* through techniques of the self aimed at such remembrance.

Concerning '*ghusl*', Hannah explained that 'the difference to a normal shower is the *intention* [*niyya*]'. Here, the difference between ritual purification and regular washing is made explicit by recourse to one's intention, which has to be to please God: the implication being that a person is not showering to clean herself for the sake of feeling refreshed or good, but solely in order to please God. In this way, the act of showering is reformulated as a mnemonic device in order to remember one's purpose – to please God. As a 'project of the good life' with the explicit aim of pleasing God, the converts were encouraged to always be in a state of ritual purity. Rather than understanding ritual purity as something required before prayer and in some other situations, the discourse at the class explicitly aimed at developing the self into an ethical agent who always renews his state of 'purity' until he becomes ritually pure always. As one more experienced member of the class put it 'Get used to staying in a

state of *wuḍū*’, even when you go to bed. You could die in your sleep, you could die going to work, so get used to staying in a state of *wuḍū*’ always’. In this formulation the ethical work of *wuḍū*’ aims at self-formation rather than conforming to a certain conduct. The continuous work of purification aims explicitly at making the believer into a person who is always in a state of ritual purity, thus always remembering God.

During one of the mosque classes, Hannah had invited a sheikh to talk about a topic of relevance and answer the converts’ questions. In preparation for the holy month of Ramadan, Sheikh Faisal Saleh decided to speak about the issue of fasting. He explained to the women:

‘everything is about the Baraka of Allah. Ramadan – why do we fast? Allah doesn’t want these rituals for themselves but for their effect on us [...] (so) why fast? For *taḳwā* – to attain God consciousness, be mindful of God. What is *taḳwā*? Protecting yourself against falling into sin, being mindful so that you don’t fall into future sins [...] You need imagination for this religion. Imagination is more important than knowledge so that we may understand God’s commands. Fasting makes you focus on the future, not think about the past. *Taḳwā* prevents us from falling into future sins. The one who is mindful of God, God will forgive his past sins. When you focus on not committing sin again, you regret past sins. *Al-muttaqin* (the mindful) are the elite of believers. Those who believe in the hidden realms: those who accept that their minds and intellect are limited and we cannot understand everything. Try to understand everything but never think that you do understand everything. The *niyya*, the intention is very important.’

In this excerpt from his speech, Sheikh Faisal Saleh clarifies that – much like the bathroom etiquette described earlier – fasting, too, is a bodily action that serves as a mnemotechnical device for remembering God. According to him, acquiring *taḳwā* is the real aim of fasting. And importantly, ‘everything is about the Baraka of Allah’. In this ethical economy, receiving blessing from Allah comes with heightened *taḳwā*. In other words, the more God-conscious I become as a believer, the more blessings I will receive.

While this chapter has so far focussed on ritual purification as a technology of the self, I would also like to draw attention to the social dimension that such techniques bring with them – the ethical beyond the ‘care of the self’ paradigm. Looking at the care of the self from the perspective of social boundaries reveals how the Muslim convert is constructed in relation to the family and to society, and how that is painful and difficult. Technologies of the self such as ritual purification help constitute the community of learners and therefore their relation to the unlearned. They provide a language for understanding the pure and the impure (cf. Douglas, 1966), and they specify practices that draw the boundaries with the unlearned. While this can be pleasurable, as it positions the convert in this world – besides the pleasure of putting oneself ‘in the right’ (Clarke, 2015:250) – it can also be painful, as it demands the drawing of boundaries between the converts and those people who are closest to them. Hannah explained to the class that such pain and struggle was inscribed in the very nature of our mission on earth. ‘Paradise is surrounded by hardships and hellfire is surrounded by temptations’ was the excerpt from the Sunna she started her explanation with. ‘Our task is to resist temptations by for example staying away from music and not eating McDonald’s [...] there are different levels of hardship and this life is a test [...] in this day and age people are told that they should put themselves first, give in to temptations, do whatever we want [...] [you have to] be informed what the pitfalls are, what will lead us to hell [...] on the day of judgment you will stand before Allah alone. It is our own responsibility to answer for our own deeds’. Hannah starts her explanation with an injunction from the Sunna, which is meant to warn her fellow sisters about leading a life of pleasure and giving into ‘temptations’. She then goes on to illustrate that very ordinary aspects of life such as listening to music and eating McDonald’s can constitute ‘giving into temptations’ while we might tend to think that temptations – like hardships – must be something ‘big’ (‘there are different levels of hardship’). Because ‘purification’ is the central empirical category in this chapter, the question arises as to what the parameters of purification are for Hannah and her students. It has by now become clear that these parameters concern both the body and the soul. Cultivating bodily hygiene goes alongside purification from a non-Islamic culture in order to achieve *taḳwā*. As such, purification is necessarily also concerned with boundary-drawing. So far Hannah has implicitly

drawn social boundaries (non-Muslims or people without the required *taḳwā* might listen to music or eat McDonald's, but *we*, Muslims who aspire to connect with God and remember him always, do not). However, in the following sentence Hannah refers to modern British ideas of 'putting yourself first', which she also called 'Western ideas' and 'YOLO [you only live once] mentality' at other times. These ideas are clearly what the converts must strive to get away from. It comes as no surprise that family and friends who are part of this 'other' majority ethical system, symbolized through 'temptations', can constitute a threat to the converts' project of self-formation: 'your family or husband may be pulling you away from Islam but to avoid hellfire we have to put Allah first *always*'. At another point during the class one convert explained 'if family members distress you or give you grief Allah will protect you and reward you for your struggles' while Hannah encouraged her sisters to pray the last of the three *quls*, 'which is meant for protection [...] there is a story of Muhammad (pbuh) getting cursed by a Jew and then being relieved through this sura [...] use it to seek protection from mankind and *jinn* as well as hardship in life – everything is a test! Ask Allah for protection by reciting this sura if your so-called friends are asking you to wear the wrong thing or to eat the wrong thing.' In all of these instances family and friends are portrayed as a potential threat, but seeking the connection with God (being God-conscious) will protect the converts. Converts are reminded to be constantly aware of temptations and to avoid falling prey by remembering Allah and asking for protection, because 'on the day of judgment you will stand before Allah alone, it is our own responsibility to answer for our own deeds'.

As one of the techniques for evading *jehanām* (hell), Hannah cites fasting – but only if done with the right *niyya* (intention): 'fasting is a shield from hellfire if you do it for the sake of Allah rather than losing weight or detoxing'. Here she constitutes the circle of converts as belonging to a community who fasts for other reasons and with a different intention than other people in contemporary British society. As in her explanation concerning the theme of 'showering' (and bathroom etiquette more generally), the believer's intention should always be to connect with God, to remember him and to ultimately form one's inner state as 'God-consciousness'. Acting out of 'love for Allah' rather than out of motives related to the self like feeling refreshed or losing weight differentiates the circle of learners from their families, friends and the rest of society. 'People find studying hellfire difficult',

Hannah finally addressed the class. ‘They don’t want to accept it, they want an all-loving God. Maybe we wish Allah hadn’t created hellfire but the reality is that it is there [...] Hardship is in this life but not in the hereafter’. In this final encouragement to take the looming threat of hell seriously in order to work towards God-consciousness, Hannah also drew one last boundary to emphasise the *difference* between the ‘new’ Muslim faith and the converts’ ‘old’ frameworks, particularly the Christian belief in which the ‘all-loving God’ is a frequent reference (despite the existence of hell in Christianity).

The question arises: what does the care of the self do not only to the self but simultaneously to others? Purification rituals from this perspective are not only about purifying body and soul but also about purifying the group and making it distinct from other groups. This purification of the group entails at its core purifying the old self, or severing the line of selfhood. This includes leaving behind old, non-Islamic practices that converts may feel very attached to, and ultimately results in what might be called an ethical dilemma (cf. Robbins, 2004; Zigon, 2008). While ritual purification has been highlighted as a technology of the self in this chapter, care of the self refers to numerous such techniques that aim at forming a God-conscious person. Other techniques my interlocutors mentioned included, for example, ‘restricting oneself’ in terms of where in the city one can legitimately move as Muslim, ‘wearing the hijab’, and obeying other ‘rules’ such as not celebrating birthdays. While there are certainly different opinions as to whether it is allowed for Muslims to celebrate birthdays, and while many Muslims do celebrate birthdays, some of the converts I met rejected the celebration of birthdays for religious reasons. This is in line with certain reformist interpretations of different *surahs* in the qur’an and sayings of the prophet, and is ultimately based on the idea that birthday celebrations constitute a form of *bid’a* (innovation) and have no basis in the *sharī‘ah*. This conservatism in converts might be explained by the fragility of boundaries which Mary Douglas points to. Douglas explains that ‘all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins.’ (Douglas, 1966:121). It is easy to see why converts who were not born into Islam and who see themselves as constantly having to re-assert their Muslim-ness act as particularly strong guardians of the margins. In this context I deem it important to signpost the fact that this particular mosque class follows a reformist view, according to which *sunnah* and *bid’a* are central categories, which are, of course,

opposed to one another. This distinct reformist version of Islam sets itself against the four classical *madhāhib*²⁷, bases itself on rationalism, and opposes the schools' accretions. In the reformism taught at the mosque class, strength of faith was measured in terms of distance from *bid'a*. Other measures of the strength of faith do, of course, exist and might be constituted through adhering to one's school's provisions or through intoxication with divine love in certain Sufi traditions. It is thus important to highlight that this reformist version of Islam, if not rarely encountered in the context of conversion, is not a standard interpretation and particular to my fieldwork site.

However, for converts who had been raised with a different code of conduct, these rules could at times mean torment, as they contradicted other important injunctions that they – even after having converted – still regarded as important with respect to leading 'the good life'. One example is given by Manal, a Filipino woman in her early forties who had been a Muslim for five months when I met her, and who was married to a British-Pakistani Muslim. During one of the classes, she reported that she had come home from work with a birthday cake that she received as a gift from her colleagues. Her husband rejected the cake with the words 'we don't celebrate birthdays'. However, she felt that she had been celebrating her birthday all her life in order to honour her mother, who suffered to bear her and had now passed away. She reported to the class that in her prayers she apologized to her mother, saying that she still honoured her but that she could no longer celebrate her own birthday. While she related the story about her birthday to the other women, her tears testified to the inner torment she felt at following this particular rule, which contradicted what she had previously been raised to do as 'the right thing'. Hannah and some of the 'older' converts advised her to 'give it time'. With time, they argued, she would deepen her faith and practice and when becoming more God conscious she would also find it easier to not celebrate her birthday and follow the rules of Islam. In this moral trajectory she would be shaping herself into the desired moral agent with time and heightened faith. The issue of not celebrating birthdays – much like the discussion revolving around not-attending Christmas family gatherings – resurfaced in many of the conversations I had with converts and during mosque classes. Most converts felt or had felt at a previous point after conversion that Islam did not allow

²⁷ Four schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence known as *Hanaḥīya*, *Mālikiya*, *Shāfi'īya* und *Hanbalīya*.

them to celebrate birthdays (*bid'a*) or to join in Christmas celebrations (*shirk*). However, both customs were simultaneously important to the converts and not engaging in them was a source of pain – to themselves and others (family).

Sana's explanation of the birthday controversy in her family highlights the offensiveness of this conduct – both to her family and ultimately to herself. Sana was not part of the mosque class. Rather, she was somebody I had encountered through my interviews and who had been a Muslim for more than thirty-five years when I met her. She was now inclined towards Sufism but had initially gone through a more reformist kind of orientation. Her explanation indicates the shift she underwent: 'One thing was that I went through a phase of not celebrating birthdays', she explained.

'Some Muslims had told me I couldn't celebrate birthdays. I have to say, that upset my family. That did upset my brother and sister. They were upset that I didn't send them a card on their birthday or remember them on their birthday. That upset them [...] *That* they didn't like. That was a phase I went through. Since I've had my children I've always celebrated their birthdays because it's a nice thing to do and it's a family tradition.'

Here, two things become clear: not celebrating birthdays is experienced as a form of 'moral injury' by family members (cf. Fadil, 2009; Mahmood, 2009). But – and this is different to other studies that look at the moral offensiveness of certain religious conduct – it is also experienced as inappropriate by the converts themselves. Sana explains that, from the moment she started her own family by having children, she did change back to celebrating birthdays because 'it's a family tradition'. It appears as though certain customs like celebrating the birthdays of family members was so deeply engrained in most converts *as a way* of honouring their beloved ones that they felt they were going against their very basic – almost visceral – dispositions by abandoning these customs.

Sana's case is, however, by no means prototypical. While Sana was strongly inclined towards a spiritual form of Sufism when I met her, the women at the mosque class followed a much more reformist interpretation of Islam, where both birthday celebrations and celebrating Christmas were seen as un-Islamic and as a form of *bid'a*. In these women we encounter people who are engaged in an ethical project of self-formation similar to what Mahmood or Clarke describe (Clarke, 2015; Mahmood,

2005). They clearly formulate the goal of getting rid of such un-Islamic practices as birthday and Christmas celebrations, which constitute a form of *bid'a*. The ability to let go, according to this ethical system grows parallel to faith. While they all experienced the 'letting go' as hard to some degree, they describe that it became easier as their faith grew stronger. Hannah's explanation is exemplary. Her first marriage was to a Muslim man who did not practice his faith much, which is why – according to Hannah – her family liked him. 'They really liked my husband as he was non-practicing so fitted in well', Hannah explained to me in a private interview outside the class.

'I would sometimes adhere to some Islamic ways and he wouldn't. For instance my parents celebrate Christmas and for years I went because I didn't have the strength to say "No" and be the black sheep of the family. As my faith got stronger I felt able to say "No", but I made a compromise and started going on Boxing Day instead. That's how I started to phase out of certain things they would do. On Christmas Day I would go to the mosque as they would have a programme of events because everyone is off work, and I would love it. I became quite involved in the mosque and the people within the mosque became my Muslim family. But some Christmases my husband would go to my mother's house with the boys and I would go to the mosque.'

Here, Hannah described her 'fading out' of the family tradition, according to which her (Jewish) parents would celebrate Christmas as a family holiday. When I asked Hannah whether she was fine with her husband and sons attending her mother's family Christmas celebrations, she answered:

'No, but he would just say that it was some family time. It saddened me, the fact that I was trying to practice my faith more whilst he was going the other way. As my faith got stronger I stopped going completely. I tried to explain to them that it didn't matter that they weren't celebrating it in a Christian way. I just do not want to celebrate any festival not sanctioned by Islam. I also didn't want my kids to be influenced by that. When they do go to her house during December and they see the lights and Christmas tree, I explain that that is what Granny does and that that's OK, and we do something else. I don't mind

that, and it's good for them to learn what other people do. Where I could compromise I tried my best. I didn't want them to hate my faith, but where things were compulsory in Islam I would not compromise.'

Hannah explicitly described her progressive fading out as a function of the strength of her faith ('As my faith got stronger I stopped going completely'). As mentioned above, she measures the strength of her faith by distance from *bid'a*. Like with many other converts, her fading out happened gradually as her faith grew stronger. First she compromised by going over to her mother's on Boxing Day and eventually stopped going completely. She also ended up preventing her children from going. Interestingly, while Hannah described her increasing orthodoxy in practice, her justification for 'being different' almost sounded like a secular reason ('it's good for them to learn what other people do'), which expresses the simultaneous respect Hannah holds for things outside of Islam, while reinforcing orthodox Islam in her own life. This juxtaposition might be explainable by Talal Asad's elaboration of how secular sensibilities structure religious conduct (Asad, 2003:1-14). In this way, converts continue to come over for Christmas or birthdays in order not to cause moral injury and respect 'secular affects' (cf. Mahmood, 2009). However, with time, converts start to challenge the marginality of their position and stop going (cf. Fadil, 2009:452). Hannah's description of her 'fading out' mirrors to some extent what Fadil found in her study on 'not-handshaking' and 'not-fasting' in Belgium. Soha, one of Fadil's interlocutors explained how she preferred not to shake hands with men but did in order not to offend. As she got to know people better she started to introduce her practice of not-handshaking, suggesting that 'you need to take it step by step. [...] if you know the person well, you gradually introduce it, you see?' (Fadil, 2009:444). While in Soha's case introducing the practice of not-handshaking does not depend on an incremental growth in faith, it does depend on the degree of familiarity one has with a person. Once a certain familiarity is given, fading out of handshaking happens in a very similar fashion to Hannah's fading out of celebrating Christmas. In both cases these women worked on fashioning themselves into the kinds of ethical subjects they wanted to be and deemed sanctioned by Islam.

In general, gradual lifestyle changes were recommended to the women of the mosque class in their endeavour to become good Muslims. When Hannah spoke to the women about not celebrating Christmas, she explained: 'it was a process and a

journey [...] it is good to make small changes but change continuously. On your first Christmas you might wonder: why am I not excited anymore? Is this all good enough not to feel excited? Even for people who haven't celebrated Christmas for religious reasons, not being there with the family is really difficult, being the only one who is left out'. Hannah acknowledged the difficulty of leaving behind the custom of celebrating Christmas because it is an important family holiday even in most non-religious families. She also acknowledged that the struggle is continuous, because the converts might try to involve themselves as much as they can in other activities during this time of the year 'but they're always going to have Christmas so it's never gonna go away'. If letting go of *bid'a* like celebrating Christmas is difficult for the converts, Hannah suggested, then 'there's not enough *īmān*', which leaves you 'feeling guilty at not following what you're supposed to do.' In her advice to her fellow convert sisters she encouraged them to pray in order to remember God and increase their faith: 'prayer helps, meeting other Muslims helps, knowing one is not alone. Giving up things is a struggle for the ego. Faith goes up and down, that's our human nature but we constantly have to strive to improve.'

Foucault's Four-Point System and the Ethical Dilemma

Finally, in order to theorise the ethical dilemmas faced by the converts I met, it is useful to turn to Foucault's four-point ethical system, as it allows for comparison and shows where the converts' old and new moral systems clash. In *Becoming Sinners*, Robbins (2004) fruitfully engages Foucault's ethical model in order to illustrate and explain the ethical dilemma experienced by the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. Foucault identifies four basic parameters of the ethical domain, the first being what he calls the 'Ethical substance' – the 'material' that requires fashioning. The soul or one's intentions or something else could constitute 'the prime material of moral practice' (Foucault, 1990:26). The second element in Foucault's ethical system is the 'mode of subjectivation' – 'the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognises himself as obliged to put it into practice' (ibid.:27). In other words, the 'mode of subjectivation' concerns the way in which an actor deciphers his moral obligations, whether that be on the basis of divine law, custom or something else. Third comes '*Askēsis*' – Greek for 'training' – which refers to the kind of ethical work a person must perform on himself in order to become the desired ethical subject.

It is the work that an individual has to perform on his ethical substance in order to become the ethical actor he aspires to be. The fourth and last parameter of Foucault's ethical system is the '*telos*' – the end of a subject's ethical striving or the person he aims to be (ibid.:27-8). As in the other three elements of the system, variation is possible so the *telos* in one ethical system may be immortality whereas in another it might be purity or 'being a good person' (cf. Faubion, 2001; Robbins, 2004)

Robbins plausibly illustrates with recourse to Foucault's four-point ethical system how certain elements in the 'new' Christian ethical system differed from their counterparts in the 'old' Urapmin ethical system, which resulted in an ethical dilemma for the people concerned. Robbins identifies the *telos* and the 'form of subjectivation' (*Askêsis*) to be markedly different in the new Christian system where particularly the second element causes tension: In the old Urapmin system the control of 'wilfulness' was ensured primarily through two taboos relating to gender relations and spirit ownership of specific resources. The kind of work required was the submission to these taboos prescribing certain practices and forbidding others. As a result, the human 'will' could be regulated. In the new Christian system the will is designated as outright 'bad' and needs to be renounced entirely. However, following the 'old' taboos has been labelled faithlessness and thus been abandoned and even turned into a sin. Since following the taboos was the primary way for the Urapmin to regulate their will, they were then left with a sense of failure by following the new system, which demanded exclusive work on the inner self through the cultivation of 'peacefulness'. But how exactly practitioners were supposed to achieve that 'peacefulness' eluded most Urapmin's capacity for action in this world. 'Christianity, in proclaiming their codes false', Robbins observes, 'also condemns their techniques of self-formation. In doing so, it leaves the Urapmin without any way to constitute themselves as ethical subjects in their relations with the spirits or the things of this world. They are left, instead, with a Christian ethical system that counsels them to look to their inner lives as the only target of their ethical efforts and that offers a set of technologies that are directed toward this end.' (Robbins, 2004:224).

Since my interlocutors at the mosque came from different faith and non-faith backgrounds, it is not possible to make an overall comparison between their 'old' and 'new' ethical systems in order to decipher moral tension, but relating to the excerpts above it is possible to make several observations. All of the converts I met expressed great respect for family relations and thought that honouring the parents was

particularly important. This had usually been the case pre-conversion and remained relatively unchanged (or increased) post-conversion. Inasmuch, the ethical code remained intact in this respect. However, like in the case of the Urapmin, the required *askêsis*, the kind of ethical work required, had changed. For Manal and many other converts, celebrating birthdays had previously been a way to show one's appreciation for family members. While caring for family relations was still important in the Islamic ethical system, not celebrating birthdays – and something similar could be said for celebrating Christmas – took away one technique for honouring the mother and showing care towards family members in general. Cosmo's sister Lalie expressed her disappointment and 'moral injury at her brother's negligence of birthdays and his absence during Christmas even after their father had passed away. 'That thought, "He should be a good person and he's not"', Lalie recalled using Cosmo's own ethical guidelines as a frame of reference. 'He's not being religious because he's not contacting me and not contacting my mum. He's sort of gone off on his own and he's doing his own thing [...] I did get annoyed because he stopped coming for Christmas. Obviously we'd lost my dad and then my brother just stopped coming for Christmas. I found that really difficult and obviously it's just me and my mum. That was hard.' However, the moral injury is not only inflicted on family members. Manal's tearful description of her prayers, in which she would ask her mother for forgiveness, testifies to her own moral pain. And bizarrely, while she had to abandon birthday celebrations on the basis that they are 'un-Islamic', she asks her dead mother for forgiveness, which is also 'un-Islamic' according to the Reformist view, as only Allah can grant forgiveness. While some Islamic traditions see the living as having a relationship with the dead, reformists would usually deny that 'the dead could be part of a community' (Bowen, 1989:606). This contradiction is both a symptom of and a symbol for the ethical dilemma in which she finds herself. At the same time, Manal's seeking forgiveness from her dead mother might be seen as her way of reconciling the value of family, of managing the tension, and of reaffirming the affective dimension of family relations. Bandak has pointed to the affective and emotional dimension of prayer, according to which prayers constitute 'a way to map affect and affective relationships people hold in what they are oriented towards and care about' (Bandak, 2017). Being affectively invested, prayers need to be seen as a modality for action upon the world and as a way to bring about change. Particularly times of crisis, such as Manal's quandary, may thus elicit affective prayer as a way of reconciling kin

relationships. The loss of what Robbins termed the ‘ethical comforts’ (Robbins, 2004:221) of celebrating birthdays in order to fulfil the moral duty of appreciating family members led Manal to experience herself as ungrateful and in need of forgiveness. While celebrating birthdays as part of the ‘old’ Christian framework allowed Manal to construct herself as a moral person, the reformist Islam taught at the mosque – by deeming birthday celebrations *bid’a* and thus a sin – took away those means and left her with a sense of failure. Despite her willingness to renounce birthday celebrations, she remains afraid of the consequences of her new conduct, as becomes evident in her prayers. Her prayer in which she asks her mother for forgiveness suggests that celebrating her birthday would have been an appropriate way to honour her deceased mother. The other sisters counsel her by encouraging her to increase her *taḳwā* through prayer. In this conjunction, God-consciousness is posited as the cause and precondition of all other Islamic behaviour: it is because you have attained a God-conscious disposition (through purification, prayer, fasting etc.) that you are able to renounce ‘old’ customs, such as celebrating birthdays or joining your family for Christmas. As Hannah made clear in the context of discussing one of Allah’s ninety-nine names: ‘As-Salaam – the giver of peace [...] peace is bestowed on you when you feel peace inside you through connecting with your creator’ and ‘It’s an amazing feeling when you connect with Allah [...] for us to have inner peace we have to connect with Allah’. Time and again, converts are encouraged to connect with Allah constantly, to remember him, to be conscious of him in order to be given peace in this world and the next. The entire project of ethical self-formation thus depends on the cultivation of *taḳwā*.

‘You’ve got a mission to get to that paradise’

‘If a person lives in disbelief and dies in it he won’t enter *jenna* but belief must be backed by actions’. Throughout her classes, Hannah reminded her sisters that ‘this worldly life is *so* temporary’, that one ‘must work to secure one’s place in *jenna*’ and that hell is a looming prospect for those who fail to live in accordance with the divine plan. The sisters were constantly encouraged to deepen their *īmān* and to develop *taḳwā*. ‘Since our worldly lives and everything in them are so temporal, he should be central to our lives [...] he is the priority, so think about him always.’ However, belief relates to the convert’s inner life, it must manifest in outward actions, and everything

we as humans do should be a reminder of God and thereby strengthen our belief. Therefore, actions of all sorts were presented as technologies of the self, with the help of which the converts could cultivate the desired inner state of God-consciousness. This chapter has focused on ritual purification but mentioned other techniques of the self in order to illustrate how seemingly banal daily actions were awarded elevated ritual importance and how they were reformulated as mnemotechnical devices to always remember God. While this aspect of technologies of the self is central, this chapter has also highlighted the often forgotten other aspect of ethical projects of self-formation. This aspect relates to the social effects that techniques of the self can have through boundary-drawing. By emphasizing the difference in *what* converts do and don't do as well as the difference in *how* they act, the women in the mosque class constituted themselves as a community of learners aspiring for God-consciousness that could be clearly differentiated from the 'unlearned', including their friends and families. However, because some old values have remained the same – albeit the way of achieving them has changed – converts experience moral pain as they see themselves deprived of formerly effective modes of action (birthday celebrations). In the new Islamic ethical system it is through acts done in the spirit of God-consciousness that they are able to incrementally augment their faith, as a consequence of which their suffering should be alleviated. However, the inner change happens slowly, and many converts struggle with the ethical tension experienced through rules – rules that allow for success on the one hand but that inevitably invite failure as well.

Converts are special insofar as they are being subjected to a pedagogy of bodily hygiene and other practices akin to that extended to children. However, being adult men and women, converts do not only have to learn new rules but they also have to simultaneously un-learn what they previously knew and practiced. This process of unlearning what was previously part of their life can be painful, as the case of Manal illustrates. While disciplining the body through techniques of the self, such as ritual purification or veiling, is one aspect of the care of the self, disciplining the boundary between the present and the past self is another aspect – and while under-represented, it is possibly the more painful one because it is inherently social – achieved through the disciplining of social relations through boundary maintenance. Authors who see themselves in the Foucauldian tradition have largely neglected the social dimension of the care of the self. This neglect is relevant because, by looking at techniques of the

self from this perspective, they mark a break with the past. Inasmuch, the teleology of self-improvement taken for granted in research around the care of the self gets replaced by severing the line of selfhood. Purifying the old self, the one that wants to celebrate birthdays, means drawing a boundary between one's current self and that old self, its family, and its past. The ethical project then turns into a project of 'self-(anew)-creation' rather than self-improvement in order to achieve the aim of leading 'the good life'.

Conclusion

'The moment I was leaving his house he said, "You've disgraced the family." I said, "Jerry, you and I are on the same page and we're above any of this." He just grinned from ear to ear and gave me a big hug and took me out to the taxi. We agreed. We do not live at this parochial level. It was absolutely true.' – Dina, London, convert from Catholicism, talking about her brother Jeremy –

Being a convert to Islam in twenty-first-century Britain means being caught in a 'mad liminal position'. This is how Ben, one of the participants in the *Narratives of Conversion* project, described it. Torn between two worlds, he experienced himself as a 'misfit', both in relation to religious Muslims who understand his belief system but whom he cannot relate to in terms of 'life style', and in relation to 'liberal' non-Muslims, whom he relates to in terms of lifestyle but does not share their beliefs. He saw himself as 'liberal in my orthopraxy', as having to manoeuvre between these liberal and pious spaces (Suleiman, 2015:27). As Brice points out, the majority of converts to Islam saw themselves as potential 'bridges', but many did not like that role (Brice, 2010). Apart from the unidirectionality of the bridge, and always having to 'explain to non-Muslims what Islam is about and polishing the image', as one of the participants in the symposia put it, the 'bridge' was also an unthankful position to be had otherwise. While a woman from the earlier female *Narratives of Conversion* project stated that being a bridge meant 'that people tend to trample on you' (Suleiman, 2013:84), another noted that, in a war, bridges get blown up first. In other words, converts' position as 'bridge' remained a precarious one. But ultimately, one male convert from the symposia remarked, 'it is not about the bridge – but about the gap'.

In many ways this thesis has been about that gap. While much has been written about the bridge, we have failed to understand the gap that the bridge was thought to overcome. A gap defines itself through *absence*. Its very nature is the *lack* of something. It is a break, a hole, an unfilled space between two sides. It is an emblem of rupture. But that void asks to be studied and, by studying it, it will reveal something about the objects it disconnects and also – by extension – about the bridge.

If the gap had to be named, maybe we could say that it is the way in which Islam is positioned as ‘other’ in contemporary Britain. It is the disconnect between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Looking at the way that this positioning as ‘other’ happens necessarily reveals something about the assumptions and deep-seated beliefs we have, not only in relation to Islam, Muslims, and converts but also in relation to ourselves.

The coming out episodes presented in chapter One revealed the impermanence of blood relations in face of conversion to Islam. While most families did not disintegrate following conversion, the anxiety around the disclosure and the re-affirmation of kinship ties in the face of revelation exposed the fragility of families where ties *might* be severed. At the same time, these episodes exposed the simultaneous application of two contradictory concepts of identity, which appeared as malleable in certain social settings, but as static (‘I am still the old person’, ‘I am still me’) vis-à-vis the family. In chapter two I went into some detail to elaborate how Islam is positioned as ‘other’ in society at large and in idiosyncratic family contexts. The convergence I found between two Islam-disparaging discourses of radically distinct sources meant that many of my interlocutors and their families saw themselves as the victims of a Muslim nationalism, which used Islam as a tool for political mobilisation while simultaneously being situated in a society, in which the old *Orientalist* discourse about Islam as inferior, is still rampant. Idiosyncratic family histories and collective memories of trauma are the lens through which Islam was seen even though other prisms are available. Together, these form strangely consonant and mutually reinforcing discourses, which give the Islam-disparaging image I found its remarkable durability as a hegemonic construct. The important message here is that not all Islam-disparaging rhetoric is Orientalist. It can stem from a position of inferiority and victimhood, but, in the context of an islamophobic, secular, post-Christian, Muslim-minority context, these two discourses seem to coalesce and buttress each other.

Conversion often starts with apprehension and even hostility towards Islam. In chapter Three, converts narrated their surprise at discovering continuity – even sameness – on the level of belief. In these narratives Islam rapidly moved from a position of alterity to being appropriated and ultimately seen as ‘filling the gaps’ of Christianity. Contrary to widespread conviction that conversion entails ‘a radical change in one’s identity, beliefs, personality, ideas, behaviour, and values’ (Köse, 1994:195), the narratives I presented reveal continuity and a sense of naturalness with

regards to all of the above. ‘Radical change’ was primarily related with respect to the social realm, but not with respect to belief. For many converts there is an interplay between continuity in faith and a newness socially, where Islam appears as a route to universalism. Importantly, converts’ narratives appear to be shaped mainly by two forces, the first one being the way that Islam was positioned as ‘other’, which, for some converts – especially where ethnicity played a role – was very appealing. The second force that shaped the narratives was what I called Islam’s ‘autobiography’ as an update to and a continuation of the older monotheisms, as found in the doctrine of *tahrīf*. This ‘autobiography’ of Islam inscribed itself onto the narratives of individual converts as they appeared to merge.

Chapter four saw to the prominence of a rationalist discourse frequent among converts, to which there are two important contexts. The first one is the social and historical context in which this rationalist discourse about Islam exists, and that is the context of Islamic modernism. The second issue at stake relates to the bigger theme of modernity and in how far the converts’ portrayal of the conversion as a rational, science-minded process entails the self-positioning as essentially modern subjects. The development of apologetics by Islamic modernists is in line with the Weberian appraisal of the ‘rational’ and discounting of the ‘irrational’, but aims at protecting Islam by rationalising it. Converts replicate the idea that religiosity and rationality are mutually exclusive – but only for other religions. In an inversion of Renan’s assertions, the converts – like the Islamic modernists – are engaged in positioning Islam as exceptional in its capacity to be rational and modern. ‘Modernity’ as such displays an inherently relational nature. Somebody is modern compared to someone else. The truth of Islam is evaluated against the testimony of Western scholars, where the non-religious has the authority to judge the religious. Dreams that offer guidance were, in turn, not accepted as a source of knowledge because they go against the ‘rationalist mind-set’ dominant in Western societies. Converts feared that their conversion would be delegitimised if they shared such dreams with their families. It seemed that they deployed discourses of scientific reason to mediate their relations with non-Muslims, but not with each other. Contrary to the rationalist discourse offered to non-Muslims, ‘cultural intimacy’ produced a discourse about mysticism and dreams among converts and simultaneously prevented this discourse, which constitutes a source of embarrassment vis-à-vis outsiders, from reaching non-Muslim family and friends. Whereas the symposia allowed converts to engage in strategies of

producing their own mystically-inclined discourse, private interviews with a non-Muslim researcher induced them to assert their own rationality – thus their modernity – and justify their conversion to Islam in that dominant language (as tactics). These different rhetorics about mysticism and rationality were thus applied at different times. The different modes of persuasion appealed alongside one another in different moments, relationships, and spaces.

Chapter Five has shown that material artefacts in conversion should not merely be seen as vectors or tools for communication, but in the vein of material culture studies as constituents of a form of sociality that we live in and recreate through our use of certain objects such as food, clothing, architecture and home decorations. I looked at material artefacts as telling a story where verbal communication was not possible or undesirable. This was a matter of methodology, not ontology: following Appadurai, in some contexts persons only become knowable through the world of things (Appadurai, 1988). Material artefacts were analysed as a powerful heuristic for explaining to us our social world but also, and beyond the expressive function, material things were seen to serve as transformative agents. These artefacts often told the story of converts as traversing multiple universes simultaneously: a pre-Islam past and a Muslim present. Christmas decoration around the festival they refuse to celebrate testified to this ambivalence. Boundary-drawing was inextricably implicated in this: with the help of certain material objects like a beef burger, a former Hindu could draw the boundary between herself and her old community. Material objects were also presented as sites of accommodation or rejection where battles were fought and disappointment expressed but also where accommodation was afforded. As ‘sites’, consumption goods are the places where boundaries of ‘family’ are drawn and where ‘insiders’ are defined versus ‘outsiders’.

Finally, chapter Six has further investigated the spectacle of boundary-drawing as part and parcel of the ethical project of self-formation through purification. Purification as a technique of the self aimed at developing *taḳwā* (God consciousness), of remembering God always, and thus at moulding oneself into a God-pleasing creation that will earn his place in *jenna*. However, this project of ethical self-formation was simultaneously an exercise of boundary-drawing through which the converts would delimit themselves from their families and from society at large. The techniques of the self in question thus taught the converts to purify their bodies and souls but also to purify their old selves and the group from ‘un-Islamic’

practices. While these exercises could at times be pleasurable and bestow a sense of meaning and belonging on the converts, it was – at other times – a source of torment as it resulted in ethical dilemmas.

In a nutshell then, I posit that conversion to Islam in contemporary Britain, where Islam is viewed critically at best and where Muslims constitute a minority in a white, areligious majority context, is less about religion and more about sociality. With the Pauline moment of rupture wholly absent in terms of faith, narratives instead revolve around tensions on the social level, particularly inside the family. The anxiety around ‘coming out’, the stickiness of memories of family trauma in relation to Islam, the resentfulness and simultaneous upholding of a strictly rationalistic discourse around religion, and the ethical dilemmas experienced in the process of self-formation as a pious Muslim subject all testify to and describe the ‘gap’ that is at stake in separating what are perceived as incommensurable Muslim and secular spaces. In this way, as suggested by Asad, I have engaged the ‘religious’ in order to learn something about the ‘secular’ that delimits and thus forms the ‘religious’ in turn (Asad, 2003a).

Though my thesis has presented a number of key insights into conversion to Islam in contemporary Britain, it remains wanting in other respects. These shortcomings positively point into the direction of future research around conversion to Islam in a ‘Western’ context. To state one obvious point, which, however, will reveal itself to be difficult in its translation into a research project, is the fact that kinship relations are worked out longitudinally. The implications are manifold. In order to properly assess kinship relations in the context of conversion, one would have to observe them over a long period of time, or go back to visiting them in intervals. Although I did mention the change over time in the way that Islam was perceived and in the way kinship relations unfolded, having conducted fieldwork over a period of only one and a half years is not sufficient to track these changes. The changes that I did account for were developments reported in the narratives of ‘older’ converts. Interestingly – and counter-intuitively – some of these narratives related a *worsening* of the perception of Islam and concomitantly of kinship relations over time. It would be interesting to see what determines whether families come to accommodate or reject the conversion over time. I surmise that the theme of childhood should play a pivotal role in the longitudinal perspective on conversion. Converts at the male *Narratives of Conversion* symposia talked about missing a childhood experience in the religion. According to them, such childhood experience is

connected to a deep understanding of the religion, including family traditions, the most basic understandings of the nature of existence, and ethics. Being born into a religion, one encounters these fundamentals ‘as one enters time’, an experience which cannot be compensated for if it is lacking. There is no way to ‘simulate’ that childhood experience inside Islam, as one convert put it.

While converts frequently marry into heritage Muslim families and often see this as ‘inheriting’ a Muslim family, their earliest religious and familial imprint remains outside of Islam. This may in turn explain the emotional distance that some converts felt towards Muslim architecture, despite their firm beliefs. Some of the younger converts reported that they felt no sense of ‘belonging’ inside the mosque, but did in English churches and cathedrals. The emotional connection remained with English churches and cathedrals as places they had visited as children, that they ‘knew intimately’, having a sense of ‘familiarity’ in relation to those places. From this perspective I also see the potential for future research relating to affect. Converting later in life, rather than being born into a religion, means that affect towards Islamic architecture or the sound of the Qur’an have to be acquired. We might ask to what extent the work of the convert relates to the acquisition of these tastes and affinities. I saw some converts hold on to an aesthetic childhood memory, a ‘national genetic memory of a sacred space’ as one convert explained it, which defined the sense of belonging these converts would keep well into adulthood in an ‘increasingly un-churched and spiritually illiterate society’. However, such sense of belonging can radically be altered the moment these converts become parents to children who are no longer converts, but born Muslims. Tracing this religious genealogy might yield insights into the ways in which giving a child a Muslim childhood may alter the convert’s own sense of belonging, which hitherto seemed based in a childhood outside of Islam. Convert children are interesting also in the context of studying kinship relations longitudinally as many converts reported that family relations were positively changed through the birth of children. These children seemed to bring back alienated convert parents as they sought to connect with their Muslim grandchildren. Cosmo explained that his mother, who had been very antagonistic towards his conversion for a long time, finally started to accept it in the face of her grandchildren. ‘To be honest, I think the children had a massive amount to do with it. When she saw the children, interacted with them and realised that this was not a strange thing, she came around.’ Inasmuch, studying religious genealogy as well as focusing

particularly on convert children may yield fascinating insights in a future research project.

As much as ‘converts in a family context’ has been an important area of study, other domains of life exist also. Another impulse for future research may thus come from the positioning of converts in other domains of life and particularly in the Islamic sphere. Other studies have mentioned the problems converts can face when entering the Muslim community (Suleiman, 2013, 2015; Zebiri, 2008), such as the ‘trophiness’ with which converts are viewed but ultimately fail to integrate into a community, from which they often enough feel alienated. In his study on post-conversion experiences, Köse (1994) almost wholly neglects the ‘Muslim side’ of the transition. His attention is very much focused on the changes that the converts make to their lives as well as the reception by friends and family. The reception of converts by the Muslim community plays virtually no role, even though the relationship is oftentimes a strained one. The condition of ‘un-belonging’ (Suleiman, 2015:9) on part of the convert owes not only to how the convert is treated by his family, friends and society at large post-conversion, but importantly also to how he is received in the Muslim community. The scarcity of research on the relations between converts and so-called ‘heritage Muslims’ was pointed out during the symposia: ‘It was hard to say what heritage Muslims thought of converts [...] There was little written evidence expressing their opinions, even though one might have thought this was an important matter.’ (ibid.:64). The problems seemed to run both ways with converts rejecting heritage Muslims on the basis that their ‘cultural baggage’ distanced them from true Islam (cf. Özyürek, 2015), and heritage Muslims belittling converts on the basis that they were ‘perpetually new’ and in need of advice, that they were unreliable and possibly spies, or that they were tokens that vouched for the truth of Islam but ultimately had no place in the community. ‘Neither “us” nor “them”’, the report concluded, ‘many converts essentially felt they were excluded from the ranks of “real” Muslims.’ (Suleiman, 2015:65). As such, I believe that research on the fraught relationship between heritage Muslims and converts can reveal much about issues of authentication of Islam, integration, gender issues, and post-colonial attitudes on part of both former colonisers and formerly colonized. It also raises the question as to whether converts – at some point – stop being ‘converts’ and become ‘Muslims’. During the symposia this issue was raised in relation to the term ‘New Muslim’, which was rejected, particularly by one of the ‘older’ converts. ‘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”? (ibid.:64).

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