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Thomas Sealy

ABSTRACT

Consideration of the growing phenomenon of converts to Islam in Britain is emerging at the moment when converts are entering the popular imagination through the dominant negative tropes of threat and betrayal. In this context, the religious aspect of conversion is feared, diminished, contained or ignored. Given the emphasis on either change or continuity, these identities are conceptualised as hybrid or multiple identities, with little understanding of the critical properties of religiosity. Based on narrative interviews with British converts to Islam, this article argues that, rather than emphasising continuity or change, it is in understandings of the dynamics *between* continuity and change that important facets of religious identity emerge as the central problematic of conversion. The concept of *congruity* is offered to reflect this. It is further argued that religiosity as the basis of this continuity better captures converts' religious identities. Georg Simmel's notion of *religiosity* is employed to make sense of their identities. Through this notion, Simmel's thought enables a congruity to be read that transcends the apparent contradiction between continuity and change.

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Introduction

Interest in both historical and contemporary British converts to Islam is limited but nascent and this picture is broadly similar across other European countries. The growing interest has to be understood in the contemporary socio-cultural and socio-political context. In the post-war decades of increased immigration from former colonies, the Muslim population of Britain grew. As it did, the prominence of British converts to Islam diminished from the Victorian period when figures such as Abdullah Quilliam had been leaders in establishing Islam in Britain (Gilham 2014, 238). In recent years, the number of Britons converting to Islam has been increasing (Brice 2010, 10). Yet, during this time, Islam has become increasingly present in the popular psyche and this has happened in a context characterised by Islamophobia, in which the issues have been dominated by perceptions and frames of Islam as an 'immigrant' and 'foreign' religion.

CONTACT Thomas Sealy thomas.sealy@bristol.ac.uk

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Following from this, the image of the convert, especially as conveyed through mainstream media, has arisen as associated with radicalisation and terrorism (Brice 2010, 13–16; Sealy 2017, 198–200), with several high-profile attacks in Britain having been perpetrated by converts. The convert's 'zealotry' thus takes on its fullest meaning, shifting from a benign 'in love' stage (Roald 2004, 283) to the apogee of zealous fanaticism, which has a bearing on the way converts to Islam are perceived more generally. The genuineness of both conversion and converts' intentions and motivations is questioned in these kinds of discourses in four ways: firstly, as not a *genuine* religious conversion (a conversion of convenience for the purpose of getting married, for instance); secondly, as dangerous precisely because they *are* religious conversions—to a religion already perceived as inclined to violence and oppression; thirdly, even if the physical threat is not direct, such conversions are dismissed as anomalous—the result of falling in love or personal instability; fourthly, conversion suggests processes of brainwashing, mirroring perceptions in earlier studies of conversion to alternative 'cults' (Robbins 1988).

In this case, we can also see the absence of the religious aspect more broadly, for, as Grace Davie comments, in a largely secularised society, "Taking faith seriously is becoming, increasingly, the exception rather than the norm" (Davie 2015, 63). Furthermore, religion and religious issues are usually framed as "a problem" in political and academic discourse (ibid, 228). Likewise, theology is often "mentioned in a pejorative sense" and set in oppositional binary to everyday or lived religion (Helmer 2012, 230).

It is against this background, and in these frames, that the convert emerges as a controversial public figure, with conversion often being portrayed as a kind of cultural or political betrayal (Zebiri 2008, 75; Özyürek 2015, 3). This generates issues about the good or bad faith of the convert's religious identity. This can further be seen in issues converts face in acceptance by Muslim communities, where their motivations and identities may also be questioned. This is found in the literature (Zebiri 2008, 62; Moosavi 2015a, 1928) and also arose in the study on which this article is based.

Given the background outlined above, it is perhaps unsurprising that converts experience a good deal of dissonance in relation to the way they experience and feel their identity and the ways in which this is perceived by outsiders. What emerges as central are issues about identity continuity and change and, importantly, the past- and future-oriented dynamics between them. The literature on religious conversion has tended to foreground the aspect of change in this dynamic, although some recent work on conversions to Islam has sought to balance this by emphasising continuity (Snow and Machalek 1984; Al-Qwidi 2002; cf. McGinty 2006;

Alyedreessy 2016). Consideration of the dynamics *between* the two is, however, missing in existing literature. It is this dynamic that, this article argues, forms the central problematic for understanding converts' religious identities. Moreover, it is suggested that *congruity*, rather than continuity and/or change, better conceptualises this process and dynamic. This is not to diminish the importance of continuity and change—both are present and should be attended to in analysis. Rather it is to suggest that focusing on one or the other as a binary or on both without connecting them fails to capture how individuals experience identity. For this reason, congruity is introduced as a way of capturing and conceptualising these dynamics.

This article suggests that existing understandings of contemporary conversions and converts' identities are often inadequate, tending to rely on overly simple conceptions of hybrid or multiple identities or seeing converts' emphasis on continuity as a strategic mode of maintaining privilege in a context of Islamophobia, both of which side-line the religious in their conceptual frameworks. The result is that conversion to Islam is misunderstood as little account is taken of the central religious reasons for conversion. This opens up complex issues of theology and spirituality. Although a fuller account of these is beyond the scope of a single article, to express the continuity felt by converts, *religiosity* is drawn on as an aspect of religion and religious identity. Reference to this renders the dynamics of conversion less reductionist and closer to the self-understanding of converts to Islam. It is argued that an analysis which foregrounds *religiosity* can better account for converts' religious identities and the dynamics between continuity and change. The neglect of *religiosity* is addressed here through consideration of Georg Simmel's writings on this concept. This article suggests that, as an exceptional figure in sociology in this regard, Simmel's work provides fruitful ways for understanding these dynamics by taking seriously the convert's good faith and religious identity. To explore these issues, this article discusses narrative interviews with converts to Islam in Britain.

From change to continuity

Reflecting on almost two decades of research following John Lofland and Rodney Stark's seminal article on religious conversion (1965), David Snow and Richard Machalek comment that "The one theme pervading the literature on conversion is that the experience involves *radical personal change*" (1984, 169, emphasis added). While change has been central and defining for some studies on British converts to Islam (Köse 1996; Al-Qwidi

2002; Neumueller 2012), elsewhere this emphasis has begun to shift towards its obverse: continuity. Alison McGinty, for example, states:

> Conversion is defined and understood not only through the changes following from becoming Muslim, but also through continuity, reconfirmation of pre-existing values, and an all-embracing feeling of connecting earlier understandings with new ones. (McGinty 2006, 67; see also Alyedreessy 2016, 142)

What emerges both empirically and theoretically is, nevertheless, an often uneasy relationship between ideas of continuity and change.

Another significant shift that needs noting is from a model that maps the *pre*-conversion process and *push* factors of psychological and sociological background to a focus on *pull* factors of Islam and *post*-conversion experiences (for an alternative stage model along these lines, see Roald 2004; 2012). It is thus that the dimensions of personal, social, cultural, and religious systems (see Rambo 1993, 23) come into focus. Kate Zebiri (2008), for example, highlights the importance of beginning with converts' own understandings of conversion. This point bears on a complaint by converts that they would like to have their conversions read from the inside out rather than from the outside in (see e.g. Suleiman 2013, 3). This wish points in the direction of the *religiosity* of conversions.

Reflecting the emphases on both 'pull factors' and continuity of 'pre-existing values', Zebiri highlights the attractions of Islam for converts who are critical of wider 'Western' society and social and lifestyle norms as over-individualistic, materialistic, and over-sexualised, especially in relation to the female body. Added to this is a broader sense of social justice, suggesting that Islam is better in answering social problems. This position is critical of broader 'Western' lifestyles and Western feminism, including the perception of a passive Muslim female subject inhabiting patriarchal structures within Islam (see van Nieuwkerk 2006a, passim). These are significant points for considering continuity and change, which can be found throughout converts' narratives and motivations. However, on their own, they do not *necessarily* precipitate religious conversion. All the criticisms are perfectly possible from outside an Islamic, or indeed religious, framework. In fact, as Zebiri also notes, converts are often critical of Muslims and Muslim communities along 'cultural' lines, which highlights that converts are not simply seeking a form of belonging to an alternative 'cultural' framework. It is for this reason that an approach to religiosity is a necessary step for developing a fuller understanding of convert identities.

Identity: frameworks of being

There are two initial points to note from the literature on the way the identities of converts to Islam are understood, stemming from the

approaches to continuity and/or change discussed above. The first is a conflation of ethnicity, culture, and religion, which can be seen in the various ways converts are positioned as *doubly strange*. In relation to born Muslims they may experience outright suspicion and rejection (Roald 2004, 261; Zebiri 2008, 61–68) or be seen as 'religious imposters' (Rogozen-Soltar 2012, 618). This might lead to pressure to conform to certain practices and exclusion without such conformity. In relation to majority society, white converts are 'othered' or 're-racialized' (Moosavi 2015b, 43) and thus repositioned as part of an ethnic minority in the cultural landscape (Jensen 2008, 390; van Nieuwkerk 2004, 235–236) and displaced in favour of an ethno-cultural view of them as Muslim. Ethnic minority converts, by contrast, may pass as invisible, already racialized as 'other'. Important for the argument here is the fact of change which undermines converts' claim to be 'really' Muslim—again, an ethno-religious and ethno-cultural view of who is included and what is necessary for inclusion prevails. Such positions reflect a view of change that results in forms of social exclusion drawn along ethnic lines.

The second point lies in the dominant conceptions in the literature for understanding the identities of British converts to Islam, where ideas such as hybrid and multiple or plural identities are found (Zebiri 2008, 252; Roald 2004, 3, 285). These identity conceptions have a currency more generally for thinking about Muslim minorities in Western countries (see e.g. Duderija 2007, 151) and often underpin debates about hyphenated identities such as British–Muslim. Where hybridity refers to a sociological truism—that everything is hybrid, thereby challenging discourses of national or ethnic 'purity', for example—no conceptual issues arise. However, as far as the hybrid is characterised in fragmented terms and regarded as "an idiosyncratic mosaic, the separate parts of which would have to be ascribed to different categories" (Zebiri 2008, 252), conceptual problems arise that relate to the totality of the way identity is experienced.

Consideration of converts' narratives shows that these relationships are challenged in a number of ways. One important part is how religious identity is constructed and understood through these narratives, where they note continuity with past identity, which is built on rather than refuted. To understand this point and begin to make the theoretical shift, it is useful to turn to Simmel's discussions of *religiosity* and *religion*.

Simmel: religiosity and religion

Simmel's writings on religion have generally occupied a marginalised position in sociological studies of religion. One commentator has noted that, while his broader *oeuvre* may have enjoyed something of a renaissance, his writings on religion remain "something of an embarrassment" to the

sociology of religion (McCole 2005, 9; see also Laermans 2006, 480). Although Simmel did not write about conversion or Islam, and may thus seem an unlikely source for this article, his writings offer significant insights for thinking about religious identity as well as continuity and change. This is perhaps because he developed a sociology of *religiosity* (Laermans 2006, 481) and "grappled with the need to reconsider subjectivity" (McCole 2005, 33). This grappling was motivated by Simmel's broader thinking on subjectivity and social relations in modernity (see Montemaggi 2017, 89). When it came to religion as part of this picture, Simmel distinguished between *religiosity* and *religion*, which offers fruitful analytical tools for the considerations in this article.

Religiosity for Simmel refers to a religious attitude, a personal, subjective sense of religiousness (at times the two terms are used interchangeably) and represents an individual dimension. *Religiosity* is "the fundamental quality of being in the religious soul and determines the tone and function of all these general or particular qualities of the soul" (Simmel 1997, 10). Notably, *religiosity* is understood as not something that one merely *has* but a *being* so that one "functions in a religious way" (ibid, 10, 22), suggesting a "religious mode of existence" and representing "a form of life in all its vitality, a way in which life vibrates, expresses itself, and fulfils its destinies" (ibid, 14).

For Simmel, *religiosity* stands in contrast to, but also in direct relation with, *religion*. *Religion*, representing the social dimension, refers to the cultural forms and practices necessary to 'being in the world' empirically; it is the externalisation of *religiosity* or "the outcome of a process of institutionalization" (Laermans 2006, 484). The external forms are necessary; one cannot do without the other. Thus, in a profound sense, social reality, in its physical, material existence, is a form which shapes the contents of *religiosity* (Simmel 1997, 140). No matter the apparent force with which the experience of *religiosity* may want to express itself in a vital and unmediated way, the use and creation of external forms are a necessity (Simmel 1997, 209; see also Laermans 2006, 485). Yet, *religiosity* is not merely something one possesses and performs at certain times or in certain places. For Simmel, it is a matter of creating a spiritual unity rather than contradictory processes and forces (Simmel 1997, 38). It is *religiosity* which is at the heart of the processual dynamics that actuate *religion* rather than the other way around (e.g. ibid, 211).

Simmel suggests that "religion sets the fundamental tone for life [through which] life's single elements … interrelate harmoniously with each other and with the whole" (Simmel 1997, 137). Thus religion 'sets the fundamental tone' in a way which is not conflictual with other aspects of identity, such as national or ethnic identity, and neither reducible to nor bound by them. *Religiosity* thus construed becomes primary and centralised; furthermore, it is neither necessarily temporally nor categorically contained

by change. This marks a significant conceptual and analytical move. For, by attuning to this relational dynamic, we can point to its quality of overcoming fragmentation and contradiction in the processes of continuity and change. This is not to ignore contradictions and conflicting forces, but to recognize that *religiosity* creates the space where "these conflicting forces now suggest a deeper, hidden unity" (Simmel 1997, 37).

Religiosity is a way of being, a way of living and experiencing the world. By recognizing *religiosity* as a *being* and not a *having*, the notion of *religiosity* construed by Simmel engages with converts' efforts to find congruity in their conversions; for this reason, *religiosity* forms the main focus of this article. *Religiosity* serves as a unifying force between continuity and change, overcoming too strong a binary distinction between them. It is by drawing on Simmel's notion of *religiosity* that we are able to shift our lens and bring *religiosity* into view as the basis of continuity and its dynamics with aspects of change, which lead to the notion of *congruity* developed in this article.

Fieldwork

To understand these issues, this article draws on the narratives of 27 converts to Islam in Britain, addressing aspects of identity and belonging. Participants were found predominantly through loosely affiliated convert networks connected to mosques, a national organization, and personal contacts. An introduction to the research project was disseminated by these networks, with participants responding directly. Broadly reflecting the demographic background sketched in previous studies (Brice 2010, 10; Zebiri 2008, 41–45), 15 of the participants were white British/European, 7 British Asian, 3 Black British, and 2 mixed race; 19 were female and 8 male; 12 had been practising Catholics, Protestants or Hindus, while the rest had been nominally Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, Sikh or Christian, with 2 describing themselves as formerly spiritual and 3 as atheist. Participants were aged between 18 and 69 and had been Muslim between 10 months and 30 years at the time of interview. All names are pseudonyms, matching the names participants use now. The study used narrative interview methodology and analysis (Freeman 2013), eliciting what might be called 'conversion stories' or 'journeys to Islam'. The interviews lasted between one and four hours.

Recontextualising continuity

Continuity emerges in the narratives in a number of ways as a result of the reflective and reflexive aspect of biographical identity. The important point about continuity is not that it resembles some 'truth', but that it is part of the way experience, memory, and aspiration or desires are structured and given

meaning in the present. How narratives provide "order over the flux of the present" (Plummer 1995, 40) is thus centrally significant to the formation of personal identity. For Simmel, memory is an interactive and mutually influencing process between past and present; thus, who we feel ourselves to be is part of a continuous and reciprocal interaction between present and past (Simmel 1997).

Continuity is an embedded feature of the narrative structure, notably in the plotting of the story. Whether explicitly or implicitly, a sense of continuity develops as converts often return to childhood for their narrative beginnings, even if their conversion took place in adulthood. Also significant in the narrative development are aspects of personality that can be both explicitly and implicitly continuous in the ways they are emphasised. For example, Sanjay, a 46-year-old convert of 12 years who was previously Hindu, had been a lover of mathematics and science rather than the arts and humanities from a young age. Throughout his narrative he stressed the mathematical and scientific aspects of the Qur'an, its compilation and *tajwid* (the rules governing pronunciation in recitation), as fundamental to its beauty, emotional resonance, and truth. Susanne, a 42-year-old convert of 17 years and a former atheist, similarly talked about beauty and emotional resonance. However, as a self-declared artist, she stressed the aesthetic form, especially calligraphy, as the captivating factor that led her to discover the depth and truth of Islam. The deeply felt appeal and emotional, indeed, spiritual resonances are experienced in ways foundational to a sense of individuals' personality as continuous.

A further relevant aspect of continuity is converts' insistence on basing their belief and practice first and foremost on the Qur'an, noted for continuity as unchanged since first written down and arranged, and on *Sunna* (the Prophet Muhammad's actions and ways) and *Hadith* (the Prophet Muhammad's sayings). There was often emphasis on 'seeing it in the Qur'an' before accepting any particular position. This may sound simplistic, but it highlights the importance of the aspect of continuity and converts' foregrounding the direct link to the divine and *religiosity* that orients their faith. This is, significantly, one way converts distinguish themselves from born Muslims' communities and their cultural practices. Because of this orientation, converts have been linked with Salafism (Özyürek 2015, 21, 131), although few of the participants identified as Salafi. They may have dropped in and out of Salafi groups, but held no firm affiliation (see also Jensen 2011, 1153; Özyürek 2015, 115). Those who talked about liking the structure and authority of Islam were more likely to see this as a form of continuity with their personality and thus linked this continuity of their personality with *religiosity*. This again emphasises the importance of *religiosity* in the accounts. Rosie expressed her liking of rules and structure and stridently challenged and reinterpreted a literal scriptural reading of

Qur'anic injunctions. Matthew, describing himself as a "Qur'an-ist" with "Salafi tendencies and principles"—his narrative is embellished with tales of the early Caliphs—stated:

> I question the legitimacy of whether all *Hadith* of the Prophet are genuine. This is because they were mostly written down [in] the centuries after his death ... in some cases they weren't written down formally for 500 years. (Personal interview, 9 February 2017)

A third way, which links to those discussed above and which for the purposes of this article is the one which requires the most elaboration, is a past-oriented sense of a religious self. Conversions are foremost experienced as being *personal*: "it's between me and God", as Zaara put it (personal interview, 25 January 2017). Nevertheless, even when deeply personal—when the apparent relation is a relation to oneself, it is necessary to move away from an isolated individualised understanding, because this personal aspect of identity sits in the broader relational aspect oriented towards the divine. This is a crucial aspect of the way religious subjectivity is understood and develops; it draws out the value of deploying Simmel's notion of *religiosity* to understand continuity in this respect. The religious sense of self is also captured in comments made by Richard and Hannah. Both talked about an already existing and deep sense of religious subjectivity which—until they discovered and embraced Islam—had been somewhat homeless, lacking a broader framework. Richard, who had been brought up as a Catholic, remarked that he had had a connection with God since he was a child, but this sense did not fit with Catholicism and he therefore felt the need for "finding a home for *it* [*religiosity*]" (personal interview, 26 January 2017). Mirroring this is Hannah's realisation that "these [Islam's] principles are my principles" (personal interview, 30 January 2017). Likewise, she spoke about how, given this basis, "it was no effort" as a result of 'it' being "of me": it is congruous with an already existing sense of *religiosity*—the 'it' referred to by both. Thus, while they may (not) find it difficult for various reasons to relate to *Muslims*, they relate very deeply and more easily to *Islam*. It is in this sense that continuity is established through the process of re-contextualising existing values, attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions within an Islamic framework stemming from *religiosity*. The re-contextualised continuity is explicit in Hannah's remark that "I was Muslim all along and nobody told me". The significance of the re-contextualisation lies in the fact that it is seen to be the fulfilment and full realisation of a sense of being that had always been there. What emerges strongly in the narrative structure regarding continuity is the very sense of *being*, where that *being* is understood in terms of *religiosity*.

This aspect leads to the religious and theological aspects of conversion and suggests an epistemological implication: that we bring a "theological

ear" (Keenan 2003, 20) to sociological endeavours. This is a way of orienting sociological understanding and listening so that it does not avoid or reduce elements of *religiosity* that are central to participants' subjectivity. The notion of change can be seen in its Latin root *convertere*, meaning 'to turn' or 'to head in a different direction' (Roald 2004, 13). In Christianity, 'turning' suggests a re-orientation to the meaning of life (Gillespie 1991, 27–28). Theories or extended analysis and discussion of conversion in Islam are lacking in classical and modern Islamic literature (Al-Qwidi 2002, 61, 85; Poston 1992, 158). It has been argued that 'conversion' is an "outsider's perspective" (Roald 2004, 14, 86–87), because underlying concepts commonly found to refer to converts in Islam relate not to change but to continuity. This is suggested in the term 'revert', which reflects the idea that all souls are Muslim, having recognized God in pre-eternity, and is found in the concept of *fitrah*. Although it has no exact English equivalent, *fitrah* captures the idea of 'natural disposition'. A revert is thus not changing from one religion to another but accepting and returning to an original and innate state of being a Muslim, having been brought up in a non-Muslim context by a non-Muslim family.

It is important to note that findings vary. For example, Anne Sofie Roald (2004) found a preference for 'New Muslim' and Karin van Nieuwkerk (2006b) for 'becoming Muslim' or 'embracing Islam'. In this study, while 'revert' was the most common term used by participants, this was not uniform. Some preferred 'convert', with one participant remarking "or revert as you have it" after the project had been introduced using the term 'revert'. Some mixed terms with no apparently strong preference. At one mosque, the initial contact advised saying 'New Muslim' when talking to mosque leaders lest this invite a lengthy lecture. Even when 'revert' was preferred, the idea of 'New Muslim' was *theologically* present as a number of participants emphasised the 'new born' status of a convert, given that sins committed prior to conversion did not count towards one's post-conversion state. Sanjay both emphasised his 20–25-year journey and referred to being "brand new in Islam. Yeah, I was only about a year old at that stage" (personal interview, 4 March 2017). Yet, 'New Muslim' might also be shunned *sociologically* when used against participants' claims of *religiosity* and *being* Muslim in a way which socially excludes and limits their voices and participation. Thus, there are temporal overlapping and overlaying senses of continuity and change, which, significantly, may also mark theological and sociological overlaps. This variation is important as it relates to participants' conceptions of conversion and subjectivity. Thus our 'theological ear' must remain sociologically grounded and not preclude variety, which again points to the dynamics between continuity and change as the important site of analysis regarding identity. Therefore, rather than focusing on or emphasising continuity *or* change, or continuity

and change, it is necessary to look at continuity *with* change, with the vision of how *religiosity* effects a congruity of both. Having established *religiosity* as the basis of continuity, the following section turns to the analysis of this dynamic.

Continuity and change: congruity as reconciling

We can begin to see the relationship between continuity and change emerging in moments heavily pregnant with standstill and deep emotional resonance. These kinds of realisations express the meeting points and imbricated-ness that may seem contradictory and ambiguous, but which are experienced as congruous. Rosie captured these aspects well when she said:

> And it was just sort of from there, it just grew that I was thinking, "Yeah, this is it, this is what I want to be, this is who I *am*." And it wasn't that I felt I needed to change, it was sort of that I sort of realised that "yeah, this is how it is; this is what I've been looking for". And I felt like it is me and not that I had found something that I needed to alter for. I did need to make changes obviously because I had been doing things that were not going to be compatible. But it was … it just felt very natural in that way. (Personal interview, 3 February 2017)

A first significant way in which change emerges is therefore directly related to continuity. Whereas it was noted that continuity appears as a past-oriented form of *being oneself* (in relation to *religiosity*), change occurs in relation to this as a future-oriented form of constantly *becoming oneself* in relation to forms of *religion*. This is bound up in narratives of personal development, becoming better, improving oneself and, by so doing, coming closer to God.

Again, a 'theological ear' helps. The concept of *fitrah* and the lack of a direct equivalent in English do not suggest that all souls are Muslim and therefore conversion is not necessary. This can be seen in terms scholars point to that are used in reference to people becoming Muslim. Significant is that *islam*, and 'Islam', are verbal nouns which express the act of *aslama* (to submit). Importantly, the emphasis is on becoming and being Muslim "through submission, of the heart and the limbs" to God (Dutton 1999, 152). Thus, *islam*, with its aspects of inchoateness, "does not signify an accomplishment, but a new, continual beginning" (Salvatore 2016, 13). This becomes crucially important to understanding the continual and renewed sense of faith and piety developed through practice, as it is these dynamics that make coherent the assertions of both already becoming oneself in relation to what one already is at the moment of accepting Islam and becoming more in relation to God continually through practice. One both *is* Muslim and is constantly *becoming* Muslim through developing an

Islamic teleological subjecthood. Tariq Ramadan (highlighted consistently as a key influence by participants) describes it thus: "all of us are required to return to ourselves and to rediscover the original breath, to revive it and confirm it" (Ramadan 2004, 17). Again, the dynamics between *religiosity* and *religion* are significant.

Consequently, the distinction between the dimensions of inner belief and outer practice, however heuristically useful for analysis, is not reflective of religious experience as the two do not exist exclusively of each other (see also Jensen 2008, 394; 2011). This allows the inclusion of the importance of becoming Muslim "by a recognition of the heart", the heart being, in Qur'anic terminology, the seat of the intellect (*'aql*) (Dutton 1999, 163; see also Kocabaş 1987). Such heartfelt recognition was a consistent theme in participants' narratives and marked the ineffable aspect of their conversion. What emerges as important is the dynamic between *being* and *becoming*, between *change* and *continuity*, and between *religiosity* and *religion*.

When *religious* identity is taken seriously, converts to Islam can begin to unsettle the borders on which their exclusions as religious subjects from both secular understandings and Muslim communities rest. This represents a qualitative epistemological shift in understanding that allows a transcendence of fragmented identities and contradiction to come into view (Flanagan 2008, 256). Following this, we can also hold the inarticulable element of *religiosity* together with the articulable *religion*, including, significantly, the dissonance, process, and dynamics between the two. This then prompts and allows to foreground *religiosity* rather than leaving it in the background.

A second way change occurs in the narratives is through the dynamics of past- and future-oriented aspects and the centrality of *religiosity* can be further demonstrated through discussion of perhaps the more obvious forms of change—those in behaviour and practice. The actual rite (if this is not too strong a term) of becoming Muslim is comparatively simple and involves sincerely reciting the *shahada* (declaration of faith) in front of at least two witnesses. This does not suggest that conversion is either easy as a simple matter of belief or simply a matter of inner belief. Changes to lifestyle and diet follow—including the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, giving up pork and alcohol, changes to traditional celebrations, and modes of socialising. These are experienced as difficult to a greater and lesser extent and approaches to some practices vary, at times considerably. Moreover, even if there are variations in actual practice, what is central to these practices is religious subjectivity and its development. Where this cannot be achieved, it is an unresolvable site of struggle or rejection.

Hannah, for example, resisted the *hijab* at first. She remarked that "I can never be like this" (personal interview, 30 January 2017), reflecting a more personal, embodied sense of whether wearing the *hijab* 'fits'—that the

person seen in the mirror feels the same as the person standing in front of the mirror. This is a big part of managing the anxiety about knowing how it will affect one's being in the social world. However, based on her reflection, reading, and interpretation, Hannah later accepted that it is a Qur'anic injunction that the *hijab* should be worn. She therefore brought the *hijab* into the orbit of her religious sense of self, taking it to the point where she felt 'naked' without it. It is through processes of drawing certain practices into their religious self that converts construct such aspects as being *congruous* with their sense of (evolving) subjectivity, even where it may be a struggle to do so. Congruity, rather than continuity, contains the sense of both continuity and change and their dynamics, including contradiction and ambivalence, while registering how these need not necessarily be experienced as problematic.

A third and immediately obvious sense of change is suggested by the subject of conversion. This must be understood in the context of contemporary secular Britain and the declining centrality of religion and religious belief. For all the participants, Britain, and much Christian practice, are seen as spiritually empty. As Adele put it, "it's kind of like something people do traditionally and culturally now rather than it being something that people follow as a faith" (personal interview, 23 August 2017). Thus practice is seen as devoid of substance or *religiosity*. This is similarly true for those who convert from a Hindu or Sikh background and forms the basis of criticism of many born Muslims, where habit and routine of practising cultural tradition are contrasted with the deeply religious content of Islam. The change is thus necessitated by their sense of a religious self, embedded in continuity as discussed above, being at odds with a secular context devoid of this aspect.

Linked to this, the final way in which change emerges is through being seen (anew) by others. In the narratives, the process of being 're-racialized' as a result of becoming Muslim appears most strongly—and with much frustration and consternation—in relation to family and the local surroundings in which converts live their everyday lives. Discussing her family's reaction to her conversion, Emily noted how "he [her father] thinks that I've [in a tone of mock horror] 'changed'" (personal interview, 23 January 2017) as she had moved into the position of 'intimate stranger' (Ramahi and Suleiman 2017). Likewise, in the most poignant part of the interview, Anna related the occasion when she was stared at and whispered about on a bus journey in her home town after adopting the *hijab*. She exclaimed in frustration:

> . . . even though I'm a Muslim, I'm still that same person. And that's what people . . . people, I think, don't realise, you're still that same person. . . I still have a personality! I'm still that person. . . (Personal interview, 23 February 2017)

These quotes point to the often uneasy relationship between continuity and change, between the personal and the social, and the way this is managed on a personal level so that congruity is established, in contrast with being seen exclusively through the lens of change. Of course, for the people on the bus, Anna has visibly changed as she now wears the *hijab* and has therefore become different. Yet Anna, experiencing herself from the inside, becomes frustrated by such a one-dimensional view of who she is. This is important because by establishing a sense of congruity in the ways described above, converts are not so much denying change, but highlighting how continuity and change are imbricated and located in the centrality of *religiosity*. It is by reference to this that the concept of congruity reconciles the apparent contradictoriness of change and continuity.

Reassessing religious identity

What the discussion above points to is that the conceptions for religious identities that rely on the ideas of the multiple and the hybrid seem inadequate for grappling with the dynamics of continuity and change, where the issue of *religiosity* arises. While in some particular circumstances a different identity category, such as gender or ethnicity, may 'rise to the top', the political process of identities need not, perhaps cannot, dilute or displace religious identity or 'secularise' it (cf. Roald 2012, 356–357). What these conceptualisations of religious identity do not recognize is that "conversion is a cultural passage more robust" (Austin-Broos 2003, 2) than the hybrid, the syncretic, and the *bricoleurs* of cosmopolitanism. Fundamentally, this is precisely because of the religious character of these identities, which evades and does not obviously square with flattening side-by-side categorical pluralities. What such conceptions do is to reduce the religious aspect of subjectivity to a level equal with other identity categories (such as ethnic or national) or keep it separate. These conceptions successfully, but unnecessarily and erroneously, secularise converts' identities, even when this is may not be their explicit aim. The effect of this is that it contains or restricts the religious aspect of these identities from its fullest character.

A related trend in the literature is to stress the 'rational' and 'intellectual' dimensions of conversions. Both aspects were present in the narratives informing this article. Islam's rational, logical, and scientific character was commonly stressed—an aspect of what one participant called "the framework of Islam" that had to be investigated and negotiated as part of the gradual process of coming to Islam. Nevertheless, the result of this has been, to use the language of 'conversion motifs' (Lofland and Skonovd 1981), an over-emphasis of the *cognitive* in *contrast to* the *mystical*, to the point where they are seen as distinct and incompatible, so that one is dominant over the other. This falls into a similar categorical ranking trap

as the multiple identity approach, where discreet identity categories are conceived in terms of hierarchical order. This is not to suggest that these are consequently irrational conversions but to reiterate the need to centralise the religious aspect.

That there is conceptual incoherence and that the literature, otherwise sympathetic towards centralising converts' own experiences, slips into these characterisations all too easily and uncritically affirms the fruitfulness of using Simmel's notion of *religiosity*. Keeping *religiosity* as part of a mosaic is successful in that it can helpfully contain its perceived problematic, or 'dangerous', character, especially given the socio-cultural and socio-political contexts and frames in which Islam is (mis)understood more broadly. However, this misses much of the depth of this *religiosity* and in turn mischaracterises it. *Religiosity* points, rather, to a deeper and higher motive for conversion and this operates as an antidote to reductionism. As Salman Sayyid has indicated, a tendency to downplay religious identity in this way can be seen as a form of orientalism (Sayyid 2000, 37). Despite its lack of nuance, particularly with regard to faith in society more broadly, this alerts us to hybridity's emergence in colonial discourse and its "fear of cultural and racial degeneration" and "throws doubt on the widely accepted idea that hybridity discourse is a privileged site of contestation of binary thinking and essentialism" (Acheraïou 2011, 5, 7).

As has been argued about identity—and against the fractured, the fragmented, and the fluid—there is often a good deal more unity, or congruity, on display than is often acknowledged (Crossley 2003, 292). Moreover, this is found in the dynamic between continuity and change so that, rather than emphasising one or the other, it is a dynamic better thought through by reference to congruity. Accomplishment of this means taking seriously that, for many believers, the emotions they experience are experienced as having extra-social, a-temporal, a-cultural, and a-historical qualities—qualities recognized by Simmel (1997, 43). This also helps dispel the competitive element of plural or multiple identities and the perceived 'threat' to secular society, registering instead how

> the absolute domination of a single principle at the expense of all the others . . . would then be raised to a higher plane: [therefore] none would have any cause to feel threatened by any other (Simmel 1997, 138).

This preserves the autonomy of *religiosity* while also seeing it socially (McCole 2005, 17). This is then what allows a reading with the potential of unsettling currently dominant approaches to understanding and talking about religious identity.

Conclusion

This article has argued that converts to Islam have entered the public imagination in a context and through forms which not only contain converts within existing negative tropes, but also serve to question and diminish the genuineness of these religious conversions or even view them as dangerous. The dynamic aspects of converts' quest for an authentic religious journey becomes undermined as conversions are subsequently understood through frameworks of brainwashing, mental instability, lifestyle choices or cognitive strategies. These dynamics have received little attention in sociology. Moreover, academic frames and conceptualisations mischaracterise and contain the religious aspect of conversions and converts' identities.

This article has sought to attend to the stories and narratives of British converts to Islam and bring a 'theological ear' to this endeavour as a way of shifting debates and understandings. This article has thus argued that "the trinity of reason, religion and theology [can be] reciprocally related and mutually enriching" (Helmer 2012, 234). Simmel's notions of *religiosity* and *religion* were used to make a theoretical shift towards approaching the series of complex issues arising from the dynamics *between* continuity and change as the focus of analysis, where personal and social issues intermingle in an often uneasy relationship with religious affiliation. This article has argued that, as far as converts are understood purely in relation to cultural and social facets of such religious affiliation, such understanding risks a reductionism that feeds into fragmented and competing claims about identity categories. Such claims are, however, both unnecessary and mischaracterise how these affiliations are experienced, negotiated, and understood by converts. To offset, if not transcend this, Simmel's distinction between *religiosity* and *religion* is a fruitful means of re-centring the relationship with the divine in converts' accounts, which marks an epistemological move away from "the a priori exclusion from sociological consideration of an entire class of explanation" (Porpora 2006, 62). The aim has been to create a sociological space in which theological motives for conversion can be brought in and, as a result, an often neglected facet of the conversions can be made more central. From such an understanding, the 'bad faith' of the convert can be displaced and resulting exclusionary boundaries in which converts find themselves cast can be permeated. At this point, the 'good faith' of the convert can be recognized, a prospect which this article has explored in relation to Simmel's notion of *religiosity*.

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Thomas Sealy is a Research Associate in the Horizon 2020-funded GREASE (Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion) project and the HERA-funded PLURISPACE (Governance of Diversity in European Public Spaces) project. He is based in the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship in the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies at the University of Bristol, UK. His research interests are in the areas of multiculturalism, religious identity, religious conversion, Georg Simmel, and religion, politics, and secularism. CORRESPONDENCE: University of Bristol, 11 Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TU, UK.

ORCID

Thomas Sealy http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3211-6900

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