بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

قَالَ تَعَالَى

إِنَّكَ لَا تَهْدِى مَنْ أَحْبَبْتَ وَلَـٰكِنَّ اللَّهَ يَهْدِى مَن يَشَاءُ ۚ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ

(القصص:56)

It is true thou wilt not Be Able to guide every one Whom thou lovest; but AllAh Guides those whom He will and He Knows best those Who receive guidance. (Qur'an 28: 56)

UNDERSTANDING THE STAGES OF CONVERSION TO ISLAM

THE VOICES OF BRITISH CONVERTS

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others

To
The loves of my life
Khalid, Zain, Hisham and Amr

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses data provided by face to face interviews with a sample of British converts to Islam to find out how and why they came to convert, and what were the repercussions of their conversions. The work is placed in the context of the predominantly post-Christian British society in which they had spent the greater part of their lives and the existence of a sizeable community of British Muslims.

Influential studies of the psychology and sociology of religious conversion are reviewed and applied to the data. These tend to leave a series of loose ends and fail to pin down the causes or reasons for the conversions. The encounter and reaction with a proselytising group, a key finding in many previous studies, is found to be lacking in the evidence of the current sample of converts. A need is found to broaden the analytic approach. A holistic academic framework is found that both enables the researcher to analyse the conversions as a process through time and allows for further fields of study to be incorporated in the analysis. Thus the stage model for analysing the conversion process proposed by Lewis Rambo (1993) is employed, with a minor modification. Rambo's stage model permits the researcher to include in the study the insights into the human predicament offered by classical Islam. Literature based on and including the Qur'an and *sunnah* is reviewed. This provides a way of linking together some of the factors previous researchers have considered significant in the conversion process.

The degree of interaction with Muslims prior to conversion varied enormously. In all cases there had been some contact but it is not found possible to state that such contact was necessary for the conversions to take place. The Islamic concept of *hidayah* is proposed as a unifying concept that can account for the disparate factors and apparently random coincidences identified as having been factors in the conversion processes. The Islamic concepts of *tawheed* and *fitrah* also contribute to a unifying view of the conversion phenomena. It is found that the common factor in the 'interaction' and 'commitment' stages of conversion is not immersion in a group of people, but interaction with a book, the Qur'an. This proves to be the pivotal element in all the conversions in this study.

The post-conversion experiences of the converts as they became members of the Muslim *ummah* are found to be broadly similar in that they had been unprepared for the differences between their view of Islam, based mainly on the original texts, and that of the mainly South Asian Muslim community which included a history of cultural accretions.. The success of their socialisation with the South Asian Muslim community varied a little from person to person, language and culture being the main stumbling blocks, but major differences were found that related to the gender and ethnicity of the converts. Their relationships within the non-Muslim community continued with some modifications. Little evidence is found that social problems, linguistic and cultural barriers, or what the future might hold, had, or would, deflect the converts from their faith. This may be because they all came to Islam through the Qur'an. It is therefore suggested that research into the psychological effect the Qur'an has on its readers would shed further light on the phenomenon of conversion to Islam.

CONTENTS

A Glossary of Arabic Terms

Notes on the Transliteration of Arabic Words in this Thesis

The number of English speaking Muslims is increasing, as is the non-Muslim English speakers' familiarity with and use of Arabic words and expressions. We are presented, therefore, with a fluid situation where some Arabic words have become common in written and spoken English and others have not. The attempt has been made to reflect that some Arabic words remain purely Arabic, some are in the process of being adopted into the English language, and some are already part of that language. This may result in some inconsistency in transliteration or spelling, but is intended to reflect accurately aspects of cultural and linguistic transition at the time of writing. Variations in the spelling of Arabic words that derive from usage in other languages, e.g. Urdu, have been avoided.

1. Arabic words that have not yet entered the English language are given a simple and consistent transliteration that relates to the Arabic spelling and pronunciation. They are italicised in the body of this work.

2. The spelling of Arabic words already part of the English language, has not yet become standardised, but for the more familiar words, there is a strong movement towards standardisation. This is especially the case in literature written by educated Muslims who know Arabic and have English mother tongue. This is taken into account in the spelling presented in this work.

3. The spelling of a few Arabic words frequently used in conversation by English speaking Muslims, is becoming 'anglicised', in order to prevent mispronunciation or confusion with similar sounding English words. Such spellings are gaining increasing acceptance in the process of becoming part of the English language. The anglicised spelling reflects the lack of diacritical marks in written English. Examples are tawheed, deen and hadeeth.

4. Other words, such as fatwa and halal, now have an accepted English spelling owing to common familiarity.

5. The name Muhammad remains problematic. The standardised spelling is now Muhammad, but many people who were given this name prior to standardisation, continue to spell their names in a variety of ways, e.g. Mohammed and Mohamed. In this work, therefore, the Prophet Muhammad's name (PBUH) is written in the standardised spelling, while authors and converts who are named after the Prophet are referred to by the spelling they or their respective families have chosen.

6. Throughout the work the word Qur'an is spelt this way, as this is now generally accepted as the standard spelling by English speaking Muslims.

7. Arabic words in common English usage that would have an initial capital in English, have been given a capital, as they have already become part of the English language. These include Allah, Qur'an, Makkah, Ramadhan and Hajj. For the sake of consistency, the word Umra, the lesser pilgrimage related to Hajj, is treated in the same way as Hajj, although it is at present less well known in English.

Allah	literally 'The God'; Allah is the proper name of God in Arabic
an-nafs al-lawwamah	the reproachful self
an-nafs al-mutma'innah	the tranquil self
aql	intellect, reason, faculty of rational and intuitive perception
da'wah	literally 'invitation' to Islam
deen	way of life; the religion that Allah has ordained for humanity, including faith, ethics, law and devotions
du'a	supplication to Allah that can be made at any time
fatwa	specific legal ruling or opinion; it can be a mere reminder of a prescription explicitly stated by the sources, or a scholar's elaboration on the basis of a non-explicit text, or made in the case of a specific situation for which there is no scriptural source
fiqh	Islamic law and jurisprudence; the science of the application of the shari'ah
fitrah	the natural, primal condition of human beings, in harmony with nature and their Creator
hadeeth	reported and authenticated traditions about what the Prophet said, did or approved
Hajj	the annual pilgrimage to Makkah that is one of the five pillars of Islam
halal	permitted, lawful in the shari'ah
hidayah	the guidance of God
hijab	literally, a partition that separates two things; a curtain; in modern times it is used to describe a form of women's dress. In this work, it refers to a Muslim women's headscarf that hides the hair, but reveals the face
hijrah	literally 'emigration'; the Prophet Muhammad's emigration from Makkah to Madinah (622 CE) is known as the hijrah. It marks the beginning of the Islamic state and the Islamic calendar (1AH)
ibadat	worship, in the form of living every aspect of one's life in obedience to Allah
ihsan	righteousness. This refers to utter devotion to and mindfulness of Allah in all of a person's thoughts and actions
iradah	will, free will, volition

ijtihad	literally 'effort', it has become a technical term meaning the effort exercised by a jurist to extract a law or a ruling from non-explicit scriptural sources or to formulate a specific legal opinion in the absence of texts of reference
iman	literally 'faith', it is the affirmation, conviction or certainty that Allah is the one and only God and Muhammad (PBUH) is His final prophet, that the angels, the revealed books, the prophets and the Last Day are all true, and that everything, both good and bad, is by the decree of Allah
Islam	submission and surrender to the will of Allah; from a root denoting peace
jum'a	congregational prayer on Friday just after midday; also means Friday
khalifa	a successor; one continuing the institution of governance of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)
Muslim	a proper designation of the person who submits to Allah and adheres to Islam
nafs	self, soul, psyche
PBUH	blessings and peace be upon him. In the Qur'an Muslims are enjoined to send blessings to the prophets. Therefore after each mention of the name of the Prophet Muhammad there is a blessing that is regarded as compulsory
qalb	heart, the seat of intelligence and intelligent feeling
qibla	the direction Muslims face during salat, which is towards Makkah
Qur'an	literally 'Recitation'; the final revelation from God to human beings, given to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in Arabic
khutba	the formal sermon delivered by the imam at Friday jum'a
Ramadhan	the month of fasting; the ninth month in the Islamic calendar
ruh	the spirit or soul, innate in every human being and linked to God
sadaqah	voluntary charity that can be given at any time to anyone
sahih	authentic, meeting specific authentication criteria
salat	formal worship and supplication performed five times daily

shahadah	the statement of witness and belief that 'there is none worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God'
shari'ah	literally 'the road', the legal modality of a people, based on the revelation of their prophet; in the case of Muslims, it is based on the Qur'an and sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)
shirk	association of other beings with Allah; the opposite of tawheed
sunnah	the practice of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the first four of his successors (khalifs)
surah	a section in the Qur'an similar to a chapter
taqwa	Allah consciousness, love and fear of Allah, piety, carefulness
tawheed	'oneness', the oneness of Allah; the science of knowing Allah's oneness (the opposite of shirk)
ulama	literally, 'the ones who know'; scholars in a broad sense, who may be specialized in one particular branch of Islamic science. Today it can mean those who graduated from university with a degree in a field related to Islamic sciences
ummah	community of faith, spiritual community, uniting all Muslim people throughout the world
Umra	the lesser pilgrimage to Makkah that can take place at any time of the year
zakat	compulsory charity collected once a year and intended for the needy in the Muslim community, comprising 2.5 % of one's disposable income

1.1 Background Information

When I first arrived in this country in 1993, I believed that everyone in the country had the same religion, i.e. Christianity, because all the religious buildings I saw were churches. It was only when I started to meet different people whilst taking my children to school that I learnt, much to my surprise, that religion did not play an important role in the lives of many people in this country.

During my studies for a MA in Applied Linguistics, I taught Arabic as a foreign language at Leeds University and met several young people who had converted to the religion of Islam. A close relationship had developed with my students, and I spent quite some time discussing with them their reasons for becoming Muslims and why they had become so totally and positively involved in their new religion. It was amazed to find people in the UK who had converted to the religion that I had been brought up with, and who practised all that it requires, including the five daily prayers, covering the head and other disciplines. One reason for my surprise was that when I was growing up in the Middle East we tended to look to the West for role models, listening to their music and seeing their way of life as having a freedom that we did not have. I grew up with a religion that defined my whole way of life, as well as my culture. Coming to England and seeing the English way of life as a much freer society, created an interest in me. It made me ask why these people, who were converting to Islam, were rejecting the freedom that I believed people here had and enjoyed. This is the main reason why I chose the topic of conversion to Islam and find it so interesting. I asked myself why someone who appears to have so much materially should want to turn to Islam,

which offers few material rewards, replacing them instead with spiritual compensations. Because the picture that the media in the UK was painting of Islam tended to be very negative and show little of what it has to offer, again the question of why people should choose to convert arose in my mind. When I heard about the 'Community Religions Project' in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds, this encouraged me to do my Ph.D. in this subject that I found so fascinating.

The research has been conducted against a background of conflicting presentations of Islam in the Western media. In general news items have continued their tendency to be negative and since 11 September 2001 this has been exacerbated. Prior to this, there had been an increasing level of interest within the media regarding the religion of Islam. A series about Islam and The Muslims that was generally sympathetic and informative was broadcast on BBC 2 TV during the summer of 2001. One programme in the series was a documentary called 'Islamophobia' that went on air on 18 August 2001. I had been approached to help find people who might like to appear on this programme, and subsequently I did so. The documentary covered the issue of prejudice towards Muslims living in the British Isles. I was also contacted by Channel 4 on 12 September 2001, when researchers requested that I assist them with a programme they had been planning for some time on conversion to Islam. They also contacted me on 8 January 2002 and confirmed that interest in the subject was growing. The Channel 4 TV series 'Muslims in Britain' was broadcast in Spring 2002 and was in general sympathetic and informative. However, after 11 September 2001, people's perceptions of the world had changed and, despite series like the ones

mentioned above on BBC2 and Channel 4, in general, a much more negative picture of Islam and Muslims was now portrayed both in the news media and in programmes that were made as a result of the events of 11 September 2001. Despite this, people working at the Grand Mosque in Leeds told me that the small but steady flow of new converts coming to the mosque was continuing. Indeed in the weeks following September 11 they had noticed a small increase in the number of converts. They said that mosques in other cities in the UK had reported a similar situation. This demonstrates to me that the decision to convert to Islam is such a deep personal decision that it will not be affected by factors such as the attacks on New York and Washington and the subsequent bad publicity that Islam has received[1].

1.2   Statement of the Problem

'Understanding the Stages of Conversion to Islam: The Voices of British Converts' is an interview study based on evidence provided by a sample of British converts to Islam. The data is provided by 37 interviews, 20 of males and 17 of females. The ethnicity, social backgrounds and age of the interviewees were quite varied, although they were all born and grew up in the UK and had spent most, if not all, of their lives in the UK. Twenty four were white, including English, Irish and Scots, ten were Afro-Caribbean, two were Asian and one was Chinese. The basic questions asked in the thesis are: Why did those interviewed become

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[1] In the Guardian newspaper on Monday, 24 June 2002, Brian Whitaker referred to a report from Saudi Arabia that had 'cheerfully announced' a few days previously that 942 foreigners had converted to Islam during the past year, 709 of them after 11 September 2001.

Muslims? What were their backgrounds? What were the processes leading to their conversion to Islam? What are the factors that make conversion viable for people? How far are existing conversion theories applicable to such a variety of British converts to Islam? Can any explanation for the conversions to Islam be found, that can account for all, or a majority, of the cases analysed? And beyond the conversion process, how did the converts interact within the established Muslim community in terms of acceptance, guidance and support?.

Religious conversion is a complex phenomenon and comprises many diverse experiences. It may be an experience of increased devotion within the same religious structure. On the other hand, as in the conversions analysed in the present study, it may be either a shift from no religious commitment to a devout religious life, or a change from one religion to another. Conversion experience may come about in different circumstances, in different ways, and with different outcomes. It may occur in many types of people, for example, the introspective, soul-searching type, who finds greater value in spiritual beliefs than in materialistic values, or, on the other hand, in somebody who had previously led a hedonistic life-style and apparently ignored spirituality.

Since the turn of the last century social scientists and religionists have adopted different perspectives when explaining the nature of the conversion experience. Social scientists have proposed a range of social and psychological forces at work, while believers have emphasised the nature of the human-divine encounter. There is also the issue of how the above-mentioned themes merge with each other or contribute to an explanation of the conversion phenomena. Therefore, the whole lifespan of the converts becomes relevant, including childhood,

adolescence, experiences in adulthood, as well as the conversion process itself and its immediate or long term results.

The choice of the word *process* over *event* is deliberate. It follows the findings of previous researchers, notably Lofland and Skonovd (1981) and Rambo (1993), and results from my personal observation in this work that none of the conversions studied occurred overnight, or in a flash of inspiration, but were a gradual process. However, the idea of a sudden conversion to Islam is not rejected. It was also discovered that most of the converts had had little if any substantial contact with Muslims or the Muslim community prior to conversion. However, nearly all of them recalled having had at least a brief encounter with an individual Muslim at some time prior to their commitment to Islam, but such encounters had not necessarily been regarded as of any special significance and had varied greatly, in intensity and proximity to the key conversion processes. It became clear that 'missionary zeal' on the part of established Muslims had not been a common factor in the conversions. There was in fact no evidence or awareness of organised or pro-active missionary work or recruitment, although some previous researchers on conversion, for example Lofland and Stark (1965), Lofland and Skonovd (1981), Ownby (1990) and Köse (in regard to conversion to Islam through Sufism) (1996), had identified interaction with a proselytising group, or at least a warmly welcoming group, as having played a key role.

While I was conducting the interviews it became apparent that the literature review would need to be in three parts. A review of Western literature on conversion would be insufficient on its own. This has caused the literature review to be longer than originally intended. The first part is material about the

established Muslim community in UK providing a necessary context for analysing the data especially in Chapter VII 'Being a Muslim'. Second is the review of Western literature on religious conversion. In particular, the work of Lewis Rambo (1987, 1993) and Ali Köse (1996) is discussed. Finally there is a review of the Islamic literature, crucial for an understanding of the data, that covers relevant issues not found in the Western material.

The meaning of the word 'conversion' has many facets. In the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, the Hebrew and Greek words that are generally equated with conversion, are words that literally mean *to turn* or *return.* According to Rambo (1993: 3) this is the central meaning of conversion . Likewise, in this work, the precise meaning of conversion is to turn from a previously held religion, way of life or belief system to a new religion, way of life or belief system. It also means a simple change from the absence of a faith system to a faith commitment, or from religious affiliation to one faith system to another. It also means a transformation of world view, from concern or distress about evil or illusion in some things connected with this world, to seeing all creation as a manifestation of God's power, regardless of the awareness of evil and illusions.

The data collected for this study indicated that no single discipline was adequate to tackle the subject of conversion to Islam. Therefore an approach involving several disciplines was considered appropriate and necessary. It would have been hazardous to undertake a survey of the subject without applying an interconnected model that might define patterns and reveal relationships among the various materials and research already available. Lewis Rambo's stage model (1993) for

analysing religious conversion provided this and has proved of theoretical importance in the present work.

Contextually, the work of Ali Köse has proved important. His study, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (1996) and the present research are connected, in that they are both concerned with the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in Britain, as opposed to other belief systems, or other places.

1.3   Research Objectives

The major objective of this thesis is to record the conversion experiences of a sample of British converts to Islam, to find out how and why these conversions took place. It aims to bring greater coherence and clarity to the understanding of conversion to Islam by linking psychological and sociological research on conversion with relevant perspectives provided by Islamic scholarship. The inclusion of Islamic scholarship, should make it possible to take the understanding of conversion to Islam a stage further than the pioneering work of Ali Köse.

It examines questions such as, what has motivated these people? What is the nature and extent of their transformation? What are the processes that are powerful enough to encourage it? Are there long-term predispositions? It attempts to describe these transformations, processes and possible predispositions, and go beyond the conversion process itself to discover if people who adopt Islam and join the community of Muslims find what they expected to find in terms of acceptance, guidance and support. These are the main objectives of this thesis.

This study is necessarily limited to a particular sample of converts which may not be representative of all converts to Islam. Therefore caution should be exercised

when generalizing from the present findings. However, I hope that readers of this thesis will gain an insight into the experience of those converts to Islam who were interviewed.

As the number of converts grows, there is an increasing sense of urgency to pin down the meaning of conversion to Islam. Specialized studies such as this one should assist in this. The goal of this work is to explore and establish some interconnections among the complex, multifaceted experience and phenomenon that is conversion to Islam. Most studies of conversion to date have been too narrow in orientation, employing theories that tended to be too restrictive (Rambo, 1993: 4). Making use of scholarly perspectives from a number of disciplines, including western psychology and sociology, together with the aspects of psychology found in Islamic scholarship, it is intended to define and clarify the factors involved in religious conversion in general and conversion to Islam in particular.

As a result of my research, I have learnt that although Ali Köse and I dealt with the same topic, he approached it from a more psychological viewpoint, using western psychological and sociological theories, so that he was able to find factors relevant to conversion to Islam, but was unable to pin down the reasons for these conversions in such a way as to be able to produce a theory. I, on the other hand, adopted a wider frame of reference made possible by using Rambo's stage model for study of conversion to broaden the range of perspectives brought to bear on the topic. It has therefore been found that the journey to Islam was less dependent on traumatic experiences and personal crises than has been suggested by researchers such as Ullman (1989). This has freed me to explore the possibility of

the conversions in this study being a positive and natural aspect of the subject's development. I found that events prompting the decision to convert varied from subject to subject. They tended to include intellectual elements and to be less driven by emotional factors than has been traditionally thought. Throughout my research I have tried to put aside my own preconceptions and explore what exactly led these people to arrive at their decision to convert, and what has motivated them through this period of their lives.

1.4   Important Aspects of this Study

The holistic approach to analysis of conversion provided by Lewis Rambo's stage model seemed to have the potential for a meaningful analysis of the data on conversion to Islam in this study. He, however, had not used this method for conversion to Islam. Nevertheless, since other 'western' approaches were too limited and Islamic literature does not expand on the topic, the stage model was employed, albeit with certain modifications dictated by the data.

The Islamic concept of *fitrah* is introduced in this study. It may be that from the point of view of traditional Islamic scholarship there is little mystery in 'conversion' to Islam. This would be because of the concept of *fitrah*, which in fact bears relevance to some of the perceptions of the converts in this study. It has therefore been incorporated in the analysis. The concept of *fitrah*, derived from the verb meaning 'to originate', holds that human beings are naturally inclined to Islam — that to be in a condition of Islam is the human's natural state of being. There is also some element of free choice in deciding one's *deen* (way of life), and this adds a second dimension to the concept of *fitrah*. Neither the Qur'an nor

the *sunnah*[2] refer to new Muslims as such. There is no separate category of 'convert' in Islam. Once a person utters the *shahadah,* that person is as much a Muslim as people who were raised as Muslims. Muslims are differentiated only by their degree of *taqwa:* piety, or love and fear of Allah.

The use of Lewis Rambo's stage model is the result of an attempt to bridge the existing gap in the literature . It enables the reader to follow a pattern starting with the context of the subjects' lives, and including stages identified by the following terms: crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences.

The new element in research on conversion to Islam that I discovered in this work was the strong link between the person's decision to become a Muslim and the Qur'an. Some light is thrown on the persuasive skill within the literary structure of the Qur'an, and the psychological power of its techniques that can command attention, influence people and change minds and lives. As far as I am concerned none of the studies dealing with conversion to Islam has examined the role of the Qur'an in conversion to Islam. This study will attempt to prepare a theoretical background that may serve as a foundation for future work in this area.

The psychology literature on conversion consists of studies of individual case-histories and samples usually taken for convenience. Random community samples, or random selection methods within selective groups have sometimes been used . The sample of converts in the present study, likewise, cannot be taken

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[2] The life example of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

to be representative of all converts to Islam. Therefore, conclusions and comparisons made throughout this thesis must be moderated by the fact that the studies are mostly based on samples that are not comparable or representative.

1.5 Organisation of the Thesis

The thesis is organized in the following manner. Chapters I to VIII comprise the body of the work. They are preceded by the abstract, contents list and glossary. The appendices and bibliography appear after Chapter VIII.

Chapter I is an introduction to the thesis and provides relevant general background information to the study. I present the problem addressed, the resulting research objectives of the present work and summarises some important aspects of the study. Finally, it presents the way in which the thesis is organised.

Chapter II describes the Muslim community resident and settled in the UK, dwelling mainly on the communities that emanated from the Indian sub-continent, notably from Pakistan and Bangladesh. Aspects of the particularities and experiences of these communities are relevant to the pre- and post-conversion experiences of the converts in the sample.

Chapter III is a literature review which gives a survey of currently available research into religious conversion in general and conversion to Islam in particular. The conversions in this study contain features scarcely noted in previous research, therefore the review also includes a selection of other relevant literature written from the classic Muslim perspective, considered necessary to throw new light on the phenomenon of conversion to Islam. Extracts from the Qur'an and *hadeeth* are also discussed.

The methodology of the study is set out in Chapter IV. The selection of primary as well as secondary data collection methods are explained. A general discussion of fieldwork strategy, selection of samples and the progressive development of the semi-structured interviews is provided. The proposed data analysis procedure is also discussed in this chapter.

In the light of previous research and other literature mentioned above, Chapters V, VI and VII discuss the conversions to Islam of the converts interviewed for this study, through an analysis of the data they provided. The data is presented mainly as direct quotations from the oral interviews, sometimes by reference, and also in table form.

Having adopted the framework for analysis of conversion to Islam recommended by Lewis Rambo (1993) the experiences of the interviewees are analyzed according to seven postulated stages in the conversion process. Diagrams show that these stages are inter-related, rather than simply sequential.

Chapter V, 'Beginning the Process', concentrates on the first three stages of conversion as suggested in Rambo's framework, namely, Stage 1: Context, Stage 2: Crisis, Stage 3: Quest, and examines the backgrounds of the related responses and motivations of the converts.

The circumstances, events and experiences leading to and including conversion , as well as conversion motifs, are examined in Chapter VI, 'Becoming a Muslim'. This involves the next three stages: Encounter, Stage 4; Interaction, Stage 5; and Commitment, Stage 6.

Chapter VII, 'Being a Muslim' deals with Stage 7 of the Rambo framework. It looks at the post-conversion period to examine the changes the converts went through regarding beliefs, practices and socialization, including their present relationship with their families, the Muslim community and the wider society.

Chapter VIII presents conclusions drawn from the findings of the present study and makes some recommendations for future research.

2.1   Introduction

Britain has a sizeable established Muslim community that is highly visible in the larger towns and cities, while many smaller towns also have communities of Muslims.   This is especially true of England, where the converts to Islam in this study lived at the time of their conversions. An overview of the most numerous groups within the British Muslim community is presented in this chapter because it is part of the context in which the conversions in the present study took place. It is important when considering the extent to which the established Muslim community influenced the conversions and the experiences of the converts when they became part of the Muslim *ummah*, in terms of acceptance, guidance and support.

2.2   The Muslim Population of Britain

The period of history that is immediately relevant to the Muslim situation in the UK today, starts with the mass immigration from Commonwealth countries in response to the post-war economic boom. This wave of immigration began in the 1950s and peaked in the 1960s and early 70s.   A high proportion of the immigrants were Muslims.   Many of these settled here, to be joined later by their wives and families. Today three or four generations of Muslims descended from, or related to, these settlers comprise a large proportion of the British Muslim population. Geographically, these communities are not spread uniformly across Britain.   In the 1950s and 1960s the major cities received considerable numbers of the South Asian Muslim immigrants as did the cotton and wool towns of

Lancashire and Yorkshire. Apart from greater London, these areas continue to have the highest concentrations of settled British Muslim communities originating from the Indian sub-continent (Nielsen, 1992: 42-43). South Asians account for 75% of the total British Muslim population. This population also includes Muslims from the Arab world, as well as Malaysia, Iran, Turkey, Cyprus and East and West Africa (Lewis, 1994:14). A minority of the settled community came as political refugees from a variety of countries, or as professional people, practising medicine, law or politics. There are also the small but growing numbers of converts among the Afro-Caribbean and indigenous white people and as will be seen in this study, a few from other groups.

It is difficult to determine exactly how many Muslims there are in Britain today, as, until 2001, the population census did not have a category to distinguish people by religion[1]. The most recent statistical analysis of all the data, which reviews previous estimates, concludes that the Muslim population of Britain in 2002 is approximately 1.8 million (Guardian, Monday 17 June 2002). By 1994, Pakistanis comprised the largest proportion of Muslims in Britain (Gilliat 1994:5).

Ethnic identity became an important issue for minority Muslim groups, despite the sense of common unity and fellowship arising from membership of the Muslim *ummah* (Geaves 1994: 62). The vast majority of the settled community in Britain have held to their Islamic culture and have been active in forming institutions in

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[1] The 2001 census has a question about religion. This may eventually reveal an approximation to the true numbers.

this country. Migration led to a life under non-Muslim rule and thus the Muslims found themselves ruled by a government whose laws were not designed to accommodate Muslim customs and practice. Muslims have therefore taken a number of steps towards establishing themselves in Britain, by building up their own community organisations and institutions. This has included negotiating with the authorities for greater recognition of their public needs (McLoughlin, 2000: 6-7). The presence of Muslims with a variety of languages, cultures and ideas has initiated a diversity of organisations within those communities. The Muslim community in Britain continues to face many dilemmas and challenges and responds to them in a variety of ways.

2.3 The Muslim Community: A Minority in Britain

As Gilliat (1994: 7) points out, in the minority situation, boundaries are important mechanisms for communal preservation. This applies whether the community shares the same faith or not. It applies to groups whose members may identify with each other through shared language or shared place of origin. A faith community finding itself in a minority situation may rely on secondary dimensions of its faith system in order to defend the group's identity. Attention may focus more on the instruments and symbols perceived to maintain identity and security than on issues of primary religious importance (Askari: 1991: 6).

Between 1950 and 1960 one could say that Muslim communities had already appeared but were not necessarily permanent. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Muslims came increasingly to believe that their future lay in Britain and as a result began to see the need of protecting their identity within the public arena.

Today they are very much part of the society, despite their defensive tendencies. (Ramadan, 1999: 120).

According to Geaves (1994: 87) religious symbols, especially in the South Asian communities, are transmitted through the cultural traditions of the old country to the children. As a result they are often structured around a handful of families, who have all migrated from the same small group of neighbouring villages and this is particularly true of the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. This characteristic of the settled Muslim communities in Britain has resulted in a diverse range of ethnic concerns and has kept the communities relatively closed. The migrants, their descendants and other family members, do not have to go outside their community boundaries to satisfy everyday needs or for marriage. This South Asian culture, which is strong, creates questions concerning the true form of Islam. There is widespread belief in an Islamic lifestyle but many Muslims are now seeking to define their faith in terms of the universals of the religion rather than local ethnic culture and this links up with the concept of the world-wide *ummah*. Muslims from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh cannot help but be aware of tensions between their joint membership of an ethnic culture and of the universal *ummah.*. This is why increasing numbers, especially of the younger Muslims in Britain, are seeking for an Islamic identity over and above ethnic differences.

The Muslim community in Britain today faces problems relating to determining its identity and establishing itself as a community. Among them religious, racial,

and educational problems as well as unemployment and lack of leadership can be highlighted and are frequently discussed within the community (Köse, 1996: 8).

As has been stated earlier, traditionally the lives of South Asian Muslims have tended to revolve around the customs and beliefs inherited from localised extended-family groupings, originating from small areas. Despite great success early on, it has become increasingly difficult to pass on the values and traditions of those villages of origin to the next generation who were born and educated in Britain. Although various factors involved in living in a non-Muslim society can contribute to fragmentation, a common unity and fellowship arising from membership of the Muslim *ummah* underlies the diversity of ethnic groupings, however defensive they may be against each other as well as against the wider society. The status given to the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) remains powerful, binding Muslims together in a common faith, forming the basis of this unity. The children's attendance at Qur'an recitation classes helps to perpetuate this devotion, but there is an important question as to what proportion of the major Muslim community are aware of the contents of the Qur'an since the meaning of the Arabic is not taught (Kints: 2001: 33). The widespread custom of arranging marriages between young Muslims resident in Britain with partners from the place of origin contributes to the strong sense of ethnicity and perpetuates traditional Muslim practice and a sense of regional identity. This strong identity has enabled the individual groups to cope with the difficult experience of living as a minority in Britain, despite losing the support of laws in the country of origin, some of which are specifically designed to accommodate the Muslim way of life. Social traditional norms and values are maintained in

everyday life, in a close-knit community (Geaves, 1994:62-63), despite the non-Muslim influences of the surrounding society.

Among the South Asian community there is a triple identity, first as Muslims with their origins in a distant homeland such as Pakistan, second as British citizens and third as members of the universal *ummah*. There remains a strong identification with the original state and local community of origin that helps to perpetuate the defensive boundaries despite continued and increasing participation in the economic, business, professional and bureaucratic life of the country in which they live.

The Muslims in Britain speak a variety of tongues, both national and regional, to which they adhere. Even within the Pakistani community several mother tongues are spoken[2]. This helps to maintain the values and norms of the locality of origin. The process is reinforced at the mosque where preaching and teaching is usually done in the local dialect of the country of origin, though this is supplemented by some Arabic phrases. The transmission of local languages to a generation born and educated in Britain continues but is becoming problematic. Those born in the UK over recent years are more likely to be fluent and literate in English than in their mother tongue. There are growing indications that these British-born

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[2] Including regional variations of Punjabi, Urdu (the national language, mother tongue in only a few homes), Hinko and Pushto. (Kints, 2001: 34).

Muslims may eventually insist on English becoming the language in which Islamic beliefs and practice are taught and communicated (Geaves, 1994: 105).

2.4 Some Perceptions of Class and Prestige

In Britain the wider society tends to perceive 'a Muslim' as working class, as the economic position and location of dwellings of many Muslims in Britain has apparently changed little in the thirty or forty years since their grandparents or great grandparents immigrated here. Despite this, the move of the family from a peasant lifestyle in a developing country to Britain has, in the main, resulted in better education for the children and a higher standard of living. According to Kints (2001: 36-40) the majority is still concentrated in the semi-skilled and un-skilled sectors of manufacturing and service industries. However, an increasing number of young Muslims now go on to further education, including university. Muslims born in Britain, but of South Asian origin, are becoming more numerous in the professions, for instance, in teaching, law, medicine, business and journalism.

The original economic migrants tended to be male and to work in mills, factories and so on, sending money back home. Even today, money continues to be remitted. As the families arrived, small businesses were set up and they continue today. Typically they include groceries, *halal* butchers, clothing and fabric shops, taxi firms and, especially amongst the Bangladeshi community, restaurants and take-aways. In 'Asian' areas entire streets of such businesses now exist. Some of these businesses have now become chains, indicating the greater wealth of the families concerned. The various migrant groups, including the Muslims, are

gathered together in relatively small areas of particular towns and cities (Geaves, 1994: 70).

Within the 'Asian' Muslim community class position can be derived from several sources. Community leaders are given considerable prestige based on the status of their family in the country of origin, education, economic resources and success, Islamic scholarship, membership of mosque committees and the length of time the family has been in Britain. The mosque has become the highest focus of communal interest, because it is not only perceived to be the centre of religious worship and learning, but also the source of status and prestige within the community. The committees running the mosques are usually controlled by businessmen and the professional middle-class, where such candidates for membership are available (Werbner, 1991: 9).

During the third week of June, 2002, a conference took place in London on 'The West and The Muslim World: Cooperation or Confrontation'. This was organised by the Islamic Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (IESCO, the Islamic countries' equivalent of Unesco) and the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). In a speech at the conference, Mike O'Brien, a minister at the Foreign Office, said,

> *The UK has nearly two million Muslim citizens. It has [Muslim]*
> *members of parliament, members of the House of Lords, writers,*
> *sportsmen, diplomats, policemen, soldiers[3].*

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[3] Brian Whitaker in the Guardian newspaper, 24 June 2002.

Although within the traditional Muslim communities, perceptions of prestige and status continue to centre around the mosques, the appearance of British Muslims, mainly of South Asian origin, in prominent positions like those mentioned above, may contribute towards a changing perception of prestige within that community and a greater sense of engagement with the majority society. It may, in time, also cause the majority non-Muslim community to have changing perceptions of South Asian Muslims.

2.5   The Role of Mosques '1960s to 2002'

The increase in the number of mosques is linked to the immigration process. In the last four or five decades, while Britain had been witnessing the establishment of Muslim immigrants as settled communities, the arrival of the wives and families brought about a dramatic increase in religious practice and a new awareness of religious life. This is reflected in the increased number of mosques (Geaves, 1994:63). The mosques tend to function not only as places of worship. Most of them have a local character and some have a number of activities. They serve as centres to maintain and reinforce shared memories, values and goals located in the place of origin. It is while embodying a strong localised ethnic ambience that for the Muslims, especially those from the subcontinent, many mosques in Britain have become a 'symbolic representation of the land of Islam' (Joly, 1995: 75). There are more than 1000 mosques, most being small, some large and purpose-built, and many are located in terraced houses. The first mosque in Britain was the one founded in Woking in 1889 and it was an early centre for Islamic activity in Britain (Lewis, 1994: 12).

In Britain the mosques have often been an instrument of sectarianism[4] and a

forum for the power politics of the country of origin. Most of the mosques have

not responded positively to the challenge of modernity or come to terms with the

society in which their Muslim community now lives.

There are two pressing issues that the mosques have ignored: the provision of

facilities, services and activities for women and for the young people (Köse, 1996:

9). This has resulted in their difficulty in attracting young people and a disregard

of women's public participation in religious activities. Very few mosques have

made special provision for the attendance of women for prayers or other general

functions. The young people have also been ignored as the mosques rarely put on

any social or sporting activities, nor do they address the many problems

challenging young people in contemporary society. The mosque has become the

symbolic centre for religious-cultural awareness yet very often the *imam* himself

continues to be appointed from the place of origin and to preach in the local

language of the original country, being unable to speak English. The *imam* in

general has come to represent an ethnic identity and his religious function is seen

as a confirmation of the perceived bond between Islam, home-grown politics and

culture. Very often the community leaders, who make up the mosque committees

employing the *imam*, find that it is in their financial interest to promote traditional

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[4]Since 11 September 2001, there has been considerable coverage in UK newspapers and TV news
programmes, stating that some UK mosques have promoted terrorism, been linked to terrorists, or
harboured terrorists. This issue had not arisen in 2000 when the interviews for this study were
conducted. The sects referred to by Köse were such as the Deobandis, Tablighi Jama'at and the
'Barelwis' originating in the Indian subcontinent, together with some political parties, mainly in
Pakistan.

values (Raza, 1991: 39). Thus, they continue to employ *imams* who will not, and cannot, relate to or initiate a dialogue with the indigenous culture. In addition to their role as focus for the community and as prayer leader, they serve to defend ethnicity, as distinct from the universal message of Islam. Nevertheless, there is an emphasis on Islamic revival. Cultural assimilation is deplored as a corruption of the faith and inner wrangling and arguments regarding community politics, steadily undermine the Muslim community in Britain.

2.6 The Younger Generations

A serious split in attitude between generations is becoming endemic, and has been commented on for some time. Today, parents, one of whom may have grown up in Pakistan or Bangladesh, find it increasingly difficult to understand or control their children who were brought up and educated in Britain. The children can find it equally difficult fully to appreciate the beliefs and lifestyle of their parents. For the older generations who find themselves struggling to maintain their ethnic/religious identity as a minority group, their Islam is not so much based on the study of the Qur'an and *hadeeth*, as on the rituals, family traditions and culture that had been practised in their country of origin. It has been realised that increasing numbers of young Muslims in Britain reject the idea of full assimilation into the west's culture but, at the same time, they reject the ethnicity of their parents (Anwar, 1980: 112). This emerging trend that Anwar recorded has continued steadily to develop. There are also signs that the later generations are developing a religious awareness that by-passes regional considerations and moves towards an Islamic identity that is based on the universals of the faith. It

has become clear to increasing numbers, that it is not enough to be 'born a Muslim' and that religion has to be more than an accident of birth; that it has to be founded on knowledge and experience. This is a developing trend in the way British-born and educated Muslim children question their parents' outlook (Geaves, 1994: 89).

In a conversation between the author and a group of young Asian Muslim students in the University of Leeds (20.10.2000), the Asian Muslims argued that throughout the years there has been a change in the family structure, and that the younger generation have begun to be able to make more choices in their lives than previously. Although many continue to accept the system of arranged marriages, both Muslim boys and girls are demanding the right to refuse their parents' choice (which is a right in Islam) and many would ideally marry a partner born in Britain, rather than someone brought over from the country of origin. Many young Muslims claim that assimilation into the indigenous white culture, or the British way of life, is hard to do. Thus, it can be seen that the situation is not a straight choice between assimilation and being isolated. Younger South Asian Muslims are beginning to see that greater integration, while maintaining an ethnic and Islamic identity as not only desirable but also possible. Embracing Islam as a religious experience, rather than a cultural heritage, is providing increasing numbers of young Muslims from Muslim families with an alternative to the pressure to assimilate into British culture. On the other hand, to take on fully the cultural norms of either the indigenous culture or the minority ethnic culture does not appeal to them.

2.7 Reactions and Responses to Modernity

The issues facing the Muslim *ummah* in Britain are not unique. Similar issues of identity involving ethnicity and the practice and understanding of Islam affect all Muslims, especially in the daily lives of those dwelling as minorities in the west. Tariq Ramadan, under the auspices of the Islamic Foundation, Markfield, Leicester, tackled the issue on a Europe-wide scale in *To Be a European Muslim* (1999).

Many contemporary social scientists comment on the secularisation of western society. They argue that any hold that religion might continue to have over individuals will be transformed into forms of privatised belief, where religious belief becomes only a matter of individual conscience. Secularisation is a part of a 'globalisation' process in which there is increasing homogeneity with respect to modes of production and patterns of social relationships (Robertson, 1989: 69). The Islamic teaching is based on faith in the Oneness of God, and on the five pillars of Islam, and it has to be applied. Thus, a Muslim's life is bound by faith, and must be directed and controlled by rules that allow people to live together in peace. It is often assumed that, as modernisation sweeps across the world, traditional religion will lose its grip on culture. So there is clearly a question as to how a religion like Islam, which is based on conscience and justice and a revealed code of behaviour, can come to terms with an ethos which puts aside the past and exalts in (individualistic) diversity (Ahmed, 1992: 6).

Tariq Ramadan is representative of forward looking thinkers within the Muslim *ummah*, who recognise the problems and propose ways forward. He presents a

strong case for engaging with 'modernism', seen as an ideology emanating from western society, rather than turning one's back on it. Owing to the perceived clash of religious values with the ideology of modernism, Muslims as residents and citizens, albeit as a minority, see the need to provide themselves with all the means that will enable them to protect their identity. There is a vital need for Muslims in Britain and elsewhere, to deal with their environment and develop a dialectical relationship with it that will enable them to give and to receive from others (Ramadan, 1999: 214). However, it is clear that the concept of *ummah* is increasingly being recognised as of central importance in Islamic ideology and that it can be used as a challenge to the overridingly secular view of the world. It is as yet unclear whether it can in the future be envisaged as a powerful base from which to give and receive in a peaceful manner. It should be noted that in this study, discussion of Muslims' rejection of the overridingly secular aspects of western society, is not meant to ignore the critique of secularism made by Christian and other concerned groups.

2.8 Muslim Organisations in Britain

Ever since the 1960s, most Muslim institutions and organisations have tended to be local in nature and to serve a specific ethnic group within the Muslim community. In the early years, a number of small local Muslim advisory groups, whose major concern was to provide expertise regarding the immigration laws, significantly strengthened ties to extended families that originated in small local groups, mainly in Pakistan and Bangladesh (Shaw, 1988: 22). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the number and diversity of services offered increased, each

service representing small sub-groups within the community. In contrast to this,

any attempts to create an umbrella organisation to represent the Muslim

community on a national level were relatively unsuccessful (Werbner, 1987: 131).

In 1986, it was estimated that there were over 4,000 Muslim organisations, mostly

concerned with local welfare, education in the form of Islamic schools, *da'wah*

(mission) and other matters (Geaves, 1994: 66).

The tensions between the universal and the particular have created difficulties in

moves towards establishing the kind of national organisation based on the

universals of Islam that would be recognised and supported by all the Muslims in

the country. The values and traditions which many Muslims of immigrant

backgrounds still hold dear stand in the way.

There are some influential organisations that are known nationally, concerned

with humanitarian aid, education, and *da'wah* (mission). Others are large and

popular but only because they are a reflection of political parties and movements

in the country of origin (Raza, 1991: 49). Some of the most well-known

institutions are: The Islamic Foundation near Leicester, the Islamic Presentation

Centre in Birmingham, and the Islamic Cultural Centre also known as Regents

Park Mosque or the Central Mosque, in London.

The UK Islamic Mission is *da'wah* oriented and disseminates pamphlets and other

literature in English. It was established in August 1962, on the initiative of a

small group of Muslims who felt the need for a British based organisation, which

would convey the true spirit of Islam to the Western world[5]. There is, however, an emphasis on teaching 'true Islam' within the Muslim community. The UK Islamic Mission has twenty one branches, each located in a town or city with a sizeable South Asian Muslim population[6]. They have a lively interactive website addressing local and international social, political and doctrinal issues, with sections especially for women and for young people[7].

The Islamic Foundation was set up in 1966 by Muslims from the Indian subcontinent. Since then its activities have increased in scope and variety. It publishes Islamic literature in English on a range of subjects. It has expanded its academic programme and is now affiliated to the University of Portsmouth. It conducts conferences on its own site and offers residential study programmes including courses in Arabic. In the early 1990s it set up a New Muslims Project with the intention of providing support and contact for converts and which publishes a newsletter. It also organises Umra[8] and Hajj pilgrimages for new Muslims and recently has begun to offer summer holidays for Muslim families in Wales. It is one of the few organisations that actively engages with non-Muslim society and also has a programme for converts (Kints, 4 July 2002)[9].

The Islamic Presentation Centre in Birmingham is a *da'wah* centre, established in

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[5] http: //www.ukim.org/about.asp
[6] http://www.mcb.org.uk
[7] http://www.ukim.org/about.asp
[8] The lesser pilgrimage to Makkah performed at any time of the year.
[9] Verbal information at a meeting in Leeds with M. Kints of IPCI, Birmingham.

1984, inspired by the work of Ahmed Deedat who engaged with the non-Muslim

society through talks, debates, literature and video films. The Islamic Presentation

Centre in Birmingham was originally a branch of the Islamic Propagation Centre

International established by Ahmed Deedat in South Africa, but broke these ties in

1997, although contact with the ailing Sheikh Deedat continues. During the

Rushdie affair[10], Ahmed Deedat made a nationwide speaking tour on the issue

(Weller 1996: 46). This tour made a contribution to the Rushdie affair by both

highlighting and defusing the situation among rank and file members of the

Muslim community. It also raised the profile and reach of the Birmingham

centre, by a strategic placing of leaflets on seats at the talks, offering free Islamic

literature and copies of the Qur'an with English translation for £5.00. The Islamic

Presentation Centre now has a mailing list in the tens of thousands and an

associated retail outlet offering an extensive range of Islamic literature, video and

audiotapes, mainly in English. It continues to supply information to Muslims and

non-Muslims and to offer counselling services and contacts for converts to Islam.

IPCI Birmingham received many invitations to establish branches in other cities,

but instead offered encouragement, advice and materials for *da'wah* outlets set up

independently in several cities. Although there is no evidence, it is highly likely

that most converts to Islam have come across Islamic Presentation Centre

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[10] 1988 saw the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, a novel by Salman Rushdie, a British writer born in India in 1947. The novel was regarded as blasphemous by many Muslims, provoking riots abroad and disorder in Britain. The Rushdie Affair persuaded many British Muslims not only to attempt to find means for preventing the publication of blasphemous material in the future but also to enable the Muslim voice to be heard within the UK corridors of power on other issues.

materials, copies of them, or materials from *da'wah* outlets inspired by the centre, as they are disseminated throughout the country, especially, but not solely, among the Muslim communities (Kints, 4 July 2002)[11].

The *Tablighi Jama'at* and *Ahli Al Hadith* are international *da'wah* movements operating within different Muslim communities across the UK. They are concerned with reforming the belief and practice of existing Muslims rather than addressing non-Muslims.

Attempts have been made to establish institutions that can represent the interests of all the Muslims living in Britain at a national level. The Muslim Parliament, whose prime mover was Dr. Kalim Siddiqui, was first convened in 1990. Amongst its intentions were: to provide Muslims in Britain with a body that could speak on their behalf, to protect Muslim interests, and to have them taken into account in the legislation and social policy of the country. It is now virtually defunct[12] and was never recognised by ordinary Muslims as either representing or uniting them. On 25 May 1996, a meeting was held in Bradford to set up another national body to represent Muslims' interests in the corridors of power. This was the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). Representatives of national, regional and local Muslim organisations in Britain adopted a constitution and standing orders for the MCB. After the formal launch, 'all national, regional and local Muslim organisations including mosques, specialist bodies and institutions, youth and

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[11] Kints of IPCI at meeting in Leeds.

[12] Faisal Bodi, *Muslims are a multitude, not a lone voice*, Guardian, 22 October 2001.

women's organisations were invited to form The Muslim Council of Britain[13].

The MCB website gives a list of the organisations affiliated to the MCB in April

2002. There are twenty five 'national affiliates', seven 'regional affiliates' and

356 'local/specialist bodies'. It was noticed that some of these national and local

organisations to some extent duplicate each other. The website also shows that

twenty seven electronic newsletters are available and provides a diagram showing

how representatives of different bodies can serve as delegates in the general

assembly, the central working committee, specialist committees and so on. Like

the Muslim Parliament there is no evidence of a mechanism for elections to any of

these bodies, which, according to the website, are composed of delegates and

nominees.

One of the South Asian Muslim journalists is Faisal Bodi of the Guardian

newspaper. On 22 October 2001 he wrote an article under the headline, 'Muslims

are a multitude, not a lone voice'. He speaks about an anomaly that has arisen in

Britain as a result of the events of September 11:

> *[This anomaly] has been the catapulting of a hitherto little-*
> *known organisation, the Muslim Council of Britain, into the role*
> *of official community spokesman. Barely a news bulletin passes*
> *these days without reference to the MCB's take on the latest*
> *developments, giving the impression, as did the Muslim*
> *Parliament during the Rushdie affair, that it alone speaks for*
> *British Muslims. For those of us who eat, drink and sleep*
> *Muslim affairs, nothing could be further from the truth. It is not*
> *just that the MCB is unelected, as was the now defunct Muslim*
> *Parliament: most minority communities have no form of elected*
> *representation. Rather, it is the way the media are allowing one*

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[13] http://www.mcb.org.uk

organisation to monopolise the debate, drowning out other
voices eager to contribute.

If Faisal Bodi's opinion represents that of most Muslims in Britain, then it seems that they still do not have a national organisation that represents their views or interests. It should be pointed out, that as far as the converts to Islam in this study are concerned, the Muslim Council of Britain was little known before September 11 and most of them had already been Muslims for some time before 1996-7 when it was set up. Therefore it cannot be identified as part of the context in which their conversions took place.

There are now many Islamic sites on the internet, some of which are especially designed for converts[14]. A few humanitarian charities are recognised nationally by the Muslim community of which Muslim Aid, Islamic Relief and Interpal have the highest profile. These depend on voluntary contributions and send aid to needy Muslims and those hit by war and natural disaster in many different countries. Such organisations as the Muslim Women's Association and The Muslim Educational Trust must be mentioned, although their activities do not touch the lives of most Muslims in Britain. The latter type of organisation specialises in publishing books and papers about Islam and Muslims in Britain (Köse, 1996: 8-9).

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[14] http://www.Conversion.org/
http://www.Islamic-
http://www.islamic-foundation.org.uk/mihe/aboutmihe.html

Most of the organisations (that have attempted to represent or serve Muslims nationally) have failed to grasp the dynamics of western society or to gain the broad support of the Muslim community, because of the diversity of the Muslim community and because they could not develop a structure relevant to generations of Muslims born in Britain (Köse, 1996:10). Köse goes on to conclude that the Muslims of Britain are a religious and cultural entity, but are not yet an organised community. This would appear to remain true today.

2.9 Native British Muslims in Contemporary Society

In 1992 the number of British converts to Islam was estimated at between 3000 and 5000 (Nielsen, 1992: 43). Their numbers have been increasing since then but there are no statistics available to distinguish whether these estimates include the children of converts, who have themselves embraced Islam, or whether these numbers include British converts and/or their families who immigrated from the Caribbean or other places or were born in the UK. On 11 March 2002 a Channel 4 TV programme was shown entitled 'Mum, I'm a Muslim'. It focused on the daily lives of three British women converts to Islam, one of which was placed in the context of the ongoing international news relating to the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001. At the start of the programme it was stated that Islam was the fastest growing religion in the country, with converts numbering more than 5000. Any accurate number would be difficult to obtain as being a Muslim does not require that one should register with any office that could provide statistics.

According to McHugh (1990: 36) most converts came to know Islam through personal contact and this plays a great role in their conversion. Many women get

involved with Muslims and they turn to Islam through marriage. Other research,

like the present study, shows that women can become Muslims without marriage

being involved and that personal contact does not necessarily play a great role in

conversion.

2.9.1   Convert Organisations

From time to time, converts decide to start their own organisations to extend their

practice of Islam even though they believe that there should be no exclusive

groupings in Islam. Many converts are dynamic and liberal in their understanding

of the role of Islam in Britain (Raza, 1991: 90-98). Since none of the existing

organisations at the time took an interest in their needs and problems, in 1974

some converts in London, decided to set up the 'Association for British Muslims'.

The objectives of the association are to represent the interests of all Muslim

converts and to project a better understanding of Islam in Britain. The association

has received a lot of criticism, not least from other converts, on the basis that there

is no racial grouping in Islam and so they should not split off (Owen, 1991: 14).

Some high profile converts like Imam Siraj Wahhaj and Sheikh HamzaYusuf

from the United States, are gaining an increasing audience in Britain, amongst the

younger South Asian Muslims and the converts themselves, through conferences

and taped talks available from many *da'wah* outlets. Some British converts, the

most famous example of whom is Yusuf Islam (former pop singer Cat Stevens),

are very actively engaged in helping both the converts and the established Muslim

community. Yusuf Islam opened the Islamia Primary School and Comprehensive

School for girls, which has an Islamic curriculum fully integrated with the state

national curriculum (Al-Thaqafiah, 2000: 35). He has also started singing again, but within the Islamic context, and has made recordings and produced a book of prayers of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and tapes telling the Prophet's life story[15]. After the Rushdie affair a group of Muslims, including converts, thought that they must have political power and that they needed a political party in Britain to represent Muslims interests. In 1989 they established 'The Islamic Party of Britain'. The president was Daud Pidcock, an English convert, and the executive body of the party was composed mainly of converts. They believed that it would be years before the party could have a solid impact on British politics by receiving votes from the Muslim community (Evans, 1989: 11). This has proved to be the case. They continue to publish a newsletter but it is difficult to assess how influential the views expressed may be.

To conclude, some converts seem to be taking the lead on occasions in organisational matters and a few British and American converts have a high profile that is proving increasingly influential, especially amongst the younger Muslims. In general, however, the Muslim 'leaders' and 'spokespersons' acknowledged with varying degrees of enthusiasm by the Muslims themselves, but recognised by the government, official agencies and the media, are from the South Asian Muslim community. The immigrant Muslims brought in their religious leaders as well as community leaders. This tradition has continued and led them, since the mass immigration of the 1950s and 1960s, to consult less with

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[15] Audio cassette and booklet pack: *The life of the last Prophet*, narrated and produced by Yusuf Islam. Mountain of Light Productions, London 1995 and 1998.

converts over matters of concern to the Muslim community than they did earlier in the twentieth century, when immigrant Muslims were few in number. (Murghani, 1987: 46).

2.10 The *Da'wah* Approach in Britain

2.10.1 *Da'wah* by Example

Muslims believe in the continuity of the Message of Islam in terms of giving *da'wah* (invitation). Traditional Muslim communities in Britain have given a high priority to many movements for improving the practice of Islam within the established community, e.g. *Tablighi Jama'at*. There is a tendency to believe that for effective *da'wah*, they must preserve and reform their identity and that this can be achieved through a good example of morality set by individuals and families (Faruqi, 1986: 7-18). The Qur'an explains the way of giving *da'wah*,

﴿ ادع إلى سبيل ربك بالحكمة والموعظة الحسنة وجادلهم بالتي أحسن إن ربك هو أعلم
بمن ضل عن سبيله وهو أعلم بالمهتدين ﴾   (النحل:125)

Invite (all) to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious. For thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance. (Qur'an 16-125)

2.10.2 Active *Da'wah* to non-Muslims

Some Muslims prefer to work within a group which usually belongs to a specific organisation, perhaps disseminating leaflets, pamphlets, books, video and audiotapes. There is no national missionary institution in Britain to arrange missionary work to non-Muslims and much *da'wah* relies on books and magazines, some of which discuss Muslim-Christian relations, to bridge the gap

between the two faiths. An increasing number of publications, however, have recognised that Britain is now a post-Christian society so the focus is moving away from the Muslim/Christian debate to address materialism and scientific[16], social and political[17] issues. Additionally, there are other activities such as lectures, seminars and conferences which are sometimes organised in mosques but most usually by Islamic Societies based in higher education institutions. These have been an effective way of gathering people together and giving them *da'wah* (Raza, 1991: 99-102).

2.10.3 Responsive *Da'wah* to non-Muslims

Many Muslims feel that they should not force Islam on anybody and this is in accordance with the Qur'anic injunction, ' Let there be no compulsion in religion' (Surah 2:256). Most will only discuss Islam with a non-Muslim when asked a question. The Muslim may choose a one-to-one approach where he/she will have the full responsibility of giving the information, however it is universally accepted by Muslims, that God has not given power to the human being to convert anybody. This was even true for the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who could not convert his uncle whom he loved dearly (Ibn Hisham, 1996). One characteristic of responsive *da'wah* is that if Muslims by chance engage in conversation with non-Muslims, they may prefer to point out common grounds that Islam shares with other religions rather than claiming that Islam is superior to others. A

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[16] For instance the books of Harun Yahya, to be found in an increasing number of da'wah outlets and advertised on the internet, http: // www.harunyahya.org

[17] For instance the Muslim magazine 'Q News'.

significant number of Muslims in Britain, in fact, appear to regard the life-style

itself as the major vehicle for conveying the message of Islam to non-Muslims.

2.11 Problems with *Da'wah*

Murad (1996: 99) argued that those Muslims who give priority to missionary

work are inadequate in developing a programme. He said that one of the most

important issues and the central concern of the Islamic missionary is the way of

giving the information to the other. In his view it was clear that propagators need

to be capable people and fully acquainted with the modern techniques of

propagation, and that they should be able to suggest reasonable explanations and

solutions for the problems [of daily life]. Above all, he believed that they should

have a solid background in Islamic law (Murad, 1986:7-16). While the need for

excellence in *da'wah* cannot be denied, the attitude that only the experts can give

da'wah has been found among the South Asian community and it would be

interesting to find out how common views like those of Murad are and how far

they have decreased *da'wah* activity to non-Muslims in Britain.

The development of methodologies for missionary work has not been a priority in

Britain. One of the many reasons for this is that Muslims lose their sense of

priority in the way they present their faith and also in how they present themselves

as a minority within British society (Ramadan, 1999: 10). Additionally, they tend

to be ignorant of the basic values of the host society and have failed to develop a

language for *da'wah*, or to develop a suitable strategy for communication with

indigenous British people (Raza 1991: 100-104).

It may be worth commenting that Raza, Ramadan and Murad seem to have ignored the fact that indigenous British Muslims and other British Muslims with English as a mother tongue, such as the Caribbeans, are likely to be familiar with the basic values of the host society. It is reasonable to suggest that they are able to communicate quite successfully with indigenous British non-Muslims. Weller (1996: 292) mentions the distinction between 'common' and 'particular' cultures. As the younger South Asian Muslims increasingly engage with the host community while readjusting, but not losing, their ethnic and Islamic identities, and numbers of the host community continue to become Muslims, greater awareness of what the Muslims and non-Muslims have in common may develop. This may enable an improved dialogue with more 'give and take' between the two communities.

2.12   Summary

The imams of the mosques, other community leaders, organisations and the intellectuals of the Muslim communities in Britain have failed to provide them with an appropriate Islamic framework to fit their situation as minorities in a predominantly non-Muslim western culture. The defensive boundaries established to preserve the sense of identity, beliefs and customs of the places of origin remain in place. Younger members of the South Asian Muslim community who were also born here, are making efforts to come to terms with their presence in Britain by reassessing their concept of Islam as well as the extent to which they can engage with the host society. This could bring about a productive dialogue. Nevertheless, it is these defensive barriers and boundaries, together with an

unfamiliarity with the two cultures shown by established Muslims and converts alike, that will be seen later in this work, to have affected the conversion experiences of the converts in the present sample. The prevailing view of the established Muslim community that nobody can make another person into a Muslim and that presenting a good example is the best form of *da'wah*, is also seen to be reflected in the converts' pre-conversion perceptions and experiences. The South Asians' strong identification of ethnicity and traditional culture with Islam, also affected their relationship with the converts, as will be seen in Chapter VII.

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I shall review theoretical material dealing with aspects of spiritual change in people's lives, and the ways in which the dynamics of change and continuity are reconciled. I shall therefore examine traditional and modern definitions of conversion, undertake a review of contemporary conversion studies through the work of selected researchers, and consider some of the key themes, models and metaphors they employ. In a critical examination, the concept of 'conversion' will be rejected as a distinct and special category of religious transformation. To understand the process of conversion to Islam, I shall adopt instead a more inclusive working definition of the authentic and modern Islamic view which is to examine Islam as worship, and the concept of human nature or *fitrah*, which will encompass the totality of religious change and self-actualisation over the course of an individual's entire life.

3.2 Definitions of Conversion

The most straightforward and popular understanding of conversion is a change of religious identity and allegiance from one religion/belief (or sect) to another, or from a non-religious to a religious life.

> *A change in affiliation from one religion to another, or the*
> *transition from non-involvement to belief in a religion. It also*
> *designates a change involving a transformation and re-*
> *orientation affecting every aspect of a person's life, which can*
> *occur suddenly or gradually. (Goring, 1992: 118)*

The word 'conversion' suggests a process of inner personal change, but in traditional religious contexts such transformations are seen as wholly directed by

the divine.   The strategy of divine conversion is usually a calling or invitation to

which the individual may or may not respond or submit:

> *As there is one blood in the veins of all nations, and one breath*
> *in all nostrils, so there is one Divine Spirit brooding over a*
> *striving within all souls.   God has made all men with a capacity*
> *of conversion, with possibilities of response to the highest call.*
> *(Strachan, 1911: 104)*

Traditional definitions of conversion, similar to Strachan's above, emphasised

'returning home' to a state of relatedness to a God who is the initiator of the

processes involved.   Modern Christian theology is inclined towards a more

inclusive understanding, which acknowledges the social and psychological

aspects. Conversion entails a radical re-adjustment of thoughts and actions and an

entire personal transformation of the social structures in society (Walter, 1987:

234).

3.2.1   Traditional Conversion in Christianity

In his study of early Christianity and the Roman Empire, Nock (1933) offers a

definition of conversion in terms of orientation, in which individuals are clearly

active and self-aware of the processes of change involved:

> *By conversion we mean the re-orientation of the soul of an*
> *individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an*
> *earlier form of piety to another; a turning which implies a*
> *consciousness that a great change is involved and that the old*
> *was wrong and the new is right. (Nock 1933: 7)*

During the famous and dramatic conversion experience of Augustine in the

garden in Milan, it was stated by Augustine's own account that the 'hand of God'

was 'clearly present'. During his life and conversion, there were both passive and

active elements involved in the process of his transformation. His own work and

efforts took him to a crucial and critical point where:

> *His quest ran its way to an intellectual conviction, and this*
> *conviction gradually acquired an emotional strength sufficient*
> *to bring him to decisive action. (Nock, 1933: 266)*

Augustine's comments on his own conversion reveal a belief that both human free

will and the will of God were involved:

> *Augustine had arrived at a decision, following an insight gained*
> *from Paul, that although conversion is indeed a matter of human*
> *will the fact and the time of conversion are purely matters of the*
> *grace of God. (McGuckin, 1986: 322)*

3.3   Conversion: Theoretical Perspectives

There has been a great deal of research done over the past three decades,

especially in the USA, into the accepted nature of religion and the patterns of

recruitment and conversion.   This work increases after the emergence of many

New Religious Movements (NRMs).   Many members of a broad range of

academic disciplines have shown interest in this subject including anthropologists,

historians, psychologists, sociologists, theologians and those working in the field

of psychotherapy.   Here follows a review of the work of selected researchers in

the field: John Lofland; Lewis Rambo; James Richardson; and Chana Ullman.

3.3.1   John Lofland

The researchers, John Lofland et al, were among the first to put forward a model

of conversion which took into account their studies into the millenarian cult which

was then known as 'Divine Precepts' (DP). They suggested a working definition

of conversion which was intended to clarify the meaning of the term conversion

that had been used inconsistently by Christian religious writers:

> *All men and all human groups have ultimate values, a world-*
> *view, or a perspective furnishing them with a more or less*
> *orderly and comprehensible picture of the world. When a*
> *person gives up one such perspective or ordered view of the*
> *world for another we refer to this process as conversion.*
> *(Lofland and Stark, 1965: 862)*

In this relatively early account, the language used identifies the convert as an

'active agent' who gives up one perspective for a different one without external

intervention.

3.3.1.1 Conversion Motifs

Another approach to the varieties of conversion process is delineated by Lofland

and Skonovd (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981: 373-385). They argue that their

theory, as applied to conversion to the DP cult, could just as easily refer to other

conversions. They postulate that for conversion to take place there are six motifs.

The first is *intellectual*, when a person seeks for knowledge about religious or

spiritual issues via books, lectures, or other media, which do not involve social

contact. Others can see conversion as *mystical*, which is always by sudden

conversion, and can involve visions, voices or other experiences. The third motif

is *experimental* conversion. This comes with religious freedom and a multiplicity

of cultures, where there are many groups to encourage this mode by welcoming

the person or the group and let them try the theology. The fourth motif is the

affectional and was first identified by Lofland and Stark in '*Becoming* a *world-*

saver' (1965: 862-875). It is an experience with a person being loved and looked

after by a group and its leaders. The fifth motif is *Revivalism*. Lofland and

Skonovd (1981) wrote that this type of conversion involves conformity to induce behaviour. For instance, revival meetings feature emotionally powerful music and preaching (Ownby, 1990: 144-164). The sixth conversion motif is the *coercive*. Lofland and Skonovd (1981, 373-385) believe that this type of conversion is rare, because it is a kind of brainwashing and involves very high pressure on a person so that he/she cannot resist the group's ideology and life-style. The person will be under fear and physical and psychological terror so that the coercive group can have great control over the individual's life

Clearly, Lofland and Skonovd's motifs are important because they explain the different experiences, themes and goals of different types of conversion. The *intellectual* and *mystical* motifs can be applied to the lone convert or a convert who does not encounter a proselytising group. The *experimental, affectional, revivalism* and *coercive* motifs on the other hand, depend on group dynamics and proselytising.

This group of researchers also made a distinction between two styles of conditions or factors, the first being the specific conditions leading to the particular individual's eventual conversion. It was noticed that a group of potential converts go on to pass through a series of stages, and at each stage a small number of the group would give up and the rest would continue with the conversion. The researchers also made a distinction between 'verbal converts' and other members of the group who were regarded as 'total converts', both of whom were sincere and committed, but the 'total' convert displayed additional commitment through active involvement in the religion. They noticed that the difference between

'verbal' and 'total' converts involved the inclusion of a final or additional stage in the conversion process.

Lofland and Skonovd (1981) united to develop work that would give a concept of 'conversion motifs' that derived from the observation that conversion testimonies did not conform to a single category. They said that the power of reasoning, (mystical, and experimental), revivalism and the use of force were among the experiences reported by converts. Another very important point that was put forward was the fact that conversion itself is not a single phenomenon. The talents and experiences of the converts themselves were seen to be the best way to characterise the actual process of conversion, as opposed to the nature or theology of the group that they convert to.

3.3.2   Lewis R Rambo

For decades Lewis Rambo has researched in psychology and sociology to better understand the nature of conversion. He has also conducted numerous interviews with people who have converted to other religions. From his research and the experience of his own sect allegiance in the 'Church of Christ', Rambo suggests that authentic conversion is as follows:

> *I see 'genuine' conversion as a total transformation of the*
> *person by the power of God. While this transformation occurs*
> *through the mediation of social, cultural, personal and religious*
> *forces, I believe that conversion needs to be radical, striking to*
> *the root of the human predicament. (Rambo, 1993: 2)*

The contribution of Lewis Rambo to this field of research has been to try to use all the literature available on this topic, especially that from the last three decades,

and put it all together into one volume and design a single model for analysis that

allows for different disciplines to be employed at different stages of a conversion

process. It is important to note that Rambo stated that he had not had any

conversion experience himself.

The non-judgmental and unbiased nature of Rambo's work, and the fact that he

puts aside his own religious perspectives, make his work a very useful tool when

studying the topic of conversion[1]. The model that he puts forward is intended to

be descriptive, while at the same time he warns that conversion studies 'are

always made from values-orientation'. His suggestion is that scholars must take

into account the individual circumstances and personal criteria of the

individual/group being studied, i.e. taking into account their personal biases, and

that therefore no work can be solely descriptive. Rambo seems to follow this

principle and gave an account of his own religious background and scholarly

career before he went on to respond to the question of what conversion meant to

him (Machalek, 1994: 142). His model puts forward the concept of there being

three 'dimensions' of conversion (tradition, transformation and transcendence),

which he bases on the fields of study and broad approaches that are typical of

each 'dimension'. It can be shown that people like anthropologists, historians and

sociologists tend to view conversion within the changing social and cultural

context of 'tradition'. With emphasis on their own field of study psychologists

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[1] For a critical review of Rambo's work, see Machalek *Review of Lewis R. Rambo, Understanding Religious Conversion* 1994.

and psychoanalysts focus on the inner processes of personal transformation, while
theologians and religious studies scholars are more concerned with
'transcendence' (Rambo, 1987: 73-4). To analyse conversions according to only
one or two fields of study cannot encompass the three dimensions of conversion
that Rambo postulates. His stage model, however, allows for conversion to be
analysed using the insights of different fields of study when looking at different
stages of the conversion process. The perspectives of one discipline do not
prevent employing the perspectives of another. Thus, as Rambo says, (1993:16),
instead of the conclusions of the blind men describing an elephant, we may have
the effect of an electric light being switched on so that we can see the whole
picture[2].

The measure of conversion, within Rambo's theory, is that its consequences,
which relate to 'inner spirituality', may only be apparent indirectly through
changes in observable behaviour or the convert's own subjective reports. The
different ways in which converts put across their conversion experiences is a
factor that makes the categorising of different conversion experiences a difficult
task. It is these different conversion experiences that define whether the
conversion itself is an event or process, which has secure and permanent
outcomes, or whether it is a part of a greater and continuing process of growth and
transformation. Rambo himself states that:

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[2] *The Blind Men and The Elephant* is a traditional Indian folk tale. Each blind man examined with
his hands part of an elephant. Each made the assumption that the part he had analysed was the
entire animal. Thus all their definitions of an elephant were incomplete, contradictory and
misleading

> *I would argue that people who convert and remain the same are*
> *not really on a spiritual path of transformation. Change is*
> *persistent and important and continuous, and most religious*
> *traditions expect and foster change by providing ideology and*
> *techniques for the ongoing development and readiness of their*
> *members. (Rambo, 1993: 163)*

Although his model is intended to be applied flexibly, there remains within it the assumption that conversion is essentially a series of stages. It could imply a serial change from religion to religion as the individual progresses on their spiritual path of transformation.   This is especially possible in the West where the following conditions prevail: freedom of conscience is enshrined in or permitted by law; literature and other information on a wide range of different belief systems is available; and the relative wealth of the inhabitants of these states provides sufficient leisure to allow them to investigate and come into contact with differing belief systems.

3.3.2.1   Application of the Stage Model

Rambo's stage model will be used later in this thesis in conjunction with the data analysis. It presents conversion as a process of change over time. A stage may be seen as a particular element or period during that process of change, and each stage has a cluster of themes, patterns, and processes to give deeper understanding of the person to whom the conversion might have happened (Rambo, 1993: 16-17).

The model can be applied to a deepening awareness or formal progress from one stage to another within a specific belief system or to entering a new belief system. It states that an individual must pass through these stages in order to get from one

spiritual location to another one, that has a whole new range of different perspectives and possibilities. While there are some individuals who may fit this model, there is no real evidence that it can be applied to every possible conversion scenario. However, Rambo does state that a new paradigm is needed for the experience of religious change in the modern world and his stage model has the potential to provide new and more holistic analyses of the conversion process, including that to Islam, the topic of this study.

3.3.2.2 Type of Conversion

Lewis Rambo (1993: 12-13) raises the case of how far someone has to go socially and culturally in order to be considered a convert. He argues that one way to better understand the nature of conversion is by describing various types and characteristics of conversion. These types[3] are as follows: *Defection,* when someone rejects his/her religious tradition or its beliefs. This change does not involve acceptance of a new religion. It is only a dynamic of loss of faith or the leaving of a group and constitutes an important form of change. *Intensification* is the commitment to a faith, and the new commitment becomes a central focus in the person's or the group's life. *Affiliation* is the movement of an individual or a group from no or minimal religious commitment to full involvement with an institution or community of faith. *Institutional transition* is the change of a group or individual from one community to another within a major tradition, for

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[3] For more reading on types of conversion see, Bailey Gillespie in *The Dynamics of Religious Conversion* 1991.

example from Baptist to Presbyterian within Christianity. Finally *Tradition*

transition is when a group or individual changes from one major religious

tradition to another. It is usually a complex process, and such movement has

occurred throughout history, for example, Christianity and Islam have initiated

and benefitted from substantial tradition transition.

3.3.3 James T Richardson

Richardson's article, *The Active vs. Passive Convert* (1985: 163-179) explores the

issue of contrasting references to the idea of the 'passive' and 'active' conversion

in the modern context:

> *Converts to a new religion are active human beings seeking*
> *meaning and appropriate life-styles. Rational decisions are*
> *being made through which self-affirmation is occurring. They*
> *are involved in an active searching that quite often includes*
> *serious negotiations with a group concerning required beliefs*
> *and behaviours. (Richardson, 1985: 107-8)*

Conversion to new religious movements (NRMs) is seldom a once-in-a-lifetime

event. It is better characterised as a series of affiliations and disaffiliations which

comprise a 'conversion career'. Many young people are taking advantage of the

many opportunities in our pluralistic society, trying out serial alternatives in life-

styles and beliefs (Richardson, 1985: 108). Richardson observes that modern

Western religious thought often involves the construction of personalised

religious identities from a mixture of sources and traditions. Individuals continue

to confuse attempts to define conversion in terms of membership of one particular

belief group, by claiming a sense of uninterrupted connection with this modern

mixture of beliefs.

It also challenges the concept of 'alignment' and calls for a model which focuses mostly on the individual and the processes that they undergo, and then to a lesser degree on the relationship between the individual and the new-found tradition or group. In this situation, where an individual may have a belief in a mixture of several belief systems, the spiritual journey becomes a powerful device for the characterisation of modern religious lives (Richardson, 1985b: 104-121).

Sometimes this journey will be relatively straightforward and the ultimate goal will be clear, and at other times it will be uncertain. Progress can sometimes be made, and at other times the individual might find themselves getting lost and going around in circles, or even backwards. However, whatever the specific nature of the journey that an individual makes, there will always be a sense of continuing the mission for a sense of 'ultimate meaning' (Richardson, 1989: 211-238).

3.3.4 Chana Ullman

Ullman (1982: 189-192, and 1988: 312-322) studied forty converts from various groups, ten converts to Orthodox Judaism, ten Roman Catholic converts, ten Hare Krishnas, ten Bahais, and a group of thirty people who served as a matched control group. Ullman's research compared and contrasted factors such as the amount of trauma or family conflict in the converts' lives during childhood and adolescence and their degree of interest in religious groups. Ullman found that converts characterised their childhood as troubled more often than non-converts. They reported specific disturbing or traumatic events, experiencing early parental divorce or death, or witnessing a parent's attempt at suicide, violent fights, or

recurrent mental breakdowns of parents. Although Ullman initially theorised that the major motivation for conversion was the need for cognitive meaning, she found, in fact, that the major issues motivating the forty converts were emotional, involving problematic relationships with their father, unhappy childhood, and a past history of disrupted, distorted personal relationships (Ullman, 1989: 11-16).

3.4   General Understanding

We have now reviewed some general theories, issues and debates concerning the nature and study of conversion as it relates to modern western religious lives. There are alternative traditional models in the lives of historical Christian figures including, for example, the concept of conversion as the culmination of an active spiritual quest.

The traditional western meaning of 'conversion' itself provides an insight into a fundamental reference not to 'change', but to 'returning'. A more modern definition meaning of 'conversion' is 'an act or an instance of converting or the process of being converted, especially in belief or religion'[4]. This meaning clearly refers to 'change' rather than 'return'.

Lofland and Skonovd's motifs and Rambo's model are relevant to the present study because they can be used to analyse the widely different experiences, themes and goals of different types of conversion. My understanding of conversion is as a wide category of transformation in which the convert is at times

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[4] Concise Oxford Dictionary, Ninth Edition.

both active subject and passive object of a range of processes of change. This is

not a specific category of changes or religious experiences in its own right, but

incorporates an array of transforming experiences, which will be unique to the

individual. The respondents in this study are 'converts' in this wider sense, and I

employ the concept, regardless of whether they identify themselves or others view

them within the narrower sense.

To understand the nature of conversion to Islam itself it is necessary to review the

literature on conversion to Islam in contemporary western studies and in the work

of classically educated Islamic scholars.

3.5 Reviewing Western literature on Conversion to Islam

There is a small but growing body of work on the Islamic communities in

America and Europe and specifically in Britain (Hussain, 1999: 221). One thinks

of edited collections such as, in the United States, Richard Bulliet *Islam: The*

View from the Edge (1994) or Barbara Daly Metcalf (Ed) *Making Muslim Space*

in North America and Europe (1996), and Gilles Kepel, *Allah in the West: Islamic*

Movements in America and Europe (1997). In Britain, Philip Lewis, *Islamic*

Britain (1994), Danielle Joly, *Britannia's Crescent: Making a Place for Muslims*

in British Society (1995), or The Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: Its Features*

and Dangers (1997). But the topic of conversion to Islam has been very little

explored and Muslim literature itself is singularly poor in such records compared

to the importance of conversion accounts in the literature of the Christian Church.

Two prominent studies of conversion to Islam are: in America, Larry Poston,

Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam (1992), and in Britain, Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (1996).

Although interest in the subject of conversion to Islam has grown in recent years, few studies of conversion to Islam emphasise individuals. Some of these studies are informed by sociological or psychological categories, but most focus on Islamisation, in other words, the creation of social, cultural, religious, and political environments in which individuals, families, communities, and societies flourish as Islamic (Rambo, 1999: 268). Two of the most detailed 'western' works on conversion to Islam are *The Road to Mecca* by Muhammad Asad (1954, republished in 1998), and *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* by Richard Bulliet (1983). But neither of these authors offers a theory for conversion to Islam. Despite their obvious differences both works can be categorised as embodying the western tradition of the 'conversion narrative'. Recent studies of a social scientific, especially sociological, orientation have cast doubt on the usefulness of conversion accounts for informing us of the actual process involved in a conversion experience (Hermansen, 1999: 57). The theory may be proposed that since Muslims do not emphasise supernatural phenomena in connection with conversion (as does Christianity), historians of Islam considered the experience of conversion to be normative and therefore not necessary to report (Poston, 1992: 158).

Into this sparse literature, Ali Köse's research (1996) has introduced something new. He critically examines the usefulness of psychological and sociological

theories of conversion and thus makes an important contribution to the existing literature on this topic. Therefore, it is necessary to look at Köse's work in some detail.

3.5.1   Ali Köse's Work on Conversion to Islam

The major objective of Köse's work was 'to record the conversion experiences of 70 native British converts to Islam and provide, to a certain extent, the reasons underlying them'. He endeavoured to understand the psychological and sociological roots of their conversion experience. His interviews took place in 1990-91 (Köse, 1996:2). Despite his thorough analysis, Köse was unable to find a reason for conversion that was common to all his sample of converts, either in his final analysis (189-194), or in the converts' own assessment of 'the most motivating factor' in their conversion (109)[5].

Among the Muslims that Köse interviewed, 23 (32.8%) became involved with Islamic organisations during their conversion process. None of the rest of his sample converted as a direct result of missionary activity or *da'wah*. In order to structure his research, Ali Köse studied various areas in the life of the converts that he interviewed. These areas included the religion of upbringing, religious affiliation before conversion, socio-demographic factors and emotional and cognitive concerns. He identified certain elements in the experiences of his

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[5] Brotherhood, community and friendliness (10%), Witnessing life of a Muslim and attraction to the culture(10%), Religious doctrines and teachings (27%), Moral ethical standards, social matters and political ideology (27%), Spiritual, mystical aspect, or inexplicable religious experience (26%).

sample that appeared to relate to their subsequent conversions, confirming some

findings of previous research on the psychology and sociology of conversion.

Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts by Ali Köse is a seminal

work and in its subject matter very close to the present study. It seemed that a

series of factors or elements had been identified, but no reason for the

conversions. The aim of the current study was to find not only how some British

people come to embrace Islam, but also a reason for this. Some of the researchers

mentioned earlier had identified interaction with a proselytising group as a key

factor, but Ali Köse had not found this to be common to all his sample, nor was it

common to the current sample. Nevertheless Köse's findings were valuable and

relevant.

In their reviews, researchers, while commending his work, made certain

criticisms. Hussain (1999: 221-223), pointed out that when Köse described the

backgrounds of his subjects, their childhood experiences, adolescence and

conversion, he sought to situate the experiences of his subjects within the

literature on psychology of religious conversion, but that many of the sources and

theories he used were outdated. He said that the work was not fully situated

within the literature on conversion to Islam. When describing the post-conversion

experiences there was a focus on the maintenance of their new Islamic identities.

Hussain felt that Köse should have raised the point that 'Converting to Islam does

not necessarily mean excluding being English or British'. Hussain identified this

phenomenon of a British Islam as a subject worthy of much more study.

Zebiri (1997: 566-567) found Köse's knowledge of the previous literature on conversion theory to be good, but that the framework of the theory used was often too complex in view of the sample being studied, and the fact that none of the old literature is empirically based. Zebiri felt that this was why the author found they only provided limited support for his theory.

Nauta (1998: 185-186) commented that although this study was about conversion to Islam, the attractiveness of Islam was not reported in detail and that the substantive appeal of Islam was only mentioned in caricature. For most of the converts, the clear and explicit values as exposed in constant practice seemed to form the main reason for conversion from a fragmented, ambiguous, individualistic existence to a haven of order, compassion, and community. No disappointment in the new faith was ever mentioned.

McLoughlin (1998: 401) noted that Köse did not give any answers to the question he was exploring in his work. He also pointed out that if the current small numbers of native British embracing Islam cannot be explained by the activities of *da'wah* organisations, then there remained the question of how such conversions are to be understood.

As regards the present thesis, Köse's work is valuable because he presents a detailed picture of conversion to Islam and it is a ground-breaking study in that the conversions took place in Britain. His work appears to prove that western psychology and sociology alone are inadequate for analysing or explaining the phenomenon of conversion to Islam. This paved the way for this writer to employ aspects of Islamic psychology to explain a phenomenon that she too found could

not be adequately analysed or explained using western disciplines alone. Within

the western approach Köse's work was constricted by the limitations of the two

disciplines he worked within. I too recognised the problem of limiting the

approach to one or two western disciplines and it was for this reason that I

employed the holistic stage model of Lewis Rambo that enabled a far broader and

more humanistic analysis. With the narrower approach of western psychology and

sociology Köse tended to find that his convert sample had experienced personal

psychological and social problems that were significant factors in the conversions,

whereas in the current sample a range of other factors seemed more significant. In

the current thesis, the broader perspective of Rambo's framework, together with

the perspective of Islamic psychology, has made possible a more encompassing

and balanced analysis that can, in a new and perhaps more satisfactory way

account for how the conversions came about.

It is now time to look at Islamic literature on the subject, to give a deeper

understanding of the nature of conversion to Islam.

3.6   Islamic literature on Conversion to Islam

In reviewing literature that has been produced by today's classically educated

Islamic scholars that might relate to conversion to Islam, it has been found that

most of the writers are mainly concerned with describing Islam from a perspective

that presupposes prior knowledge of Islam on the part of a reader. The writer is

often attempting to address issues of detail that arise in such a context and which

bear little relevance to the conversion process. Other authors are attempting to

recommend Islam in a somewhat rhapsodic tone, without first relating their work

to the basics of the religion e.g. Al-Tantawi (1994). Since none of the classical or modern Islamic literature has yielded a theory of conversion to Islam as such, works relating to psychology from the Islamic perspective have been reviewed. This will assist in the analysis of the conversion process as experienced and reported by the sample of converts to Islam in the present study. The selected material ranges from early sources such as the Qur'an, hadeeth, classic historians, classic and modern scholars of Islam, to the western educated psychologists, Rashid Skinner and Yasien Mohamed.

The pivot of the Islamic faith is the principle of *tawheed* and literature on this will be referred to first, especially as the converts in the current sample presented it as an important element in their conversion process.

3.6.1 *Tawheed*: the Pivot of Islam

Islam is based on the belief in one God (*tawheed*) and one humanity. As Nasr (1981:9-10) states, the unitary perspective of Islam is rooted in the metaphysical principle of *tawheed* in which all aspects of life are within the power of Allah. According to Qutb (1979:3918), *tawheed* is an expression of the unique perception of Islam, that faith in Allah as Lord of the Universe and Lord of all Dominions is an affair of the heart: a concept which one imibibes in the core of oneself. To the Muslims Allah is Creator and Sustainer of the universe, Who is similar to nothing and nothing is comparable to Him. Islam rejects characterising God in any human form or depicting Him as favouring certain individuals or nations on the basis of wealth, power or race. He created human beings as equals.

They may distinguish themselves and obtain His favour through virtue and piety alone.

3.6.2 The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

Prophet Muhammad is a well-attested historical figure, responsible for the original recitation and promulgation of The Holy Qur'an, on which Islam is based. As a prophet, it was his mission to invite people to Islam, and so it has been considered suitable to quote here a *hadeeth* (saying) of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), to be found in the *sahih* hadeeth collection of Imam Al-Bukhari (died 256 AH / 870 CE). We will present a simple explanation of this definition of Islam, with a few additional details added from named sources.

3.6.3 The Definition of Islam According to Prophet Muhammad

This well-known and *sahih hadeeth*, was narrated by Abu Huraira (Sahih al-Bukhari, 1996: 6.300). It sums up what Islam is about. *Iman* may be described as the essentials of personal faith. *Islam* as defined by the prophet (PBUH) links personal faith to the socio/religious practices that bind the Muslim *ummah* together. *Ihsan* describes the extent of a truly devout Muslim's commitment to Allah.

> *One day while Allah's Apostle was sitting with the people, a man came to him walking and said, "O Allah's Apostle, what is belief (iman)?"*
>
> *The Prophet said, "Iman is to believe in Allah, His Angels, His Books, His Apostles, and the meeting with Him, and to believe in the Resurrection." The man asked; "O Allah's Apostle, what is Islam?"*
>
> *The Prophet replied, "Islam is to worship Allah and not worship anything besides Him, to offer prayers perfectly, to pay the (compulsory) charity, (i.e. zakat), and to fast the month of*

*Ramadhan." The man again asked, "O Allah's Apostle, what is
ihsan? (i.e. perfection or benevolence)?"*

*The Prophet said, "Ihsan is to worship Allah as if you see Him,
and if you do not achieve this state of devotion, then (take it for
granted that) Allah sees you." The man further asked, "O
Allah's Apostle, when will the Hour (Day of Judgement) be
established?"*

*The Prophet replied, "The one who is asked about it does not
know more than the questioner does."*

Thus, Islam is based on the recognition of the unity of God (*tawheed*) and the
unity of humanity (as promulgated in The Qur'an and the *sunnah* (example) of the
Prophet Muhammad). The practice of Islam is based on 'The Five Pillars'. The
first of the Five Pillars is sincere adherence to the concept of and devotion to One
God, '*tawheed*'. This incorporates obedience to the Prophet Muhammad who
brought the message of *tawheed* through the Qur'an. The other four pillars viz.
formal worship, formal charity, the Ramadhan fast and Hajj are called ' The
Duties' – *ibadat* (Al- Tantawi, 1994:25).

3.6.4   The Meaning of *sharia*

The *sharia* or 'essential principles of behaviour' is contained in the books
revealed by God. In a given society a new book updates the preceding book.
The Holy Qu'ran is the last of these books and is hence for the whole of
humanity. From the Islamic point of view, all the books and scriptures that
preceded it became either altered or were lost and forgotten. The Holy Qur'an has
remained intact and safe from distortion and loss. The final prophet is
Muhammad, an Arab of the *Qureish* tribe descended from Abraham's son Ismail.
(Al-Ashqer, 2001,14-20).

3.6.5 Entry to Islam: Declaration of Faith (*shahadah*)

In order to submit to Allah and be accepted in the fold of Islam, one must declare one's faith in God as Lord and to accept the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the final prophet and messenger of God. The two statements of submission to Allah are enshrined in the double declaration of faith, 'I bear witness that there is no God except Allah and I bear witness that Muhammad is the prophet of Allah'. The moment when a person sincerely pronounces this statement of faith in front of witnesses marks the formal entry into the community of Muslims, and the intention to perform all the duties enjoined by the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad's '*sunnah*' or example (Rashid, 1996: 27).

It is usual but not obligatory for people to take on an overtly 'Islamic' name on becoming Muslim. This practice dates back to the time of the Prophet who would change people's names if they clearly reflected unacceptable pre-Islamic beliefs or practices (Dutton, 1999: 156).

3.7 Conversion as 'Submission' in the Qur'an

There is no word in Arabic for 'conversion', but there is the idea of 'becoming a Muslim', for which the verb *aslama* (literally, 'to submit') is used. It is from this verb that the word 'Muslim' is derived. Grammatically it is the active participle meaning 'one who submits, a submitter' (Ibn Abbad [died 385 AH / 992 CE], 1994: 332). So 'Islam', which is the verbal noun–equivalent to the gerund in English, means 'submission'. Thus, it could be said that to understand conversion to Islam, one need go no further than understanding the name 'Islam' itself. Since the word Islam is, grammatically speaking, a verbal noun, it has a distinct verbal

force behind it. Thus 'Islam' is not simply the name of a religion in the way that,

for example, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism are, but actually denotes an

action– in this case predominantly of the heart, although also of the limbs – that

should be the hallmark of the religion, namely, 'submission'. It is in this way

that the word Islam and its associated forms are used in the Qur'an. Beyond this

'verbal' or active quality of the word Islam, the first point to note about the

Qur'anic usage of the term is that the act of submission is associated with all the

prophets and not just the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Notably, Abraham is

associated with submission / Islam on many occasions. He was ordered by God to

'submit':

﴿ إِذ قال له ربه أسلم قال أسلمت لرب العالمين ﴾   (البقرة:131)

Behold! his Lord said to him: submit (the will to me):" He said. "I submit
(my will) to the Lord and Cherisher of the Universe. (Qur'an, 2:131)

The Qur'an says (22: 78):

﴿ وجاهدوا في الله حق جهاده هو اجتباكم وما جعل عليكم في الدين من حرج مّلة أبيكم إبراهيم هو
سمّاكم المسلمين من قبل وفي هذا ليكون الرسول شهيداً عليكم وتكونوا شهداء على الناس فأقيموا
الصلاة وءاتوا الزكاة واعتصموا بالله هو مولاكم فنعم المولى ونعم النصير﴾   (الحج:78)

And strive in His cause as ye ought to strive, (with sincerity and
under discipline). He has chosen you, and has imposed no
difficulties on you in religion; it is the religion of your father
Abraham. It is He who has named you Muslims, both before
and in this (Revelation); that the Messenger may be a witness
for you, and ye be establish regular Prayer, give zakat and hold
fast to Allah! He is your Protector-the best to protect and the
Best to help!. (Qur'an, 22:78)

These references make clear that 'becoming a Muslim' is not simply the

acceptance of any one particular Prophet's practice. Rather, the word represents

that worship of and obedience to the Divine that is exemplified in the lives of all

of the prophets, including Noah, through Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad

(PBUH). Thus Islam is, to use the Qur'anic idiom, that one submits oneself:

﴿ بلى من أسلم وجهه لله وهو محسنٌ فله أجرُهُ عند ربّهِ ولا خوفٌ عليهم ولا هم يحزنون ﴾ (البقرة:112)

> *Nay,-whoever submits His whole self to Allah and is a doer of*
> *good, he will get his reward with his Lord. On such shall be no*
> *fear, nor shall they grieve.* (Qur'an, 2: 112)

Thus to take on Islam, to 'become a Muslim', is in essence to take on the ancient,

Abrahamic way of worship, albeit given the specific detailed requirements

reflected in the outward practice of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Dutton,

1999: 151-152).

In describing submission to Allah, Murad (1996: 119-120) said that the believer is

always anxious in case God should punish him, here or in the hereafter. He

therefore surrenders himself to Him and serves Him with great humility.

3.7.1   Islam and Violence

The claim has often been made that Islam was spread by force, but in the Muslim

sources it is forbidden for someone to force another to become a Muslim;

﴿ لآ إِكراه في الدين قد تبين الرشد من الغيّ فمن يكفر بالطاغوت ويؤمن بالله فقد استمسك
بالعروة الوثقى لآ انفصام لها والله سميعٌ عليم ﴾ (البقرة:256)

> *Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear*
> *from Error: whoever rejects Tagut and believes in Allah hath*
> *grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And*
> *Allah heareth and knoweth all things.* (Qur'an, 2:256)

Before the Emigration (*hijra*) (622 CE) of the Prophet from Makkah to Madinah,

people became Muslim through strong individual conviction of the truth of the

Prophet's message (PBUH) despite the ensuing problems in terms of rejection and persecution by the rest of society. This peaceful forbearance and witness previously in their midst contributed to almost the entire population of Makkah accepting Islam at the time of the peaceful 'Conquest' of Makkah in the year AH 8/630CE when the Prophet entered the city at the head of a large armed force. There is no record of any 'forced' conversion – indeed, there was practically no blood spilt during the whole enterprise (Ibn Hisham [died 218 AH / 833 CE], 1996: 46-49).

Nevertheless, it is clear that there was considerable military activity associated with the spread of Islam. The people of the conquered territories were not forced to become Muslims at the time of the Prophet (PBUH), nor in the time of the rightly-guided caliphs immediately after him.

The majority of the inhabitants of the 'heartland' areas - Syria, Iraq and Egypt, outside Arabia - did not become Muslim until many decades, even centuries, after the conquests. It was not until the fourth century AH (11th century CE) that over 80 per cent of the people had become Muslim in Iran, and the same seems to apply to other areas. There are in fact sizeable Christian and Jewish minorities both within the Arabian peninsula, and in Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Iran, even to this day (Bulliet, 1983: 31).

The early process of Islamisation was circumspect. The kinds of institutions and social infrastructure were such that they might eventually lead to the gradual conversion of the people, in their own time. The expansion of the Muslim community was not only motivated by religious conviction, but also by a political,

and later, a trade motivation (Gilliat-Ray 2002: 161). Conquered people became equal with the conquerors, if they accepted the idea of Islam, or if they were already 'People of the Book' like the Christians and the Jews, who were not supposed (ie expected or required) to become Muslims. For several centuries the conquered Christians remained Christians (Waddy, 1990:102). On payment of a special poll tax (the *jizya* tax) Jews and Christians had certain privileges as 'People of The Book' and were protected religious minorities in the new Muslim lands (Gilliat-Ray, 2002:162). Originally traders were the most instrumental in introducing Islam in non-Muslim territories but from the eighth century onwards, Sufi mystics were the most successful in advancing the cause of Islam outside the Islamic heartlands (Poston,1992:17-18).

If there had been mass forced conversion, it is hard to imagine, firstly, how people could have taken so long to become Muslim, and, secondly, how in many cases they could have failed to do so even by today. However, it is evident that the early Muslims were intent on making Islam 'dominant' in the sense of establishing Muslim rule, and the goal of people becoming Muslim could then be left to take its natural course (Hasan, 1996: 88-89).

3.7.2 The Way of Conversion to Islam in the Early History of Islam

It could be said that there are two basic ways of becoming Muslim, the way of *fitrah* (this term will be examined in more detail in the next section) and the way of power. Both these types of 'conversion' are illustrated by the early history of Islam and exemplified in particular by the Makkah and Madinah periods of the Prophet's life (PBUH) (Dutton, 1999: 157). The way of *fitrah* is when someone

becomes a Muslim through strong individual personal conviction of the truth of the Prophet's message and with enduring certainty, regardless of the external difficulties this may bring, despite the ensuing problems in terms of rejection by the rest of the society and even, in some cases, physical torture (Mohamed, 1996: 14-15).

In the early Islamic histories, for example Ibn al-Athir [died 630 AH/ 1233 CE], *(al-Kamil Fil-Ta'ri'kh)* and Ibn Hisham *(al-Seerah al-Nabawyah)*, the reader will find hundreds of stories of Muhammad's followers and how they followed him with love and loyalty. His followers were mainly the weak and poor, including young slaves and young women, besides some of the powerful and highly respected people in Makkan society.

The second way of conversion that has been found in the early history of Islamic conversion is the way of power. This is when someone becomes Muslim by virtue of external circumstances that make it difficult not to do so. For example, as the Prophet (PBUH) became more successful politically and militarily, previous leaders of the opposition also accepted Islam. A prime example is the so-called 'Conquest' of Makkah, when a comparatively large number of people accepted not only the political but also the religious dominance of Islam. In the Madinah phase of the Prophet's mission (PBUH), people frequently became Muslim because the leaders of their group had become Muslim. It was in fact 'the thing to do', regardless of the depth of individual commitment, and that explains the growing number of hypocrites *(munafiqun)* in the new community in Madinah (Dutton, 1999: 159).

By the time of the Prophet's (PBUH) death in AH 11/CE 632 the whole of the

Arabian peninsula had at least outwardly accepted the political and spiritual

dominance of Islam (Hasan, 1996: 124).

3.7.3 Motives for Conversion

In one of the most famous *hadeeth* of the Prophet (PBUH), and the one which

begins the most famous collection of *hadeeth*, that of Al-Bukhari, we are told:

> *Actions are by intentions, and everyone will get what he intends.*
> *Whoever emigrates for the sake of Allah and His Messenger, has*
> *emigrated for the sake of Allah and His Messenger; while*
> *whoever emigrates for the sake of some worldly thing that he*
> *wants to get or some woman he wants to marry, has emigrated*
> *for whatever it is that he has emigrated for (Sahih al-Bukhari,*
> *1996: 6. 45).*

Much has been said about the motives or reasons for conversion. A person can

convert to Islam for very varied reasons, and not necessarily from deep, spiritual

motives, but it is still regarded as Islam. It is apparent that to a certain extent this

is not a problem in Islam, as long as outward 'conversion' has taken place, the rest

is more or less left up to a person's conscience.

The early sources depict many variations on the two modes, 'the way of *fitrah*'

and 'the way of power'. With regard to conversion to Islam by *fitrah*, we find the

early Muslims being impressed not only by the Prophet's (PBUH) Qur'anic

message of creation, forgiveness, death, resurrection and ultimate accountability,

but also by the excellence of his personal behaviour as manifested, for example, in

his exceptional patience, generosity and courage (Al-Ashqer, 2001: 8-9).

Once people had started accepting Islam, they in turn became a model for others, particularly close associates. As an illustration of this we find that several of the earliest Muslims were friends of Abu Bakr, the first to become Muslim outside the Prophet's (PBUH) immediate household. People were as much impressed by his qualities of character as they were by the message he had to pass on. Similarly, we hear of leaders of tribes accepting Islam and this leading in turn to the acceptance of Islam by the rest of their tribe (Islam in Concept, 1999: 31).

Another motive for conversion is marriage. By Islamic law, a Muslim man is allowed to marry a Muslim, Christian or Jewish woman but a Muslim woman may only marry a Muslim man. Thus in the early sources we hear of individuals becoming Muslim because the women they wanted to marry, or were already married to, had become Muslim and would not accept them unless they too became Muslim. This situation continues to be a source of new Muslims to the present day (Dutton, 1999: 160).

Owing to the limited material in Islamic literature on the conversion process, Islamic psychology is now examined as it can provide valuable insight for the analysis of the data in the present study.

3.8   *Fitrah*, the Islamic Concept of Human Nature

Within their spiritual nature lies the deep, universal moral intuition that human beings are creatures of God to be respected (Mohamed, 1996: 6). With regard to Western culture this intuition can be described as 'a sense of the numinous', from

the Latin 'numen' implying 'acknowledgement of or recognition of divine power'[6]. The equivalent term in Islam is *'fitrah'* or ' a state of *fitrah'*, which however, has a more indispensable meaning than 'a sense of the numinous', in that the Western concept is to some extent tentative, while in Islam, *fitrah* is regarded as an incontrovertible fact.

This section will examine the concept of human nature from an Islamic perspective and how *iman* (faith in Allah) is seen as part of human nature. The Islamic theory of human psychology is one of those that will be tested when the data on conversion to Islam is analysed.

3.8.1 The definition of *fitrah*

The literal meaning of the Arabic word *fitrah* is derived from the consonants *ftr* in the root word *fatara,* to originate. The literal meaning of the term *fitrah* is creation; the causing of a thing to exist for the first time (Mohamed, 1996:15). However for our purposes it is necessary to investigate more deeply the Qur'anic and hence Islamic meaning of this term, in order that it can be correctly understood in the English language. The concept of creation in Qur'anic Arabic is presented with great precision. In comparison, the English term 'creation' is more general or imprecise. The word *fatara* means to originate, and that only Allah can perform this particular act (Hamid, 1998:38).

So *fatara* can only refer to Allah originating something. As an example we find the title of Surah 35 in the Qur'an often given as *Faatir* or *Al* (the) *Faatir*. This

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[6] Collins English Dictionary, (updated 1994: 710).

means (The) Originator. It opens, 'All praise be to Allah, the Originator *(Fatiri)*

of the heavens and the earth.' (Ali, 1994: 368). The major theme of the entire

surah is that people should observe the natural creation around them and

recognise that Allah originated it and is fully aware of it in all aspects.

A useful formal definition of *fitrah*, which like *fatir,* derives from *fatara,* is that of

Bewley (1998: 7):

> *Fitrah: the first nature, the natural, primal condition of mankind*
> *in harmony with nature.*

Hamid expands this definition in (1998: 21):

> *According to the Qur'anic or Islamic worldview, the human*
> *being – man and woman – is created by God in a naturally good*
> *and pure state, free from sin. This is called the state of fitrah. A*
> *babe at birth is totally innocent. He does not bear the sin or*
> *guilt of his parents or his ancestors. He starts off with a clean*
> *slate.*

3.8.1.1   TheWord *fitrah* in the Hadeeth

In Sahih Al-Bukhari (1985:6.298), there is a *hadeeth* narrated by Abu Hurairah a

companion of Prophet Muhammad:

> *Each parent's child is born in a natural state of goodness*
> *(fitrah). It is only his parents that later turn him into a Jew,*
> *Christian or a Magian.*

The *hadeeth* tells us that the Prophet (PBUH) then recited *surah* 30: 30 of the

Holy Qur'an, which will be discussed. Hamid (1998: 22) points out that the term

'parents' in the above *hadeeth* has the wider meaning of 'social influences' or '

environment' and that the religions named were the ones best known to the

audience at the time of revelation. In the wider application by means of analogy

(typical of the Qur'an, *hadeeth* and other religious literature) the statement can

refer to any religion or worldview which takes a person away from his natural

disposition.

3.8.1.2 The Translation of *fitrah* in the Qur'an

The Holy Qur'an 30: 30, quoted by Prophet Muhammad with regard to the issue

of *fitrah*, will now be discussed.

﴿ فأقم وجهك للدين حنيفا فطرت الله التي فطر الناس عليها لا تبديل لخلق الله ذلك الديـــن

القيم ولكن أكثر الناس لا يعلمون ﴾   (الروم:30)

> *So set thou the face truly to the religion being upright, the*
> *nature in which Allah has made mankind: no change (there is)*
> *in the work (wrought) by Allah: that is the true Religion: but*
> *most among mankind know not.* (Qur'an, 30:30)

The first translation provided is the certificated translation by Zayid (1980).

> *Therefore set your face in devotion to the true faith, the upright*
> *nature with which Allah has endowed man. Allah's creation*
> *cannot be changed. This is surely the true religion, although*
> *most men do not know it*[7].

For comparison we provide another well-respected translation by Abdullah Yusuf

Ali. He renders the verse:

> *So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the Faith: (establish)*
> *God's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has*
> *made mankind: no change (let there be) in the work (wrought)*
> *by God: that is the standard religion: but most among mankind*
> *understand not*[8].

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[7] The Qur'an. Translation checked and revised by Mahmud Zayid based on original translation by N.J. Dawood and certificated in 1980. pub. By Dar Al-Choura, Beirut – Lebanon.

[8] The Holy Qur'an translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali published by IPCI (1999).

It should be noted that the word *fitrah* occurs in this verse in the accusative case. Thus Yusuf Ali (1999) makes it the object of the understood imperative 'establish', i.e. 'Establish *fitrah, (fitrata)*'. The Zayid (1980) translation renders *fitrata* as 'the upright nature' and Hamid[9] renders *fitrata* 'natural disposition'.

It is worth noting that the word *'deen'* (*al-deeni* and *al-deenu* in the Arabic) that occurs in this quotation has been translated in different ways. It means ' the true way of life in the context of this world and the next'. The meaning of *deen* in fact incorporates the concept of *fitrah*, but also includes the concept of a 'life-transaction' between the human being and Allah. It is well attested that translators have always had difficulty finding an accurate English equivalent for both *deen* and *fitrah*.

3.8.2   Common Understanding of *fitrah*

A statement ubiquitous throughout the Muslim world in circumstances which might reasonably be considered to impose great stress, is 'To Allah we belong and to Him we return'. This can be seen to take for granted the concept of *fitrah* (Qur'an 2:156)[10]. Generally however, the term *fitrah* is consciously most often associated with birth: the belief being that a child is born as a Muslim, i.e., submitting to the will of Allah. According to Mohamed (1996:17), this is when

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[9] For our purposes, the translation of Abdul Wahid Hamid (1989: 21) is well worthy of consideration. It is as accurate, but takes a slightly different slant, as is so often the case when translating a text with great depth and implication: 'And so, set your face steadfastly toward the (one) ever true *faith*, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition (*fitrah*) which God has instilled into man, (for) not to allow any change to corrupt what God has created-this is the purpose of the ever-true *faith*, but most people know not'.

[10] Qur'an 2:155-156 "......Give good news to the patient who in adversity say, "We belong to Allah and to Him we shall return." (Zayid's translation).

fitrah is viewed in respect of the *shahadah* (the statement of witness and belief).

Since Allah's *fitrah* is within the human soul, human beings are born in a state in

which *tawheed[11]* is integral. Since *tawheed* is the human being's *fitrah*, all the

prophets, peace be upon them, came to remind people of it. As implied previously

the soul, in a state of *fitrah*, is with Allah before life on this Earth. In the womb,

the child is in a state of *fitrah*, and is born in a state of *fitrah*.

3.8.3 Further Aspects of *fitrah* According to Classically Educated Islamic Scholars

Imam Al-Nawawi defined *fitrah* as the unconfirmed state (as described above)

which exists until the individual consciously acknowledges his belief. A child is

born pure and predisposed to belief in one God. Having been given limited free

will the child will then have to make his/her life choices at later dates (Rashad,

1981:382). Islam is sometimes called *deen al-fitrah*, loosely translated 'The

religion of human nature', because its laws and teachings are believed to be in full

harmony with the normal and natural inclination of human nature *(fitrah)*, viz.: to

believe in and submit to the Creator.

According to Al-Attas (1985:57-58), for the human being the natural tendency to

worship Allah implies or means both *deen* and *fitrah; fitrah* being the natural,

unconscious and original disposition and *deen* being the conscious (and correct)

outlook and practices that maintain the human being on the path laid down for

him or her by the Creator. The natural tendency to worship God is the pattern to

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[11] *Tawheed*: Adherence to the belief that there is none worthy of worship except God.

which He has created all things. Submission to it brings harmony, for it means the realisation of what is inherent in one's true nature; opposition to it brings discord, for it means actualisation of what is extraneous to one's true nature.

According to Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328 CE), the extremely influential Hanbali[12] jurist, every child is born in a state of innate goodness, and it is the social environment which causes the individual to deviate from this state. There is a natural correspondence between human nature and Islam; man is suited for *deen al-Islam* and responds spontaneously to its teachings (Rashad, 1981:383).

3.8.4 Some Implications of the above Views

It is necessary to mention that according to Islam, human beings have limited free will, although Allah is aware of all that we do and is in control even of our free will. Free will means that human beings can make choices upon courses of action and interpretation of events. The possession of free will is part of *fitrah*, because we are created able to make choices. On the other hand, when we make choices that put us out of harmony with the natural order, to a certain extent we deviate from *fitrah* and are then in need of a return to the *deen*. The innate sense of right and wrong is regarded as part of *fitrah*, and in extreme cases (temporary) loss of

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[12] The Hanbali Madhab (school of Islamic legal thought) was founded by Imam Ahmad Hanbal (778-855 CE) who based much of his work on that of Imam Malik (717-801 CE,) a resident of Madinah whose grandfather was a companion of the Prophet. Imams Malik and Hanbal laid great store by the belief, practices and verbal traditions of the people of Madinah, where the Prophet had established the first Islamic society. Imam Hanbal also conferred with scholars who were based in other areas. He made a point of analysing every issue using the same methods of investigation and reference as the Prophet and his companions. Ibn Taymiyyah likewise.

the sense of right and wrong, which does happen, must be regarded as a loss of

fitrah.

These implications could appear to be to some extent irrational. If it is part of our

state of *fitrah* to be able to make choices, and also part of it to make wrong

choices, do wrong choices take us out of *fitrah* if they also take us out of the *deen,*

or not? How does this tally? It is necessary to provide illustrations to resolve this

issue. This brings us to two further very important concepts in Islam, both of

which relate to the psychology of Islam. These are the concepts of balance and of

moderation.

3.8.5   Balance and Moderation
3.8.5.1   Balance

Throughout the Holy Qur'an the reader is invited to observe the balance between

night and day, the balance by which birds stay in the air, by which clouds remain

in the sky, and so on. Many arguments in the Qur'an are presented in contrasting

and balanced units. The Muslim who is on the correct (and therefore natural) path

is presented as living in a state of *taqwa* (God-consciousness) which can lead to

the state of *ihsan* (total God-consciousness). In this way he/she is living in a

perfect balance between hope and fear that results in a state one may describe as '

alert tranquillity'.

Nature is in a state of balance and people too, should be in a state of balance.

Yusuf Ali (1999) says in his textual note on Surah 7:146:

> *The argument may be simplified thus in paraphrase. The right is*
> *established on the earth as Allah created it: Nature recognises*
> *and obeys Allah's law as fixed for each portion of Creation. But*

*man, because of the gift of Will, sometimes upsets this balance.
The root-cause is his arrogance, as it was in the case of Iblis
(Satan). Allah's Signs are everywhere, but if they are rejected
with scorn and blasphemy, Allah will withdraw His grace, for
sin hardens the heart and makes it impervious to the truth. Want
of faith produces a kind of blindness to spiritual facts, a kind of
deafness to the warnings of a Day of Account. If we had
contumaciously rejected faith, can we hope for anything but
justice, -the just punishment of our sins.*

3.8.5.2   Moderation

To lead a healthy life the Muslim is expected to exercise common sense and not

drive himself too hard in any particular activity, without the balance of another

complementary activity. If he chooses to make extra devotions at night-time, he is

only expected to do as much as is comfortable. When he eats, he is not expected

to over eat or under eat. When he gives voluntary charity, he is instructed not to

give so much that he puts himself into difficulties. He is assured that every

hardship is followed by ease:

﴿ فإن مع العسر يسرا [5] إن مع العسر يسرا [6] فإذا فرغت فانصب [7] وإلى ربك فارغب [8] ﴾   (الشرح:5-8)

*So, verily, with every difficulty there is relief[5]. Verily, with
every difficulty there is relief[6]. Therefore when thou art free
(from thine immediate task), still labour hard[7]. And to thy Lord
turn (all) thy attention[8].*   (Qur'an, 94:5-8)

Sahih Bukhari *hadeeth* 8.471 (1985):

> *Allah's apostle said, 'Do good deeds properly, sincerely and
> moderately and know that your deeds will not make you enter
> Paradise, and that the most beloved deed to Allah is the most
> regular and constant, even though it were little'.*

(It should be noted that it is by the grace of God that one enters Paradise, not by

one's own merit.)

3.9 Components of Human Consciousness According to Islam

The Qur'an refers to three aspects of the self: *qalb, aql* and *nafs*. The *qalb* or heart, is seen as something that connects the self with the spirit *(ruh)*. The spirit is from Allah. When the individual is truly balanced the *qalb* or heart is where the consciousness of Allah resides. It is the part of human consciousness in which dwells the inherent sense of right and wrong *(fitrah)*. The *aql* can be defined as the intellect that ordinarily comprehends and analyses external data, and which can articulate (Skinner, 1989: 7-8).

The *nafs* (self) can perhaps best be defined as 'drives'. It can be expressed in three types or levels. The individual who has attained a higher spiritual consciousness has passed through these three broad levels of spiritual growth and awareness, the *nafs ammarah*, the *nafs lawwamma*, and the *nafs mutma'ennah*

3.9.1 Al-Nafs Al-Ammarah

This is the lowest level of the spiritual state of the *nafs*. The *nafs al-ammarah*, is the commanding self. Umaruddin (1982: 175) states that this is the negative part in man, the seat of one's selfish drives. This *nafs* has a negative character in the Qur'an:

﴿ وما أبرئ نفسي إن النفس لأمارة بالسوء إلا ما رحم ربي إن ربي غفور رحيم ﴾ (يوسف:53)

Yet I do not absolve myself (of blame): the (human) soul
certainly incites evil, unless my Lord do bestow His Mercy: but
surely My Lord is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (Qur'an, 12:53)

3.9.2   Al-Nafs Al-Lawwamah

The *nafs al-lawwamah* is the first major step in spiritual growth and is 'the reproachful self'. It is the inner guide that directs one to the truth, and stands midway between the negative tendency of *al-nafs al-ammarah* and the positive tendencies of the *ruh* and *aql*. At this stage, the slightest departure from the straight path arouses in the believer the pains of conscience (Mohamed, 1996: 103).

﴿ ولا أقسم بالنفس اللوامة ﴾ (القيامة:2)

And I do swear by the self-reproaching soul. (Qur'an, 75:2)

3.9.3   Al-Nafs Al-Mutma'ennah

This is the contented self and is also regarded as the confident self. The *nafs al-mutma'ennah* is the final stage. At this stage the individual is totally liberated from the carnal self and attains the highest level of spiritual balance and harmony (Mohamed, 1996: 104). In this quotation the highest or confident self is addressed:

﴿ يا أيتها النفس المطمئنة ارجعي إلى ربك راضية مرضية ﴾ (الفجر:27-28)

To the righteous soul will be said: O (thou) soul, in (complete)
rest and satisfaction.. Come back thou to thy Lord, well pleased
(thyself), and well pleasing unto Him!. (Qur'an, 89:27-28)

This then is the self in the Islamic view. It must be trained so that it may be integrated with the spirit *(ruh)*. The individual may be liberated from bondage to the lower *nafs* by being transformed into the positive, spiritually higher state. In Islam a healthy individual is one who maintains a balance in the degree to which these drives influence his/her thought and behaviour. A lack of such drives may

prove harmful for the soul and body, while an excess of them may harm the individual's intellect and faith (Al-Razi, 1982: 195).

3.9.4   The Role of Al-Qalb

Skinner (1989: 9) states that *al-qalb* may be approximated to 'heart' as the seat of one's intelligence and intelligent feelings. In an ideal, healthy balanced person, consciousness is centred in the *qalb*, which is open to the *ruh* and directs the *aql*. He explains that together with the *aql* the *qalb* directs the *nafs*.

The natural view of *fitrah* allows for human free will and responsibility. Human beings are distinguished from the rest of material creation because they have been endowed with intellect (*aql*) and free-will (*iradah*). The intellect enables them to discern right from wrong and the will enables them to choose between right and wrong. People are responsible for their actions and accountable to God for all they do. It is this sense of accountability that guides a human being to act in accordance with the will of God and empowers him/her to struggle against the wrong-doing of his/her lower self (*nafs*) as well as any negative influences of social circumstances (Mohamed, 1996: 21).

Skinner provides an analogy for the relationship between the *qalb*, *aql* and *nafs*, as that of a rider on a horse. The well balanced person, whose consciousness is centred in the *qalb*, is like the rider whose horse takes him/her where he/she wants to go, and where he/she wants to go is in accord with the will of God. Various permutations of imbalance can be illustrated from this basic analogy, for instance, the case of the horse being reined in or hamstrung and going nowhere, the horse

out of control and 'riding' the rider to destruction, or the horse under control but being directed the wrong way (Skinner, 1989: 9).

The integral part played by *ruh* (spirit from God) mentioned earlier, in the Islamic world view, including Islamic psychology, is an example of where the Islamic perspective which the converts in this study had adopted, departs from the western mechanistic world view as described, for instance, by Guenon (1981:51) and Skinner (1989:10). This may partly account for the previously mentioned inadequacies found in western sociology and psychology as vehicles for analysis of the conversion process to Islam in this study and also in Köse's work (1996).

3.10 Summary

In this chapter I have first reviewed some general theories, issues and debates concerning the nature and study of conversion written from the perspective of western academic disciplines. Those produced during the past thirty years have tended to adopt the sociological and psychological approach. There are earlier traditional models, including the lives of historical Christian figures that present the concept of conversion as the culmination of an active spiritual quest involving the power of God. The historical meaning of 'conversion' itself provides insight into the fundamental reference not to change, but to returning. (From God we all came, to God we return). These traditional models presuppose the existence of God, whereas the more recent theories do not necessarily do so.

A modern definition of 'conversion' is 'an act or an instance of converting or the process of being converted, especially in belief or religion'[13]. Such modern definitions do not presuppose a supernatural element. The conversion could be to a new political viewpoint, for instance. Modern definitions do not presuppose an active quest on the part of the convert and most, but not all of them, assume contact with a proselytising group to be an integral part of the conversion process.

Decisions and process, 'verbal' and 'total' convert, the active or passive convert (Richardson), Lofland and Skonovd's conversion motifs and Rambo's stage model, add to a rich conceptualisation of what is a complex phenomenon. The complexity also finds expression in patterns of multiple affiliation, both serial and concurrent, although regarding conversion to Islam, we are not concerned with these latter complexities.

My understanding of conversion is as a wide category of transformation in which the convert is at times both active and passive object of a range of processes of change. This is not a specific category of changes or religious experiences in its own right, but incorporates an array of transforming experiences, which will be unique to the individual. Despite the uniqueness of each individual's experience it will of course be seen that certain aspects of the individual experience bear some resemblance to parts of another's experience. The subjects of this study are 'converts' in the wide sense defined above and I employ this concept whether or not they themselves, or others, identify them this way.

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[13] The Concise Oxford Dictionary, Ninth Edition.

In this literature review a representative selection of western theories of religious conversion were read. In only one work were these theories applied to Islam. All the theories appeared to have too limited a perspective to be used to analyse the process of conversion to Islam. In most cases the perspective was too narrow because most theories depended on the approach of a single discipline. The work of Lewis Rambo (1993) appeared to come nearest to the kind of holistic model required for analysis of the data in the present study and will be returned to later.

Classical Islamic literature has not yielded a theory of conversion to Islam and modern scholarly Islamic literature is also short on analysis, description or discussion of the topic. Having failed to find any literature that could provide an adequate basis or theory with which to analyse the phenomenon, and after re-examination of the data prepared for this thesis, it seemed that a key aspect of Islam that had attracted all the converts was the Islamic concept of *tawheed*, in brief the unity of God, and its implications. Therefore it became relevant to read literature that discussed the nature of Islam. Most works looked at tended to be concerned with complex aspects of theology and practice or what could be regarded as 'special pleading' on behalf of Islam, rather than those aspects that are immediately relevant to conversions to Islam in general or to the conversions in the current sample. Lacking Muslim sources for a theory of conversion to Islam, it was felt that well authenticated historical literature from the work of classical scholars might yield useful information.

Nothing was found in the historical literature that dealt with the conversion process itself and so it was decided to read and discuss the Islamic theory of

human nature and human psychology. This proved more useful. It has been seen that the application of Islamic psychology depends on a system where the material and social dimensions are fully integrated with the spiritual dimension; the material being dependent, for its interpretation, upon the recognition of a spiritual dimension. These two dimensions are seen as comprising a unified system. The key to perceiving this system is the concept of *fitrah*, which will be seen to bear relevance to the conversions analysed later in this thesis.

The Western academic tradition, within which I am working in order to produce this thesis, requires that I present this work within a Western academic framework. However Western research and theories, although they shed considerable light on the conversion process in general, have been found inadequate for a meaningful analysis of conversion to Islam. The concepts of *tawheed* and *fitrah* that are central to Islam are an inextricable part of the conversion process to Islam. It has been found that these linked concepts which are integral to the message of the Qur'an and *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) provide the key for understanding the conversion process experienced by the interviewees for this thesis. It was a relief to find the broadly based academic framework of Lewis Rambo's stage model, that could be employed in such a way that Western and Islamic perspectives could be integrated in the analysis of the data presented in this work.

4.1   Introduction

Until the mid to late 1960s very few British people had met or even seen Muslims in Britain, nor was there more than a very sketchy idea of what Islam was. It was generally regarded as something belonging to distant foreign countries, barely distinguishable from other exotic religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. There are now sizeable and established Muslim communities in most British cities, notably in the inner-city areas. The Muslims are visible and have, to a considerable extent, changed the character of these areas, and contact between the indigenous or non-Muslim and Muslim communities has increased in, for instance, schools, colleges and universities, in trade contacts, in the professions and on the street. In the main, knowledge about Islam itself, both doctrine and practice continues to be limited, despite its inclusion in RE lessons in schools, awareness of the times of Muslim festivals and an intermittent but increasing number of programmes devoted to Islam and Muslims on terrestrial TV and radio. Non-Muslim perceptions of Islam, although better informed than before, tend to be derived from news reports in the media about 'trouble spots' and conflicts in different parts of the world and therefore the negative stereotypes that have traditionally hovered in the minds of the non-Muslim British public are perpetuated. For these reasons many do not know why someone would want to become a Muslim.

This study attempts to give the reader a picture of the nature of conversion to Islam, how the converts in the present study proved to have been active agents in their conversions, constantly observing, questioning and coming to their own

conclusions and how this critical approach continued after conversion. As has been stated in Chapter I, the inspiration for this study arose when I met some English converts to Islam at the University of Leeds and became very interested in finding out how and why these conversions had taken place.

It was found that the converts I spoke with had, in the main, come into the fold of Islam from backgrounds with no major religious upbringing. The fact that Islam is such a disciplined and all-embracing religion, indeed the people who follow it view it as a way of life not just a religion, intrigued me further. This made me even more keen to find out what it was that made these people take this giant step.

To understand the nature of conversion to Islam, the present study followed the principles of the social psychology of religion and used a qualitative research method. Data for this study were gathered from primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources included both published and unpublished materials both in English and Arabic. These were used to delineate the theoretical background of this study, and included books, journals, both PhD and Masters theses, newspapers and web-pages, and their analysis, involving classification, criticism and commentary. In terms of primary sources, semi-structured in-depth interviews and observations served to provide a sampling frame for the primary data collection (see 4.4.1). Correlation and differences were examined using the data from in-depth interviews and observations based on qualitative analyses only (Manstead and Semain, 1996; Beit-Hallahim and Argyle, 1997). The qualitative interview based approach was chosen as it is a technique enabling the development of an in-depth understanding of the individual's views, attitude and behaviour.

4.2   Studies of Conversion to Islam

Conversion to Islam has been a little explored topic, either by Western academics

or Muslim academics and historians, although in recent years interest in the

subject has grown. As far as personal accounts of the conversion process are

concerned, researchers like Hermansen (1999: 56) have doubted their value as

evidence for informing us about the conversion process. As has been suggested in

Chapter III, the problem may not be the inadequacies of the conversion accounts

but rather the limitation of the disciplines used to analyse them.

There is a small but growing body of work on Islamic communities in Europe,

such as Lewis (1993), *Bradford's Muslim Communities and the reproduction and*

representation of Islam[1] and Shadid and Koningsveld (1996), *Muslims in the*

Margins: Political Responses to the Presence of Islam in Western Europe.

However, as we saw in Chapter II, the topic of British converts to Islam has not

been widely discussed by scholars most especially when compared to the British-

Asian Muslim experience. Apart from the significant exception of the work of Ali

Köse (1996), none of these works deals with the role of converts to Islam in a

substantive way.

4.2.1   Methodological Approach in Western Studies

In the last three decades the outward demonstration of the phenomenon of

religious conversion has been seen to lie at the crossroads of several disciplines.

It is a widely studied topic among various fields of the social sciences. Rambo's

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[1] This thesis was revised and published in book form as *Islamic Britain* (1994).

(1982) bibliography from various fields attests to the popularity of this subject among psychologists, sociologists and historians as well as theologians. Psychological studies of religious conversion were numerous around the beginning of the 20th century, but interest in the phenomenon dwindled in the course of the following decades.

This waning interest reflected a decline in frequency of religious conversion within the Christian religion. In Rambo's bibliography of 25 psychological studies the majority of them that are clinical have been identified since 1970. During the same period over a hundred sociologically oriented studies have been made. More recently, with the rise of new religious groups and the resurgence of 'born again' evangelical Christianity, the phenomenon has reclaimed the attention of psychologists. Rigorous empirical studies of the experience from a psychological perspective are however still scarce. The most recent psychological studies have been undertaken largely from within a sociological psychological framework. The inclusion of societal variables by an increasing number of analysts subsumes the study of the topic under a social psychology of conversions, religious or otherwise (Taylor, 1975: 35-37). At a methodological level, the development is from scientific large-scale questionnaire based research towards smaller scale research.

4.3 Sampling Methods and Participant Observation

This study followed the principles of the social psychology of religious conversion, and as I mentioned before I used a qualitative research method. Data for this study were gathered from both secondary and primary sources (see Table

4.1). Traditionally popular methods in the psychology of religion have been the administration of questionnaires and the study of documentary accounts, mostly autobiographical, of conversion experiences. These have been supplemented by interviews where possible, often as a means of checking on the questionnaire, and the results have been evaluated statistically or written up in the form of case histories (See Clark, 1986: 191). With the emergence of new religious groups there have been many studies of conversion from sociological, psychological, and anthropological perspectives. However, in order to better understand the conversion process, it has been suggested that individual cases must be examined (Wilson, 1982: 118), because the interview gives us the opportunity to enter the conceptual world of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves (McCracken, 1988:9).

The aim of this research was to determine the reported nature of conversion to Islam as far as British people born and bred in the UK were concerned. The current research examines the accounts converts give of the why and how of their conversion experiences and what made their conversion possible.

The purpose of the research was not so much to test a specific hypothesis, but to try to chart and interpret what conversion meant for the individual, and to search for patterns in the actions, feelings, and ideas that were reported.

In the field of religious conversion, it has been recognised that most of the data produced from previous studies in this field has been analysed according to psychological theories. This has meant that each person has had to be classified according to these acknowledged theories, even though the fundamental nature of

the human being means that an individual cannot always simply be 'pigeon-holed'

in this way. This is due to the ever changing and unique nature of each individual

(Lichtenstein, 1988, 1-18). The approach that I adopted differed in that I tried to

analyse each individual from a more humanistic point of view, instead of strictly

applying the aforementioned psychological theories. This was so that each subject

could be analysed as an individual, and not merely a statistic. This could produce

a body of in-depth information regarding not only the nature of conversion, but

also the on-going effects that it has had on each individual. According to

Rambo's vision of conversion (Rambo, 1993: 5):

> *Conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a*
> *dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions,*
> *expectations and orientations; (a) conversion is a process over*
> *time, not a single event; (b) conversion is contextual and thereby*
> *influences and is influenced by a matrix of relationships,*
> *expectations, and situations; and (c) factors in the conversion*
> *process are multiple, interactive, and cumulative. There is no*
> *one cause of conversion, no one process, and no one simple*
> *consequence of that process.*

Table 4.1: Data collection methods

Sources	Tools	Application
Secondary	books, articles, theses, web pages and reports, news articles collected from magazines and newspapers	Appropriate materials published by the end of 2001 were collected.
Primary	Semi-structured in-depth interviews	37 converts were interviewed in England.
	Observation	Mosques, Muslim centres, and converts accommodation were visited.
		My personal experience as a teacher of Arabic and Islam in schools and university was also used.

The data from this study tend to support the above view that there is no one cause

of conversion. The following chapters will deal with conversion from descriptive

approaches, yet will seek to delineate the contours of the phenomenon, with little

concern for scholarly theory. The descriptive approach observes the nature of the

process.   This work will be primarily descriptive rather than normative; in other

words, it will explore what actually happens in a conversion process.   What

behaviours are changed? What beliefs are changed? What sorts of experiences are

elicited in the process? By focusing on a descriptive approach, I shall treat

conversion as a dynamic, multifaceted process of transformation.

It is imperative for researchers of conversion to Islam to recognise it as a variable

phenomenon.   Externally it is subject to structural, ideological and theological

debates.   There are questions about whether conversion is sudden or gradual,

active or passive, internal or external.   For the purposes of this work, I suggest

that conversion is what the convert says it is.   The process of conversion is a

product of the interactions between the convert's aspirations, needs, and the

orientations into which he/she is being converted, and the particular social matrix

in which these processes are taking place.

4.3.1   Holistic Model

The holistic model of conversion to Islam that I propose is an exploratory

orientation enabling me to confront a wide range of questions and issues. This

model is not yet a complete theory; it is an initial framework only, based on a

survey of the literature and interviews with converts. No model can encompass

the whole of reality, but I submit that the study of conversion to Islam must

include the following four components: the cultural, social, personal, and religious

systems. For conversion to be understood in all its richness and complexity, the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and religious studies must all be taken into account; otherwise an examination of conversion will remain one-dimensional. Thus, the psychologist tends to focus primarily on the isolated individual who is converting; the sociologist tends to see conversion as the result of forces shaped and mobilised by social institutions and mechanisms; and the theologian emphasises the dominant influence of God in the process and minimises the impact of other factors. These limitations I intend to avoid.

4.3.2   Stage Model

Given the multiplicity of approaches that I have briefly introduced, a heuristic model that allows for conversion to be investigated as a process of inter-related stages, may provide a framework for integrating research within the various disciplines. This may offer a deeper understanding of the process involved in conversion. A stage model is appropriate in that conversion is a process of change over time. A stage may be seen as a particular element or a period during that process of change. Each stage has a cluster of themes, patterns and processes that characterise it. The model of Lewis Rambo provides a useful heuristic model. In this work I am proposing an adaptation of Rambo's model as a strategy for organising complex data (see Figure 4.1).

4.4   Primary Methods: Fieldwork

The original idea for the format of this study was to use the questionnaire in such a way that it would be given to the subjects, filled in, and handed back to the author to analyse. One of the preliminary drafts was tested on six of the subjects, but it was found that the layout of the draft had to be changed, as it did not inspire

the subjects to tell their stories, but simply to answer 'yes' or 'no', or 'fill in

boxes', in response to the questions asked. This would have been insufficient for

this level of study.

Figure 4.1: Stage Model

Recent investigators of religious change have used the interviewing technique and

found it practical and effective. Despite limitations in terms of reliability and

validity, interviews provide perhaps the best approach for exploring the process of

conversion and commitment (Bellah, 1974: 487-489). The interview gives us the

opportunity to enter the conceptual world of another person, to see and experience

the world as the subjects do themselves. So to better understand the conversion

process individual cases must be examined (Wilson, 1982: 118, McCracken,

1988: 9). As Moor (2000: 121-130) observes the interview also can provide an

in-depth insight into the background of the subject, as well as the reasoning as to

why they changed their religion, along with their experiences before, during and

after the conversion process. After the six trial interviews, taking into account the

comments of the above researchers, the format was changed to produce a more interesting, in-depth interview, which would inspire the subjects to 'open up', tell their stories fully and indeed, enjoy doing so.

4.4.1   In-depth Interviews Design

To aid in the construction of the semi-structured interview schedule, the literature on religious experience and conversion in the domain of psychology and sociology was reviewed. The design of the semi-structured in-depth interviews ensured that they would cover all the topics in the same order for each respondent, while still preserving a conversational context for each interview (see Appendix 1). The interviews proceeded in chronological order beginning with childhood and family, adolescence, then exploring an approximate two-year period prior to conversion and the conversion process itself and concluding with post-conversion life up to the present.

Interview times ranged from 45 minutes to three hours, most being about two and a quarter hours. All interviews were taped after permission to record the conversation and to use the transcriptions for writing the research had been gained. To protect the anonymity of the participants they were assured that fictional names would be used and when necessary other potentially revealing characteristics would be disguised. For this purpose each subject was also provided with a standard ethics protocol (see Appendix 1).

The subjects were allowed to tell their own story in their own terms. However, some control over the interview was exercised. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were open-ended and largely non-directive. The purpose of this

relatively non-directive or free response approach was to help each subject examine their experience according to their own understanding, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. As information was provided, spontaneous questions were used to gradually narrow the scope and focus on specific times, places, people, and so on. 'Floating' and 'planned' prompts to encourage the subject to go into detail where necessary were also employed. When the interviewee paused, a new question was not always asked. A few moments of silence were allowed. If this hesitation was a call for encouragement then a reformulation of something the subject had just said was given. If the subject had nothing to say on a given topic, either something mentioned earlier was referred back to, or a new question was posed.

In choosing the questions, the results of previous studies were taken into account. For example, Ullman (1989: 11-16) found that converts characterised their childhood as unhappy, reporting specific disturbing, traumatic events. So to test the applicability of this finding to the present sample, questions on childhood experiences were asked. 'Can you describe your relationship with your parents when you were a child?' The questions in the first part of the questionnaire are on the childhood and adolescence experiences of the converts interviewed. Most of the questions here were selected from Ullman's (1989: 199-210) questionnaire on which Ullman's book *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion* was based. This part of the questionnaire aimed to find out the relationships of the converts with their parents and to examine whether or not they experienced a troubled adolescence.

Questions were also included to determine if the interviewees came from religious or non-religious families, and how they would describe themselves when they were an adolescent, to find out if it was during adolescence that they were alienated from the religion of their parents (if they had a religion). These questions were included after reviewing the literature on identity and adolescence (e.g. Marcia, 1980) and noting that in adolescence a lower proportion of the population than in other age groups claim allegiance to the Christian churches in Britain (Francis, 1984: 10).

In the second part, questions regarding the pre-conversion period and conversion process were posed. The first three sections asked questions about the pre-conversion period after adolescence and then the two year period prior to conversion.

In the first place, interviewees were asked about their religious history and commitment. This was because a previous study (Poston, 1992) has suggested that converts to Islam came from the normally religious section of society, or had tried another religion before conversion. A review of the relevant literature (e.g. Ebaugh and Vaughan, 1984, and Richardson 1985) on conversion and new religious movements revealed a growing division between psychodynamic and cognitive approaches to the emotional and cognitive antecedents of conversion. To find out some of the emotional antecedents of conversion, questions were included such as 'Did anything unusual like a broken marriage occur?'. The elements of Lofland and Stark's (1965) conversion process model (e.g. seekership) were examined with questions like 'Were you looking for something?'.

The last section included questions designed to look for conversion patterns based on Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) conversion motifs (intellectual, affectional and mystical etc). The interviewees were also asked to identify the chief motivating factor in their conversion to see if this differed from subjects in a previous study of American and European converts to Islam (Poston 1992).

Questions such as 'How were you introduced to Islam?' or 'Was an individual or group helping along the way?' were included to see if conversions came about as a form of socialisation as claimed by some sociologically oriented researchers (e.g. Stark and Bainbridge, 1980a; Snow and Machalek, 1983; Long and Hadden, 1983).

In the third part the consequences of conversion and the nature of the transformation were investigated. The question of whether conversions were followed by postconversion depression or not was also addressed. Studies (e.g. Barker, 1989) on conversion to new religious movements also cover converts' families and ex-friends. So a question with regard to the reactions of interviewees' parents and friends to their conversion was included in this section.

The final part of the questionnaire included questions on identity change as some researchers (e.g. Barker and Currie, 1985; Gillespie, 1991) defined religious conversion as a definite break with one's former identity involving a radical change in one's beliefs, personality, ideas, behaviour, and values.

The subjects were allowed to define conversion for themselves and to describe how far they had changed, and also asked to look at their former life in retrospect. It has been suggested (Heirich, 1977; Ullman, 1989; 15) that converts tend to

denounce preconversion life as sinful and immoral and they tend to exaggerate their preconversion 'sufferings' or 'sins' so as to glorify their present salvation. To see if this was so for those involved in this study one of the questions asked was 'How do you see your former life? In the wrong direction, sinful, lost, etc'. To introduce the issue of whether conversion meant also cultural change, the question 'Do you wish you had been born to a Muslim family/environment?' was included. This question also attempted to see if they had accepted the culture as distinct from the religious practices and beliefs of the community whose religion they had converted to. Having asked a question about whether conversion meant total rejection of their former beliefs and attitudes, further questions on the extent of practising their new religion were posed (e.g. abstaining from alcohol or doing daily prayers). No comparison to life-long Muslims is made as there is only limited data available.

In preparing some of the questions in this section Poston's (1992) questionnaire presented to American and European converts to Islam was helpful. In the end, a semi-structured in-depth interview that covered the lifespan of the interviewees was prepared (see Appendix 1). A pilot study of five converts was then carried out. The results indicated that the revised interview schedule was an effective tool for investigating conversion experience. Thirty seven converts to Islam were then selected for interview.

4.4.2   Selection Methods

The methods which were used to select the subjects were snowball and convenience sampling. The interviews were conducted during 1999 and 2000. In

the end, around forty-two converts were met, but only thirty-seven participated in

the research. (see Figure 4.2).

Converts were sought through four channels. First, converts were contacted

through Leeds University.   Second, help from various Islamic organisations was

sought to provide the names and addresses of converts.   Third, a substantial

amount of time in mosques and other Muslim meeting places was spent to identify

British converts who would be obvious through physical features.   Fourth,

converts already known or interviewed were asked to introduce the researcher to

other converts whom they knew.

Several analyses were carried out to see if converts contacted by these different

routes differed from each other in terms of background or in features of

conversion history.   Such analysis showed that there were no significant

differences between the groups with respect to any of the features examined, such

as age at conversion, gender, education, class, or general reasons for conversion.

This suggests that the samples were not biased by comparison with each other,

which gave a richness to the study.

Another point worth mentioning here, is that although the different converts

suggested other converts who might be happy to provide information about

themselves for this study, it is important to note that often the social connections

between the converts were quite tenuous. A convert might have been a personal

friend of another convert in the sample. On the other hand it might have been that

one had heard of another convert, but did not know him/her personally, or they

may have only met once, or have been introduced on some occasion and merely

exchanged phone numbers, etc. Others among the sample, had heard of others but never met. Many of the converts in the sample had not met each other, nor even heard of each other.

The prospective interviewees whose names and addresses were given were contacted either by a letter which introduced the research, or (where a phone number was available) they were telephoned. If they agreed to participate, it was indicated that the researcher was prepared to meet them whenever or wherever they would like. Figure 4.2 shows how contact was made with the interviewees using a snowball method and includes their age, gender and ethnicity. To meet and interview the converts the researcher travelled to different places (see Figure 4.3), for example London, Birmingham, Manchester, Blackpool, Newcastle, Bradford and Leeds.

4.4.3   Setting

During the course of this work, the researcher would remain objective and refrain from any personal comment or judgement. The findings would be presented in a truthful manner without any attempts to pacify any one group of people.

The interviewee was always made to feel that she/he was valued as a person and it would be made clear to him/her that they were not merely a source of data.

The subjects were not pressed to reveal more than they were ready to disclose and they were encouraged to relax and feel as though they were talking to someone who was sympathetic as well as curious. Privacy was given by avoiding interviewing in public and making appointments to visit people in their homes. The author took steps to make sure that she was welcomed into the interviewee's home as a guest, not merely tolerated as an inquisitor.

Figure 4.2: Snow ball diagram or contact tree, which includes name, gender, age and ethnic group

The Researcher

Safeeyah (F-21-AB)

Lateefa (F-21-WE)

Abdul Qader (M-24-WE)

Abdul Salam (M-22-CB)

Yussif (M-24-WE)

Maryam (F-55-WE)

Mohd Asad (M-23- WE)

Rafael (M-25-WE)

Rachel (F-24-WE)

Sufyan (M-59-WE)

D Talbot (M-51-WE)

Kate (F-38-WE)

Sarah (F-28-WE)

Nabilah (F-30-Ir)

Suliman (M–33– WE)

Mohd Sidiq (M-36-WE)

Rahem (M-48-WE)

Najyah (F-20-WE)

Idrees (M-23-WE)

Sohail (M-28-WE)

Andrew (M-21-AC)

Ajaz (M-46-WE)

Salamah (F-45-WE)

Zainab (F-35-WS)

Saif (M-49-WE)

Aisha (F-24-WE)

A Saber (M-42-AC)

Abdul Karim (M-37-AC)

Halima (F-35-AC)

Rokanne (F-33- AC)

Daud (M-20-WE)

Khadijah (F-35-AC)

Karim (M-42-AC)

Lady Aisha (F-34-AC)

Karima (F-39-AC)

Fadil (M-38-AC)

Amaani (F-28-AC)

F	M	A B	A C	C B	IR	W E	W S
Female	Male	Asian British	Afro-Caribbean	Chinese British	Irish	White English	White Scottish

Figure 4.3: Schematic diagram of snow ball showing the places of residence of the interviewees

The Researcher

Safeeyah
Leeds

Yussif
Leeds

Idrees
Leeds

A Saber
Leeds

Khadijah
Leeds

Lateefa
Leeds

Abdul Qader
Leeds

Abdul Salam
Bradford

Maryam
Todmorden

Mohd Asad
Todmorden

Rafael
Todmorden

Rachel
Todmorden

Sufyan
Skipton

Rahem
Liverpool

Ajaz
Lincoln

Zainab
Sheffield

D Talbot
Leeds

Najyah
Hull

Salamah
Blackpool

Saif
Birmingham

Kate
Dewsbury

Sarah
Leeds

Nabilah
Leeds

Suliman
Leeds

Mohd Sidiq
Blackpool

Sohail
Harrogate

Andrew
London

Abdul Karim
London

Halima
London

Karim
Leeds

Fadil
Leeds

Lady Aisha
Leeds

Aisha
York

Rokanne
York

Daud
Newcastle

Karima
Manchester

Amaani
Manchester

Some subjects were invited to the researcher's home for dinner and the interview was done after the meal. However, a few interviewees preferred the interview to take place in a public place like a university or the office where they worked. This was more likely to be so in the case of male subjects, who were keen to avoid any situation that could be considered to be prohibited (*haram*) in Islamic law.

No matter where the respondents were met a time of free conversation was always allowed before the interview started, to make sure that the subject was in a relaxed state of mind. During the interviews it was always ensured that there was no one else in the room, in order to guarantee total confidentiality.

4.4.4 Problems Encountered with Interviews

One of the problems at the outset in finding converts to Islam was that converts are scattered across England and they do not reside together in ghetto-like enclaves. Yet being already familiar with the Muslim community in Britain, and also being acquainted with several converts, proved to be an advantage in seeking them out.

Another problem encountered in interview studies is that the sex of the interviewer poses problems (Finch, 1984: 72). Being a female interviewer was a disadvantage in interviewing male converts. Two of the male interviewees were uncomfortable about talking to a female whom they did not know, and telling her all about their past. Three potential male interviewees simply rejected the whole idea and refused to be interviewed. No reasons were given.

4.4.5 The Subjects

The group studied was made up of seventeen females and twenty males. The ethnic composition and social backgrounds of the respondents were quite varied, and the ethnic group categories have been defined by using the Census 2001 classification.

Table 4.2 shows some personal details. Information regarding the age that the subjects were when they converted, and the year in which they did so, is shown in Table 4.3. In Table 4.4 the ethnic group, along with the place where the subject grew up is displayed. Employment, along with the qualifications that the subjects hold, is shown in Table 4.5. Table 4.6 presents the religion of the interviewees before they became Muslim.

The study demanded close personal contact with the subjects. Therefore, consequently, some long-lasting relationships with a number of converts developed.

Table 4.2: Some personal information of the interviewees

Interviewee Name	Safeeyah	Yussif	Idrees	A Saber	Khadijah	Lateefa	Maryam
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female
Marital status	Single	Married	Single	Married	Married	Single	Divorced

Interviewee Name	Sohail	Andrew	Abdul Karim	Halima	Karim	Fadil	Abdul Qader	Abdul Salam	Mohd Asad	Rafael
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Marital status	Single	Single	Married	Married	Married	Married	Single	Single	Single	Married

Interviewee Name	Rachel	Sufyan	Rahem	Ajaz	Zainab	Lady Aisha	D Talbot	Najyah	Salamah	Saif
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Male	Female	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male
Marital status	Married	Married	Married	Divorced	Married	Divorced	Married	Married	Married	Married

Interviewee Name	Aisha	Rokanne	Daud	Karima	Amaani	Kate	Sarah	Nabilah	Suliman	Mohd Sidiq
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male
Marital status	Single	Married	Married	Married	Divorced	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married

Total					
Female	**Male**	**Single**	**Married**	**Divorced**
17	20	9	24	4

Table 4.3: Year and age at conversion

Interviewee Name	Safeeyah	Yussif	Idrees	A Saber	Khadijah	Lateefa	Maryam		
Age at Conversion	21	21	19	30	24	19	37		
Year of Conversion	1998	1997	1998	1990	1992	1999	1981		

Interviewee Name	Sohail	Andrew	Abdul Karim	Halima	Karim	Fadil	Abdul Qader	Abdul Salam	Mohd Asad	Rafael
Age at Conversion	24	21	18	29	29	30	20	19	27	15
Year of Conversion	1994	2000	1992	1996	1989	1996	1999	1995	1996	1986

Interviewee Name	Rachel	Sufyan	Rahem	Ajaz	Zainab	Lady Aisha	D Talbot	Najyah	Salamah	Saif
Age at Conversion	20	29	40	36	27	24	30	18	40	39
Year of Conversion	1990	1977	1995	1996	1994	1993	1980	1990	1994	1993

Interviewee Name	Aisha	Rokanne	Daud	Karima	Amaani	Kate	Sarah	Nabilah	Suliman	Mohd Sidiq
Age at Conversion	22	33	19	33	26	30	24	26	22	26
Year of Conversion	1998	1994	1999	1995	1998	1993	1984	1996	1990	1995

Table 4.4: Ethnic group and place of growing up of the interviewees

Interviewee Name	Safeeyah	Yussif	Idrees	A Saber	Khadijah	Lateefa	Maryam
Ethnic Group	A B	W E	W E	A C	A C	W E	W E
Growing up Place	Leeds	North Liverpool	Kent	East London	USA	Essex	West Yorkshire

Interviewee Name	Sohail	Andrew	Abdul Karim	Halima	Karim	Fadil	Abdul Qader	Abdul Salam	Mohd Asad	Rafael
Ethnic Group	W E	A C	AC	A C	AC	A C	W E	C B	W E	B S
Growing up Place	Manchester	Trinidad	East London	London	N West London	East London	Leeds	Leeds	Lancashire	Manchester

Interviewee Name	Rachel	Sufyan	Rahem	Ajaz	Zainab	Lady Aisha	D Talbot	Najyah	Salamah	Saif
Ethnic Group	W E	W E	W E	W E	W S	A C	W E	W E	W E	W E
Growing up Place	Manchester	East London	Liverpool	Tottenham	Scotland	London	Leeds	Birmingham	Yorkshire	Wales

Interviewee Name	Aisha	Rokanne	Daud	Karima	Amaani	Kate	Sarah	Nabilah	Suliman	Mohd Sidiq
Ethnic Group	W E	AC	W E	A C	A C	W E	W E	Ir	W E	W E
Growing up Place	York	Leeds	Newcastle	Manchester	Manchester	York	Manchester	Ireland	Newcastle	Blackpool

Table 4.5: Interviewees' description of occupation and qualification

Interviewee Name	Safeeyah	Yussif	Idrees	A Saber	Khadijah	Lateefa	Maryam
Occupation	Student	Student	Student	Student	Unemployed	Student	Teacher
Qualification	"A" Level	B.A	B.A	B.A	B.A	B.Sc.	Diploma in Art

Interviewee Name	Sohail	Andrew	Abdul Karim	Halima	Karim	Fadil	Abdul Qader	Abdul Salam	Mohd Asad	Rafael
Occupation	Travelling Worker	Unemployed	Secretary	Student	Radio Presenter	Office Worker	Work in Bookshop	Postman	Factory Worker	Manager
Qualification	"A" Level	B.Eng.	B.A	GCSE	"O" Level	"A" Level	"A" Level	"A" Level	Computer Operator	Degree in Politics

Interviewee Name	Rachel	Sufyan	Rahem	Ajaz	Zainab	Lady Aisha	D Talbot	Najyah	Salamah	Saif
Occupation	Journalism	VAT Inspector	Teacher	Electronic Engineer	Full Time Mother	Secretary	Radio Technician	Full Time Mother	Teacher	Qualified Engineer
Qualification	Ph.D.	"A" Level	"A" Level	Airspace Studies	"A" Level	"A" Level	"O" Level GCSE	GCSE	"A" Level	"A" Level

Interviewee Name	Aisha	Rokanne	Daud	Karima	Amaani	Kate	Sarah	Nabilah	Suliman	Mohd Sidiq
Occupation	Student	Skills Officer	Shop Worker	Shop Worker	Receptionist	Lecturer	Teacher	Full Time Mother	Lecturer	Student Postman
Qualification	B.Sc.	GCSE	GCSE	No degree	"A" Level	M.A	B.A	"A" Level ICT Degree	Ph.D.	Ph.D.

Table 4.6: Former religion of the interviewees[2]

Religion Before Islam											
Religion	Catholic	Roman Catholic	Moral	Sikh	Christian	Jewish	Presbyterian	Buddhist	Church of England	Protestant	No religion
Total	3	1	9	1	16	1	1	1	2	1	1

4.5 Summary

In this chapter I have outlined and provided a critique of my research strategies and methods. The primary data and the issue of the framework and the procedure of in-depth interviews have been analysed and discussed. My sample group was relatively small and cannot be taken as indicative of a wider selection of Muslim converts in Britain, but the extended and candid interviews undertaken provided rich data, too much in fact for it all to be included in the subsequent discussion and analysis. My strategy was to focus on depth rather than breadth, allowing my respondents the opportunity to articulate their stories freely, and develop some empathetic understanding of their religious lives through my own personal participation. I have suggested that, within this strategy, my relationship with my

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[2] Nine of the interviewees said that they were taught moral values regarding personal behaviour and attitudes that were derived from Christian culture. Because these values had not been identified by their parents as specifically Christian and did not include Church doctrine on Virgin Birth, vicarious atonement on the cross or the Trinity, their religious upbringing has been categorised as 'moral' rather than 'Christian'.

respondents has been dialogical, and I have considered the value of oral testimony as a medium for the research.

It is very important to note that in this work the reader will come across tables of data, and the data regarding ethnic identity, religious upbringing, etc., is taken from the information provided by the interviewees about themselves. It therefore records the interviewee's perspective only. It is equally important to note that such information cannot be taken as representative of English or UK citizens as a whole. It must also be kept in mind that because the sample was accessed by a 'snowball method' it is not necessarily representative of all UK or English converts to Islam. Clearly a sample accessed by this method, with different individuals as a starting point, could have produced different results, especially regarding personal details and background.

5. 1   Introduction

In this chapter, I begin to investigate the experiences of the converts to Islam who

have been interviewed for this thesis. As previously stated I shall be employing

the framework for analysis provided by Lewis Rambo's stage model. These

stages are Context, Crisis, Quest, Encounter, Interaction, Commitment and

Consequences.

As Rambo states (1993:16-17) a stage model is appropriate in that conversion is a

process of change over time that generally exhibits a sequence of processes, but

also a going back and forth between stages. A stage may be seen as either a

particular element or a period during the process of change. It is clear from his

comments and also from the data analysed in this thesis that a sequential approach

is not entirely satisfactory and therefore a simplified systemic model has been

provided for the present study. The systemic model, with a different stage in the

centre, according to which stage is under discussion at any given point in the

analysis, is intended to show how the different stages overlap or influence each

other in ways that are not always simply sequential. As will be seen, different

academic disciplines have greater or less relevance, according to which stage of

the conversion process is being analysed. The first three stages of conversion

process postulated by Rambo are analysed in this chapter, viz. stage 1: context,

stage 2: crisis and stage 3:quest. A range of issues will be considered bearing in

mind the whole life span of the individual convert. I recognise that it is not

realistic to isolate rigidly culture, society, persons and religion from one another;

these features of human existence are inextricable. Despite the fact that some

stages of conversion have been found to overlap or influence each other, the

context of the individual's life, stage 1 in Rambo's model, remains an appropriate

starting point.

5. 2   Stage One: Context

The macro context or wider social community in Britain is relevant to the nature

of the micro context of the individual.   To some degree the macro and micro

contexts integrate and co-ordinate with each other. I am concerned in this chapter

to examine the micro context, but it is necessary to take a quick look at some main

features of British society as 'the big picture'. After that I will examine the micro

context, the more immediate world of a person's family, ethnic group and

religious community.   Conversion takes place within the dynamic of context.

Context embraces an overall matrix in which the force-field of people, events,

personal experience, and institutions operate on conversion. Context is the first

stage (Figure 5.1), because it structures and shapes the nature of the conversion

processes.

According to Gration (1983: 157-163) every conversion is in a context which is

multifaceted, embracing the political, social, economic and religious domain in

which a person is living at the time of his/her conversion. But we should not

forget here that conversion does not only have an external context, but also

motivations and aspirations internal to the person concerned. The avenues of

communication, the range of religious options available, people's flexibility and

opportunities, these factors have a direct impact on who converts and how
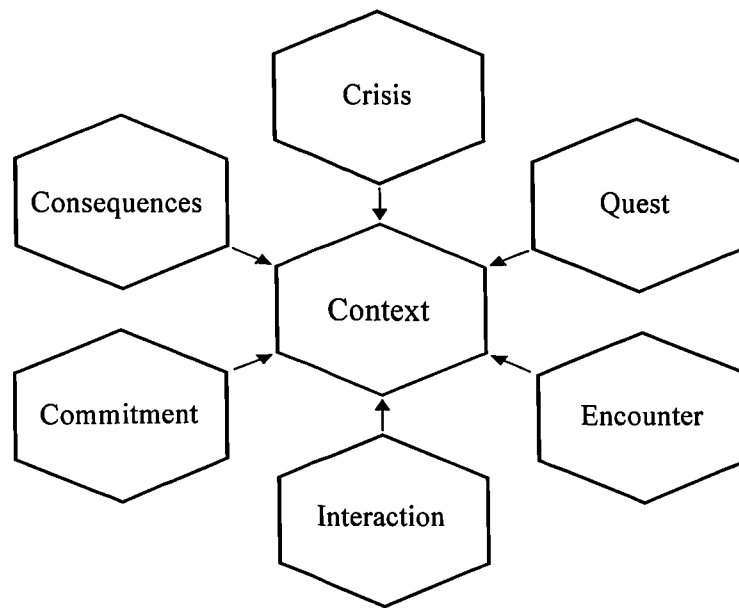
conversion happens.

Figure 5.1: Effect the other stages can have on the context

5. 3   Micro Context: Social Factors

The converts who participated in this study span a wide range of backgrounds regarding their former beliefs, practices and social life. All the converts in this work have a good educational background and qualifications. Table 5.1 shows the qualification level of the converts: three had PhD degrees, one convert has an MA degree, ten had a bachelor's degree, four had a diploma, thirteen had A level and the last six had the General Certificate of Secondary Education, GCSE. Table 5.2 presents the social classes of the converts. Two of the converts classified themselves as upper middle class, while fifteen of the converts associated themselves with the middle class and the last twenty identified with the working class. They seem to have had a wide range of occupations, from postman to university lecturer. Many of them appeared to have attained successful positions in various professional fields such as teaching, journalism and engineering. Three

women preferred to be housewives and look after their families. Of the 37

converts, 10 were Afro-Caribbean. Seventeen are females and 20 are males. As

for marital status at time of interview, 24 were married, 4 were divorced, and 9

were single.

Table 5.1: Level of completed education   **Table 5.2:** Social Classes
       or Qualification level

Qualification	Total Number
GCSE	6
A level	13
Diploma	4
College (BA/BSc)	10
Master Degree	1
PhD Degree	3

Categories	Total Number
Working class	20
Middle class	15
Upper middle	2

Now the reported childhood experiences of those interviewed will be described.

5.3.1   Childhood Experiences: Religious Upbringing

Concerning religious upbringing in Köse's sample, the converts reported that they

came from families with no particularly strong identification with any religion.

Eighty-five percent of them came from families who did not belong to a church,

or who were not active participants in a church (Köse, 1996: 38-39).

The converts to Islam involved in this research also tended to have come from

families where there was no strong identification with any religion. Thirty two

percent come from families who did not belong to a church, or who were not

active participants in a church. Most of the interviewees gave the following or a

similar account about their parents: 'I had no awareness. My family was not

religious'. Most described their parents' connection with the church in terms of

ceremonial attendance like weddings and funerals. One such subject, Abdul

Qadir (date of interview 3 July 2000)[1], described his family as follows:

> *My mother used to take me to Church but she never knew*
> *anything about religion. She only went for the social aspect of it.*
> *She thought the Christians were very nice and that I could play*
> *with their children.*

Kate for example (12 March 2000) described how her mother was a practising

Christian but her father, although a Methodist, would not attend church. Kate said

that she had received aspects of institutional religion from her mother, but

received deep God-consciousness from her father. She described her father as not

identifying with any institution, but nevertheless aware of God in his life.

According to self-attested religious upbringing, the sample in this study consisted

of the following (Table 5.3). Adding together the different denominations, we

therefore find 24/37 had a Christian background of some identifiable sort. All

those who felt they had a 'moral' rather than Christian background could perhaps

best be described as post-Christian.

The sample in this work presents eleven subjects who described themselves as

having 'no' or 'weak' religious upbringing. An example is Muhammad Asad (28

July 2000) who said:

> *My parents did not arrange for me to go to Sunday school, I*
> *went by myself. I was around 10 years old. My mother taught*
> *me what was right and wrong, there were religious education*
> *from school and I learnt a lot from there.*

---

[1] Date in brackets after interviewee's name indicates date of interview. Refer back to charts in Chapter IV for details of gender, ethnicity, religious background etc.

Table 5.3: Religious upbringing

Religion	Buddhist	Catholic	Christian	Church of England	Jewish	Moral	No religion	Presbyterian	Protestant	Roman Catholic	Sikh
Number	1	3	16	2	1	9	1	1	1	1	1

Safeeyah (3 February 2000) said that as a child she had believed in God and used

to read the Bible regularly up until the age of fourteen but she kept her religious

beliefs to herself because she was afraid of ridicule, because her family were not

religious and religion was very rarely discussed except in a negative way. She

never thought about the nature of Christ, whether he was human or divine, but she

was more interested in what he said. At the time she felt that the only way a

person could truly follow Christ was to cut oneself off from this society and

become a nun.

Ajaz (9 September 2000) described his religious upbringing by saying:

> *My parents were not particularly religious. We used to go to*
> *Sunday school. That was only because my parents wanted time*
> *on their own for the afternoon. I used to go to church because I*
> *had to.*

Sixteen of the sample answered 'normal', when asked about parental religious

upbringing, while ten described it as 'strong' (Table 5.4). A typical comment

from the sample was 'Although my parents had a basic belief in God, they did not

regularly attend an organised Church'.

Table 5.4: Parental Religious Upbringing

Upbringing	No / Weak	Normal	Strong
Number	11	16	10

Sarah (26 September 2000) said she attended Sunday school when she was small.

She went to Church occasionally with her parents. Daud Talbot (20 August 2000)

said:

> *My family were from a Methodist background, which is a*
> *branch of Christianity. We were not particularly strict with*
> *Methodism. We would attend Church of England also. As*
> *children we were expected to go every Sunday to the Sunday*
> *school. All the adults would go to the main service. After the*
> *age of 9 or 10 we would leave the Church.*

The majority of the sample that fell into the 'strong' category tended to be of

Afro-Caribbean origin. Afro-Caribbean society as a whole seems to place a much

greater emphasis on religion than does the majority British society. A strong

belief in God, regardless of the extent of church-going or formal practice of

Christianity, seemed to have been an important element in the upbringing of the

Caribbean converts in this study. Khadijah (12 March 2000), for example, when

she was asked if she believed in God from an early age, answered in the following

way:

> *I believed in God, because God was always a major subject*
> *within the home. You will find that among many African-*
> *Caribbeans. It's a major subject. The name of God is always*
> *called over your meals. You thank God for your meals. You*
> *thank God that He has given you in life. There is a prayer that*
> *you will find most people will know, who are of the same origin*
> *as me, because you are told to say it before you go to bed, and*
> *basically, if I can remember it, it says, "As I lay my head down*
> *to sleep, I pray that the Lord will take my soul and keep.*

Abdul Karim (23 June 2000) said:

> *My father was Jamaican and my mother English. My*
> *grandparents were very religious and they used to take me to the*
> *church. My family were Roman Catholics. My grandmother*
> *brought me up with a lot of love of God. When I became a*
> *Muslim I understood God better, I didn't come from a lawless*
> *background.*

Amaani (6 November 2000) remembered her early religious upbringing and how she was brought up as a Christian attending church twice on Sundays. In the morning, she used to attend morning service with the adults and in the afternoon Sunday school for children. She said that she had been taught good morals.

Although the piety of parents was not specifically examined, the converts in this study described their mothers as more religious than their fathers and they learnt their religion through their mothers rather than their fathers. For example Idris (28 April 2000) described how his mother took him to church, and she used to take him to Christian camps between the age of 10 and 15 years old, and how much she encouraged him to be a Christian at a very young age. Muhammad Sidiq (5 September 2000) talked about his mother by saying:

> *My mother was a practising Christian and she took us to church*
> *every Sunday without fail.*

This, in fact, is congruent with the finding that women are more religious than men (Argyle, 1985: 71).

Now we have looked at the converts' childhood religious experience, and since we are still in the stage of Context, it is necessary to move on and look at the subjects during the period prior to conversion.

5. 4   Prior to Conversion: Religion

Only two of the thirty-seven reported that they were practising their religion of

origin prior to conversion. Those who defined themselves as practising were not

practising in any deep sense but rather by habit, with the exception of Fadil (18

October 2000) who said that he was born into a Christian family, and in his teens

became fervently religious and was genuinely devout and practised regular prayer,

meditation, fasting and self denial. Nine reported being nominal, weak or

disillusioned with their old religion. Rokanne (26 September 2000) said:

> *People used to come to my house from the church talking about*
> *religion, to pray or sit and talk. Christianity was not what I was*
> *looking for, there was something missing. With religion I*
> *always felt that you would have to give something up, makeup,*
> *disco, mini skirts, alcohol, you have to live a certain way of life.*

Sufyan (30 September 2000) said that before he became aware of Islam, he had a

strong belief in God, but he could not find an exact expression of that belief in any

of the churches he used to attend. He said that there always seemed to him to be a

hypocrisy about church goers, a sanctimonious 'holier than thou' attitude which

contradicted the kind loving nature that he saw in Jesus. Twenty three of the

converts had had no religion or were not interested in religion at all. For example,

Suliman (18 September 2000) said that at the age of 17 he began to wonder about

the meaning of life. This was because his grandfather died of cancer. He watched

his grandfather die slowly for over two years, and it was quite difficult. After he

died Suliman decided that it could not be just for someone to die in such a

manner, so he decided he did not have need of a religion. Abdul Salam (9 June

2000) said that although his father was a Buddhist in his background and outlook,

his parents chose not to follow any religion. But Abdul Salam believed in God

from an early age. His school was Church of England and taught Christianity.

Therefore he believed in God. He said that he believed in the afterlife and the

Day of Judgement and he thought that everything he did would be counted. One

interviewee reported that he was more or less atheist for most of his life but he

turned to God before he converted to Islam. Ajaz (9 September 2000) said:

> *When I was a teenager I did not believe. If anyone asked me if I*
> *believed in God, I would tell them no, there is no such thing.*

Two interviewees had been involved with new religious movements prior to

conversion (Table 5.5). They both left these movements long before their

conversion. For example Muhammad Asad (28 July 2000) explained how he had

studied Buddhism but it did not do anything for him. Then he looked at Hare

Krishna but did not believe in it. He also looked into Judaism but found that the

Jews rejected Jesus; therefore he could not go along with Judaism.

The material from the sample studied confirms that various motivations for

physical, emotional, and intellectual change do exist within the period before

conversion, and that it is a time for adjusting conformities and trying to sort out

what is to be accepted and what is to be rejected totally. It suggests that these

adjustments and assessments prepare the ground for conversional change, and that

it is the period in which interviewees partly or completely rejected the religion of

childhood. However it must be stated here, that it may not be so for all British

converts to Islam.

Table 5.5: Religious affiliation before conversion

Practicing religion of origin	Nominal/ weak	Atheist	No formal affiliation / not interested	Involved with a NRM
2	9	1	23	2

5.4.1 Religious Alternatives

For a significant number of converts rejection of the faith of their parents or culture did not imply a rejection of religion in general or loss of belief in God prior to conversion, since they proceeded to explore other religious alternatives following their initial rejection of a particular faith. As for 'belief in God', thirty three reported that they believed in God prior to conversion (within this group, three were not sure if they believed or not); only four had lost their belief in God (Table 5.6).

According to previous religious affiliations and belief in God prior to conversion, and to what conversion meant for these people in terms of these issues, they may be classified into two groups.

Table 5.6: Belief in God prior to conversion

Believed in God	Lost belief in God	Not sure
32	2	3

5.4.1.1 First Group

This includes those who had had no religious commitment for a long time or described themselves as nominal in their religion of origin. People who fell into

this group formed the vast majority (thirty two) of the sample. For example

Rafael (27 February 2000) said that he knew that there was a God, and if there is a

God, there must be a religion, and that God must exist in his life. Maryam (2

October 2000) said that she had always believed in God although there was no

mention of Christianity in her home, apart from the fact that Christians

commemorated Jesus's birth. She did go to a Church of England primary school

and she had been taught Bible stories in school and general good behaviour by her

parents. She said that she went to university thinking that she was a Christian, but

she did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. Sohail (23 April 2000)

explained how he always believed that there was something more powerful than

human beings. He believed very strongly in God, and he knew that he had to be

good because God was watching everything that he did. Daud (10 August 2000)

said he always believed in God and he used to go to Sunday school from when he

was very young.

For them conversion meant a religious intensification, not through the religion of

childhood, but through a different religion. It was returning to a religious life.

Before conversion, religion for them was something called Christianity or

Judaism. Consider the case of Amaani (6 November 2000):

> *I could never understand why you needed to go through Jesus or*
> *a priest or vicar to get to God. It seemed like taking insurance*
> *through a broker; providing work for someone but not getting*
> *anything (yourself). I tried to live as I felt a Christian should*
> *live; caring for my family, working hard, trying to be honest,*
> *and not interfering with others.*

5.4.1.2   Second Group

This included those who described themselves as religious for a period of time,

but became disillusioned later and were on the brink of losing their belief in their

religion prior to conversion. Around four fell into this group. Within this group

are those who were not sure if they had completely lost belief in God after

rejecting their religion. Yussif (11 March 2000) for instance, said that the earliest

recollection he had was when he had to draw a picture of Jacob's Ladder, the

ladder which allowed him to meet with God. Yussif had been asked by his

teacher to draw God. He said that others drew God as a man but he drew God as a

little ball with two eyes in it, and the teacher told him that he was wrong and that

God is a man. In his early teenage years he did not think that there was more to

life than what could be seen. But at the age of 20 he started to think about the

meaning of life and he pondered over the idea that maybe God existed, so he

decided to pursue belief in God.

For them conversion meant finding God again. Around three fell into this

category. Consider the case of Fadil (18 October 2000)[2]. He described how he

went through the confirmation ritual in the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of

England, which encompassed all the ceremonial he so loved; statues, bells,

incense and so forth. Then, all of a sudden, he lost his faith. Something happened

to somebody for whom he had prayed. He said for the first time he felt that his

prayers were not being answered. He had, in a childlike way, seen the world as

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[2] See Appendix 2 for detailed transcription. The following paragraph is taken from Fadil's
testimony (but rendered in the third person).

good and belonging to God. He said that he viewed the world now with newly

acid (sic) eyes, questioning everything he hitherto believed in. Terminal illness,

disability, earthquakes; all of these things pointed, in his mind, to the fact that

God did not exist. It was all a trick and everything was a lie. Then he said that he

felt total emptiness, loneliness; he had no-one with whom he could discuss his

feelings. Slowly, study of contemplative lives, like those of saints and hermits far

removed from the materialistic world, helped him to believe again. Fadil said that

somehow he found God again. However, while faith in God returned, faith in the

church did not. He still questioned the complex doctrines and ceremonies, and

challenged everything.

As I mentioned before at the beginning of this section, in modern Western culture

religion has been relegated to the edges of consciousness. Society has become

more complex, offering many choices, and embodying change. The traditional

models have stopped providing all the answers. Consequently, the individual has

become a member of an increasingly secular society (Baumeister, 1986: 77).

These circumstances seem to be reflected in the interviewees' decreased response

to organised religion.

5.5   Stage Two: Crisis

The crisis stage, proposed by Rambo, must be assessed carefully in relation to

conversion to Islam. What is the nature of the crisis that stimulates or facilitates

conversion? Are all crises equally important to the process? Two basic types of

crisis seem to be significant: a crisis that calls into question one's fundamental

orientation to life, and the crises that in and of themselves are rather mild but are

the proverbial 'straw that breaks the camel's back' (Bankston, 1981: 279). It is

easy to see that death, suffering, and other painful experiences can challenge one's

interpretation of life, calling everything into question, but other events that appear

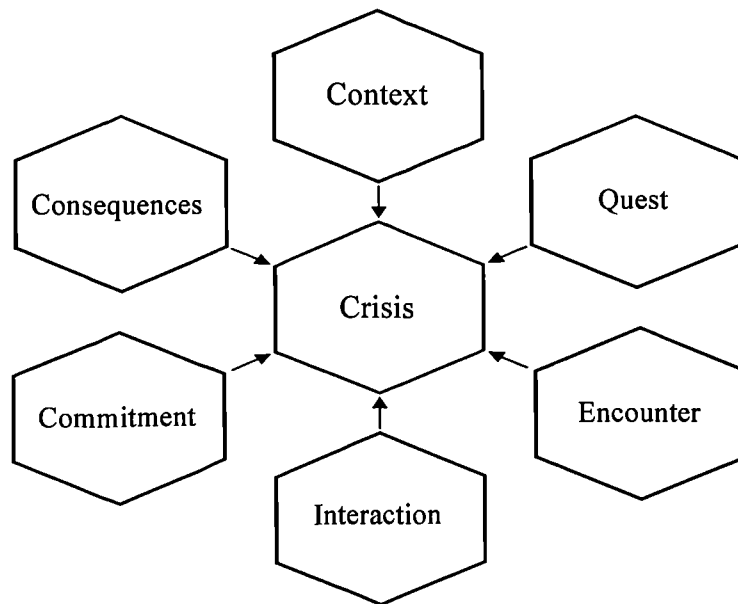to be rather insignificant may also eventually serve as trigger-crises (Figure: 5.2).

Figure 5.2: Effect the other stages can have on crisis stage

Among the first social scientists to note the importance of crisis in the conversion

process were Lofland and Stark (1965: 862). They found that some sort of

tension in the lives of participants in their study, who lived in an urban area,

triggered a religious quest. Clearly, stress, tension, or crisis alone is not enough to

explain conversion, although these may be a catalyst of some sort. For example,

mystical experience, near-death experience and illness and healing are often an

initiator of the conversion process[3]. The precise nature of the crisis will vary from person to person and from situation to situation.

I will now look to the interviewees' childhood and adolescence for the presence or absence of emotional turmoil, or personal stress.

5.5.1 Happiness Versus Unhappiness

To examine these issues the interview questions aimed at disclosing converts' emotional well-being during childhood and adolescence. They referred to the person's perception of their parents and relationships with them, and to specific events during childhood and adolescence (Table 5.7).

Table 5.7: Happiness versus unhappiness

Upbringing	Happy childhood	Moderate	Unhappy childhood
Number	10	15	12

About two thirds of the subjects interviewed in the present study drew a picture of a happy or moderately happy childhood (with only one described as 'very happy') while one third said they had an unhappy childhood. . Ten reported a 'happy' childhood.   Lateefa (12 June 2000) for example, described her childhood as fairly satisfactory while Najyah (14 May 2000) described her family life, schooling, and holidays as exceptionally happy and enjoyable. Fifteen described this period as moderately happy.   Karim (9 August 2000) for example said:

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[3] For more reading on this issue, see Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

> *My life seemed pretty normal to me, whatever normal was. A*
> *young mother brought me up, her and my father had separated*
> *and she had two other children besides me. For some people*
> *that was an abnormal environment to grow up in, however from*
> *my perspective it was normal because I knew nothing else.*

Suliman (18 September 2000) said that he had a normal childhood. He and his

family lived in a close society, so he did not consider anything that he did as

abnormal.   But, as he said, he might consider what other people did as abnormal.

Rachel (7 February 2000) also described her childhood experiences as happy with

her family and life.   Only 12 reported an unhappy childhood. Muhammad Asad

(28 July 2000) said that he was unhappy with some of things that happened to him

but he preferred not to go on details. Salamah (17 June 2000) said that she was

not happy.   She thought that she was very different from everyone. Her parents

kept her very innocent; she was not allowed to grow up like the girls around her

who grew up very quickly. She said that she never fitted in with the society and

she was constantly in a state of conflict and turmoil. Two reported being very

unhappy.   Maryam (2 October 2000) said she was fairly dissatisfied with her life.

She said that there was no society around her.   She lived on a farm with her

parents and young sister; she never saw her classmates outside school.   Her

grandparents would come and visit her family in the summer holidays. The only

way out for her was to get an education. She did not have other children to play

with.

Yussif (11 March 2000) said:

> *I was between 10 and 14. I was so sick of life. I was very*
> *unhappy and I went to my bedroom to think about nothing. I*
> *tried to cancel out my existence by remembering nothing. It was*

> *a very strong meditation experience for me. Thoughts still*
> *cropped up in my mind. I tried to think that there was no earth*
> *and no space and I thought some eyes were watching me.*

As for traumatic events in childhood or early adolescence, 4 of those interviewed stated that their parents were divorced. For example Abdul Qader (3 July 2000) said that his father left them when he was very young. His mother raised three children by herself and was very bitter about that because it was very difficult for her. He said how hard it was for his mother to keep the children in line. Idrees (28 April 2000) said:

> *At the age of 13 my parents divorced and my dad lived with his*
> *girlfriend. I lived with my mother and my sister for three years.*
> *Later on my mother remarried and I lived with them. I did not*
> *get on very well with my stepfather and that is what changed me.*

These findings clearly do not suggest that all who have specific disturbing, traumatic events during their childhood, or have experienced early parental divorce will be religious converts. It may only suggest that difficulties in early childhood may be one among many antecedents of religious conversion.

5.5.2   Adolescence Experience: Rejection

It has been noticed that the collective sample in this research tended to adopt beliefs, cognitive changes, and a lifestyle different from their original culture. Their parent's religious beliefs were generally weak or unmentioned, or on the other hand, taking one's religion too seriously was considered something 'weird'. The interviewees turned away from their parent's religious orientation and adopted new views that better fitted their psychological needs and their view of life. In this study Nabilah's (26 September 2000) recollection of her childhood

and adolescent years gives us a good example of why she rejected her parents' religion. She was a Roman Catholic. She used to go to Church every Sunday with her parents. At the age of 7 she took the sacrament of Holy Communion. At the age of 11 she was confirmed, thus accepting Christianity and the faith. At this age young people were expected to understand everything about Christianity and Nabilah was expected to affirm her faith according to the teachings of Roman Catholicism. She said that at that time in her life she accepted everything and did not question it. However, for the first time, when she was a young teenager, she started to rebel about going to church, and did not believe in it; for her it was so false. She said that the priests, who had to be celibate, had no experience of life outside the priesthood. They knew nothing about marriage and bringing up children, but would preach to them how to live their lives and bring up their children; to her it was fake and uninspiring. She said: '*I stopped going. There was nothing spiritual for me in the Church, much to my parents' disapproval.*'

Kate (12 March 2000) recalled being very unhappy in church at an early age. She said that when she was eight or nine she was due to be confirmed and she remembered when her mother took her to the church, how she felt absolutely petrified that God was going to kill her because she was going to declare, 'In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost'. She said that she knew instinctively that it was wrong, but she could not understand why she felt it was wrong. Kate went on:

> *I remember standing in front of the altar, big stained glass*
> *window behind me. I remember thinking that God was going to*
> *send a bolt of lightning through this window and he's going to*

> *kill me. He is going to be angry with me because I am going to*
> *say something that I know is completely wrong.*

She described how she felt so scared that she crossed her fingers behind her back. And when they told her to say it, she was waiting for the bolt of lightning to come through the window, but nothing happened, and she felt that God had forgiven her because she had crossed her fingers.

The material from the sample studied suggests that for the vast majority of the subjects interviewed, adolescence was not the prime time for conversion. However, it was the period when they partly rejected the religion of childhood. My interviewees' accounts of their childhood experiences and their parents' attitudes towards religion, showed that deeply held religious belief tended not to be heavily imposed as an important part of their early environment and that they rejected the religious beliefs of their childhood in adolescence.

5. 6 Emotional and Cognitive Behaviour

Young people are involved in many emotional, cognitive and behavioural issues. They struggle with life or have ideological conflicts regarding altruism or emotional intensity. The behaviour of many young people reflects this tension and quest for identity. As the adolescent context for religious conversion reflects the same thing, many look for the 'right choice' in these years. Their cognitive development impacts on their religious concerns. This context may be a time of faith development for young people, and it may be appropriate for religious conversion to come to the fore, thus providing an answer to identity confusion (Gillespie, 1991: 180-181). However, according to Baumeister (1986: 170),

religious conversion in the form of solving an adolescent identity crisis is something of the past. The decline of religious faith and religious experience among young people has deprived them of a means of solving such crises. Whether it was emotional or cognitive matters that the converts interviewed were concerned with during adolescence will be now examined.

The accounts given by those interviewed for this study confirm Köse's finding. Twenty of the 37 reported no emotional stress during adolescence. For example, Safeeyah (3 February 2000) said that when she reached sixteen or seventeen she fell in love with a student, and that was very powerful, very strong; that took over a lot of her life. She said that she always had a strong feeling for beauty. Twelve interviewees described their adolescence as moderate or mixed as far as emotional stress was concerned. Rafael (27 February 2000) said that from a very early age he regarded himself as an outsider. About his experiences at school he said that he used to challenge the teachers because he knew that a lot of what they were teaching was not God. He said that his mother used to buy him a lot of books. He said that the more books he read, the more she bought. The best time of his life was when he went on to higher education. He enjoyed attending London University from 1990 to 1994. As he was on his own he did not get into any fights. His best friends were from the University. He said that this was the happiest time of his life.

Five interviewees said they had an unhappy adolescence. Some converts involved in this study had experienced a tormented adolescence period as a result of their relationship with the outside world, which eventually precipitated their

conversion. Muhammad Sidiq (5 September 2000), Zainab (16 May 2000), Abdullah Saber (20 March 2000), and Idrees (28 April 2000) are among those who had gone through such experiences. Consider the case of Idrees (Appendix 3). He said that the most significant part of his life was when his grades were good enough for him to do his 'A' levels at a boys' grammar school. He had done his GCSE previously. Then he was very shocked by his 'A' level results as he had done very well prior to taking the exams in Art, English Literature and Ancient History. This was the most radical time of his life. He was searching for something but he did not know what it was. He was growing his hair long, going to parties and was into music, but did not know what he wanted to do as an adult. He was trying to find something that would help shape his life. Thinking that this might be music, Idrees started to take lessons. He began taking drugs and was mixing with people who were into drinking and taking drugs. He wanted to try new things and he tried them. He felt that there was something inside him that needed fulfilling and he was searching for a balance in his life. He went to parties, finding a variety of friends in his search for happiness. These types of strong emotional experiences were with him until he embraced Islam. He said: .

> *The key feature that attracted me was that it was something to*
> *reshape my life. Islam was instructing me, it was telling me*
> *what to do. I was happy to do any thing that Islam required of*
> *me. I am not really sure. I spent a lot of time with Yussif during*
> *Ramadhan talking about Islam. I told him that I was very*
> *depressed and unhappy and I asked him if he felt some kind of*
> *balance being a Muslim. Yussif said yes. I sat nine days with*
> *Yussif because I was not completely sure; I needed a bit of*
> *encouragement, I so much wanted to change my life. I thought*
> *Islam would give me balance in my life. It was approximately*
> *one month after the initial attraction that I accepted Islam".*

Human beings need to have an organised framework through which their life takes on meaning and purpose. Adolescence is precisely that period in which people begin to orient themselves within some meaningful system. Thus, a religious system exists precisely as one type of meaningful system in which individuals can position themselves, understand, interpret, and direct their lives (Spilka and Gorsuch, 1985: 200).

As well as the emotional side of adolescence this study also tried to explore the convert's interest in religious, political or other questions that reached beyond the circumstances of their own personal lives, such as concern over social injustice and specific unresolved religious doubts (Table 5.8).

Table 5.8: Emotional and Cognitive Issues

Emotional matters	Both emotional and cognitive	Religious concerns
23	11	3

There are some periods in an individual's life that are more crucial than others for structural changes. For example Karima (22 November 2000) said:

> *At the age of fifteen to sixteen I began to wonder about the*
> *meaning of life. This was because my oldest brother died of a*
> *heart attack. It was a very difficult time for all of us.*

Sohail (23 April 2000) described his adolescence. He took an interest in most things, he was always aware of what was going on in other parts of the world, so he decided to keep an archive of what was happening. He bought different papers and magazines. Sufyan (30 September 2000) said that he was thinking most of

the time about the meaning of life on a material level, not a spiritual level. He

stopped going to church around the age of fourteen or fifteen. He realised that he

was not going to get very far, so he started doing his 'A' levels and he gained 5

'A' levels.

Rokanne (26 September 2000) said:

> *I left home at the age of 18. I was working. I formed a*
> *relationship with somebody then. Within relationships things*
> *happen which make you question; not only the relationship, but*
> *also yourself. I have often wondered "What's the purpose of my*
> *life? What is my role in society? What am I meant to do? What*
> *am I going to achieve?.*

Sarah (26 September 2000) said that she was very rebellious at high school. She

did things that she knew her parents would disapprove of, like going out with

boys and saying that she was one place when she was another. She said that she

never drank or took drugs but she was 'naughty at 17'. After a few years she got

worried; she thought if there was a God, what would He think of her behaving in

that way. Daud (10 August 2000) said that he stopped going to church between

the ages of nine and twelve, but when he was 15 he went to a church. He said that

at the church they were asking Jesus all the time for everything and not God. He

said that he did not like it and was very uncomfortable and he thought that there

must be another way of worshipping God. He told his friend that he was not

comfortable and his friend said that he thought that he should have been born a

Jew, because they worship God, rather than Jesus, and have rules to follow. Daud

said that he needed at that time to worship one God and have one book to follow

which would guide him as to what to do. But he said that he was more interested in football at this stage.

Adolescence is a period of transition in approach to cognitive tasks and moral issues; it is a period for decision making in religion, politics, work and social relationships (Marcia, 1980: 160). Many of the converts involved in the present study claim that adolescence was the time when they began questioning the application of their religion in society at large or looking for answers to life's basic questions. It is the time to attempt to fashion a consistent personal code of morals and behaviour in a changing culture of uncertain values. Subjects also reported a lack of interest in the religion of origin in late teenage, although a few reported disillusionment about religion in early adolescence.

5.6.1   Rebellion Conversion

It was rare for converts involved in this study to describe their adolescence as a period of rebellion. The interviews showed that in only a few cases hatred, hostility, and destructive attitudes, to a lesser degree towards their parents and to a greater degree towards society, had been involved in the preconversion period. As a consequence of this rebellion they converted to Islam. For such rebellion to result in conversion was found in only one case, whereas in Köse's sample there were three cases (Köse, 1996: 54-55).

The case of Karim (9 August 2000) gives an example of the rebellion type of conversion (Appendix 4). Karim described himself with a lot of emotion and anger at racism:

> *I have never been satisfied with this country because it has
> never recognised the people that are born in it that are black;
> they want to keep them back in this country. All my work is
> designed to smash the stereotypes because they said that if you
> are black, poor, ignorant you are not capable of much.*

When he came out of prison, he came out to many depressing things in November 1979. After reading the autobiography of Malcolm X[4], he knew that he was a Muslim, but at that time he did nothing about it. It was three days before his birthday and he needed money. He said that no one actively introduced him to Islam. After all the traumas in his life, including going to a mental institution, he decided that the only thing he wanted to fear was God. He did not want to fear the people who were trying to send him crazy. It made sense to him to be a Muslim because that was the only refuge for him.

> *After my recuperation I started to look at Islam again. After a
> month I read the Qur'an in eight days. Four weeks after that I
> knew all my prayers in Arabic. I have never looked back since.
> I read the Qur'an through regularly. The idea of God being one,
> the idea of submitting to him, and fearing him and him alone
> really appeals to me because I have been a bad boy. I did not
> fear anybody before so it made perfect sense. I had to have fear
> for somebody.*

> *My heart now has faith it never had; my mind has never felt so
> secure. I have never felt the type of peace I feel now. Even in
> the most adversity I feel peaceful.*

So far Karim's conversion seems to be intellectual as well as affectional. As the above account illustrates, totalistic struggle against society was a most

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[4] Original name Malcolm Little, born 1925. U.S. Black civil rights leader. Converted to the Nation of Islam, a black separatist sect, while in prison. Converted to mainstream Islam. Not long after his well publicised conversion, he was assassinated in 1965.

outstanding manifestation. Therefore, 'contumacious' conversion, resistance to authority, as identified by Josselson (1980: 190-97) divorced him from the oppressive influence of the society. In such a case, conversion involves new co-operative views. This type of 'rebellion' conversion leads to an identity formation which involves the consolidation of a sense of personal identity and incorporates independent choices with a selective acceptance of past identification (Josselson, 1980: 190-197). Such a conversion involves rebellion and the embracing of a religion/way of life which may be perceived as 'contumacious' to the surrounding society. The conversion itself may be seen as 'identity forming', or on the other hand perception of having a new identity prior to conversion may have brought about conversion. Either way, a crisis in the subject's perceived relationship with his environment affected his sense of identity and precipitated a change in his concept of his own identity and relationship to society that was manifested by his conversion to Islam.

5.6.2 Conversion as a Concept of Identity

Conversion may provide the adolescent with opportunity for the exploration of the self in the context of a group, tradition, or religion. It may also give some central perspective, direction, personal fulfilment and goal orientation in moments of identity crisis or ideological confusion.

Having an unstable childhood because of parental problems, etc., or a thorny relationship with parents or the environment, may have pushed some individuals into an identity achievement. However, in the present study conversion to Islam seems to have consolidated realistic long-term commitments, rather than 'identity

achievement'.   In this excerpt from the interview with Najyah (14 May 2000),

who became Muslim when she was 18, we see that her conversion to Islam does

not mean a new identity:

> *I have an identity. Allah gave me my identity I do not need to*
> *change my identity. I decided to change my name because every*
> *name has a meaning and power. Someone in the mosque gave*
> *me this name. When I asked what does it mean he told me it*
> *means "survival". For me Islam is the ideal vehicle for the*
> *development of the personality and the character. My identity is*
> *who I am, my ability and my mentality. No matter where I am, I*
> *still have my identity. I am an English Muslim; I am submitting*
> *to God. I do not need to be in America or Arabia to do what I do.*

Throughout the interviews the respondents said that in their encounters with Islam

they came to believe that they had found answers to questions they had been

asking themselves for many years and this was sometimes as a result of a lesser or

greater identity crisis.   They had questioned the permissiveness of society with

respect to many things, for example, homosexuality, and they found themselves

attracted by the moral stand of Islam and in some cases by the Muslims they met.

To conclude, analysis of the preconversion histories of converts interviewed

suggests that conversion is a complex and gradual process which is prepared by

individual conditions over a long period.   For the vast majority of the subjects

interviewed conversion occurred beyond adolescence and was most likely to have

occurred in the early twenties. There is a period in the lives of the converts in this

study when they found themselves concerned with life's basic questions, like

one's purpose in life, and questioning the values their own society presented to

them.   During this time they had adopted secular identities letting any conscious

religious quest lie dormant at the back of their minds.

5. 7   Emotional Antecedents

Emotional turmoil or conflict that is experienced prior to conversion can arise
from various sources, which may include the perception of childhood
relationships with one's parents and any traumatic events or stressful
circumstances.   Conversion may occur after periods of emotional confusion and
disturbance. Family stress often becomes a factor in causing such anxiety.
Krailsheimer (1980) found that most converts had lives marked by tensions or
imbalance in family relationships.

For the present sample none of the emotional turmoil that might have
characterised their descriptions of their childhood and adolescence was apparent
in the immediate antecedents to the conversion experience. The present study
showed only one case of a seriously troubled life. Apart from this case there are
no signs of personal stress such as divorce, serious illness or accident that left the
subject either disabled or stricken, a broken relationship, or imprisonment so
significantly close to the conversion as to have precipitated it.

5.7.1   Desire for Transformation

In the thirty seven interviews I have conducted since I started this work the
conversions to Islam have not often been stimulated by extraordinary life
shattering events, and I did not come across any cases involving a crisis triggered
by a dramatic life-or-death experience or illness and healing.

For some people the 'opening' is made by a vague and growing sense of
dissatisfaction with life as it is. One feels that the ordinary way of doing things

and of thinking about things is not as comprehensive and compelling as it should

be. Perhaps the person has achieved all of his or her goals and then asks the

question, 'Is that all there is?' Perhaps getting a promotion, having a family, or

achieving a central goal proves to be less fulfilling than expected. One may feel

that life does not have the meaning and purpose it should have. Such a perception

may stimulate a search for new options or a quest to rediscover roots in the

tradition in which one was raised.

As Rambo explains (1993: 50-51), rather than thinking in terms of crisis, it might

be helpful to think in terms of the desire for transcendence. Some would argue,

especially from a theological point of view, that human beings are naturally

motivated to seek beyond themselves for meaning and purpose. Many people

desire to experience God in a way that will enrich and expand their lives.

Whatever the case, some people do convert even though no overt crisis seems to

exist. They simply desire more.

In any case, a crisis, from whatever quarter it springs, will more than likely

stimulate activity to relieve the discomfort, resolve the discord, remove the sense

of tension. For many, this activity can be identified as a quest.

5. 8   Stage Three: Quest

According to the well established sociological tradition of Berger, Luckman and

others, human beings continually engage in the process of world construction and

reconstruction in order to generate meaning and purpose. Some social scientists

like James Richardson (1985) and Dawson (1990), have begun to view people as

active agents in the creation of meaning and selection of religious options. The

notion of quest begins with the assumption that people seek to maximise meaning

and purpose in life, erase ignorance, and resolve inconsistency. Under abnormal

or crisis conditions they argue that this search becomes compelling; people

actively look for resources that offer growth and development to solve the

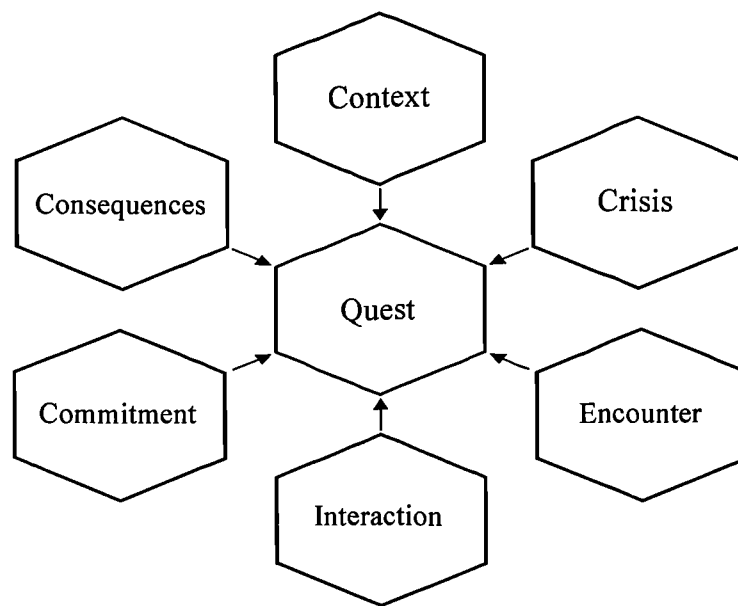problem, or enrich life. (Figure: 5.3).

Figure 5.3: The effect of the six stages in the Quest stage

5. 9   Response Style

Response style differentiates the person who reacts actively from one who

responds passively to the conversion process. The working assumption in this

study is that converts are often active agents in their own conversion. Gokhale

(1986: 31) suggests that sometimes religious seekers' path to their transformation

is not always clear and direct, but they are able to seek out beliefs, groups, and

organisations that serve their perceived needs.

Maryam (2 October 2000) was dissatisfied with both the teachings of the church

and acclaimed English Literature. So after university in 1964, she resolved only to

read those books that God put in her way – by chance. She told me she therefore

read a wide range of books, so she gained a picture of the world that was different

from most literature graduates. She found life rather empty. In about 1979 she was

curious about the Iranian Revolution shown on television and bought a Qur'an to

see if this would explain the attractions of Ayatollah Khomeini. She said that by

the end of reading it:

> *I was convinced of two things: first that although it was a*
> *translation, it hung together; it made sense in the translation. If*
> *I read the original, the original would be alright. So the first*
> *thing I thought was, 'This Qur'an is what the Muslims say it is:*
> *it's the words that came out of the Prophet Muhammad's mouth,*
> *peace be upon him, straight from God and has not been*
> *altered...The second thing is; 'Then I must be a Muslim'... It's*
> *surrender I felt, rather than submission.*

She did not know about the Shahadah and did not take it until about two years

later. In Maryam's case she had been passive in that she left her reading to chance,

but active in creating circumstances that might eventually lead her to some

meaning in life not found in her formal education. Her evidence is similar to

Gokhale's suggestion, in that her path was not clear or direct, but different in that

she did not seek out any belief, group or organisation to serve perceived needs.

Almost all the converts to Islam in this work have themselves been active agents.

It is important to highlight the active quality of many, if not most. For too long,

converts have been viewed as primarily passive, brainwashed or victims of

coercive persuasion. For most converts in the present study the degree of a

person's active quest for religious change is intellectual and motivational. Saif

(13 October 2000) is a dramatic example of the active agent (Appendix 5). He

described his life before coming to Islam:

> *I had no sense of direction in my life. In those days I was*
> *drinking alcohol on social occasions and was fully occupied*
> *with concern for obtaining the material things in life; for*
> *example, the new car every three years or so, the house, the*
> *inevitable mortgage as a result, and all the mod-cons of the*
> *materially oriented society that we live in today.*

He said that he was getting so depressed with the behaviour of society as a whole

and the part that he was playing in it, that one dark and clear starry night while he

was out walking his dog, he looked up to the sky and said out loud, *'If there is*

anybody out there, please come and help us out of this mess'. He was referring of

course to the mess of society, and he did not know then that Allah was soon to

answer.

A short time later, he was working with a man from Pakistan, helping him with

his work. That man started talking a lot about Islam, but Saif said he had to

confess that at that time he was not really listening. However, some days later the

same man gave Saif a book called *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science*. Saif read

the book in his tea and dinner breaks. Before long he was reading the book with

avid interest. Two weeks later Saif was given his first copy of the Qur'an by his

friend. He opened and read the Qur'an in awe and absolute wonder and a week

later, Saif made the confession of faith at the mosque. He went on:

> *My life changed very quickly after embracing Islam. I stopped*
> *drinking alcohol and amazed my family one evening by throwing*
> *all the alcohol in our home down the sink. I've never had a*

> *family to call my own, in that I mean a Mum and Dad, in the true*
> *sense of the word, and I didn't have any brothers or sisters. Mum*
> *and Dad died in 1982. Now I have a family of millions, and I do*
> *consider them to be my brothers and sisters.*

As we have seen in this section and previous ones, an active quest was typical of the converts in the sample. The last example, that of Saif, was unusual in that his Muslim work mate was actively trying to interest him in Islam. This was *da'wah* in action. Saif was not very interested to start with. However, with his investigative character, once he had the first book about Islam in his hands, he was fascinated and read it at every opportunity. A fortnight later he was given a Qur'an. He read that too and a week later took his *shahadah*. Like many of the converts, reading had more effect on him than listening.

5. 10 Active Questing

All the converts had expressed greater or lesser dissatisfaction with the prevailing lifestyle of British society. Although their accounts made clear that there are elements of spirituality within the society, these were not seen as predominant and their religion of upbringing had largely been rejected. Gellner (1992:5-6) mentions attraction to countries with a strong Islamic culture as an important factor in conversion, but there was little evidence of this in the data. In fact, most of the converts, prior to conversion either knew little at all about Islamic culture at home or abroad, or had negative perceptions of it. It was after conversion that some of the interviewees had the opportunity to visit Muslim countries and as a result of this, expressed their enthusiasm for Islamic society, while some, also after conversion, expressed appreciation of having come to belong to the Muslim

community within Britain. In the context of questing for something new and better, the converts described themselves as rejecting the prevailing life-style, rather than being drawn to Islamic culture. Although most of the sample had participated fairly fully in the life-style in which they had grown up, several of them reported that they had joined political parties or movements such as Greenpeace in an effort to improve some aspects of the way of life around them. During this period of their lives most of them said that they had felt the predominant life-style and outlook lacked meaning and/or justice and were in some way looking for strong clear values.

Daud Talbot (Appendix 6) explained how he felt before, and how Islam helped him now in his current environment in northern England. He said that with hindsight he was more concerned with the religious/spiritual aspect of life. He was generally busy trying to sort out his education and training for the future. He had an interest in football. Religion did not play a strong part in his life at that time. At the age of 24 or 25 he felt that there was something missing in his life. He was dissatisfied. All he saw was his friends visiting pubs regularly, and he said that he could not imagine living a life like that when he reached 40 years old. What worried him was that he did not want to live a life which revolved around drinking alcohol for the rest of his life. He said:

> *I was looking for more social justice. I wanted to join the*
> *Communist Party. This was supporting the rights of the working*
> *people. Educating the working people of their rights for better*
> *pay and conditions etc. This lasted approximately one year. I*
> *did not have any perception of Islam before approaching Islam.*

While he was visiting Papua New Guinea he went to the library and found a book on Islam. He saw pictures of people praying in this book and he started to follow

the teachings of the book. He did not know why; he had no one to explain things to him but he tried to practise what he read in the book. Daud said that he was convinced in his heart that Islam was right. He did not think as deeply at that time or come across anything about it. He said that he knew the Prophet Muhammad existed because his name was mentioned in the book about Islam that he got from the library. Daud accepted that Jesus came before Prophet Muhammad and he had always believed that there was only One God. He knew that the Muslims were not supposed to drink alcohol and eat pork.

After reading a book on Islam given to him by a Muslim, Daud was helped to understand more about the prophets and what they believed. It encouraged him to find out more about Islam. He was travelling at the time and did not know whom to turn to. On arriving back in England he determined to investigate Islam. He said:

> *I had already decided within myself that Islam was the right way*
> *of life. Therefore I do not believe anyone could deter me from*
> *that. I had a belief in Islam and all I needed to know was what*
> *to do. On my return from New Guinea I came back to Leeds and*
> *I wanted to find where the Muslims were. I needed to know*
> *what was required of me. I was convinced in my heart that*
> *Islam was the right way of life for me.*

Abdul Qader (3 July 2000) said that the whole social order in Britain influences people to waste their time and throw their lives away. He described it as based on capitalism, saying that everything is money orientated. People want to take what you have and what other people have also. He said that having looked at many reports on alcohol, he could confirm that it is one of the biggest social problems we have in society, though a mild intoxicant, marijuana, is banned. Through the

media, people are encouraged to acquire the latest designer garments. Abdul

Qader said that garments with designer labels always cost a little bit more,

therefore requiring people to work that bit harder to earn that bit more to buy

these things. He said:

> *It upsets me that people do not stop to think. I cannot believe*
> *that I am the only person who is thinking rationally, but it*
> *appears that way. When I was contemplating Islam and various*
> *aspects of life, I was thinking about all these aspects and it upset*
> *me. It is a sad system. The Government is very evil, very*
> *insidious; they are propagating all these things.*

Whereas Abdul Qader expressed his criticism of society from an economic

perspective, Khadijah's (12 November 2000) expression of concern was more

experiential. She too referred to an alcohol driven life-style. She said that she

used to party and go to clubs. She used to enjoy drinking, smoking and the social

life because it was something that she grew up with. She explained that she was

doing those things because it was what was expected at that age. She wanted to

do everything she believed people of her age did and had a very big group of

friends. Friday and Saturday was always their party time and they used to go to

the pub or wine bar or go to a club and come home at two or three o'clock in the

morning. She looked forward to the weekend because that was the excitement.

She said:

> *So I did these things but you can only do them for so long. Then*
> *you have to wonder, now, "Why are you doing these things?". I*
> *was searching. I went through a period of searching and I*
> *called it a cleansing process. People at some stage have to*
> *make a stop. They have to stand still and say, "Who am I? What*
> *am I? What am I doing? What is my purpose? Why am I here?*
> *Do I believe in God? And if there is a God then what is my*
> *purpose? And for myself I went through that process. I had to*
> *redefine 'life' in order to move forward. And the reason I had*

> *to do that is because I was living in the United States for a while*
> *and I had experienced many different changes* [travelling
> between] *England and America!.*

While giving their accounts of their previous lives the converts interviewed strongly emphasised that they felt a need for a religion whereby they could orient their everyday life. They eventually chose Islam because they felt it is not a compartmentalised religion confined to certain areas. They felt that something had been missing, and that that thing was the influence of religion in their lives. Before coming to Islam they had started criticising the existing culture and begun having certain affinities and world views closer to those of Islam which eventually made possible a correlation between their views and Islam, and this facilitated their conversion.

The present sample were in search of an alternative to the materialistic way of life with a strong reaction against the prevailing perspective of society. The interviewees unanimously agreed that 'people feel spiritually and intellectually unfulfilled'.

However, it must be noted that only a minority of the selected group returned at any time to their religion of origin. Four of the interviewees re-examined Christianity before converting to Islam. Suliman (18 September 2000) was one of these. He said that something was missing inside him. He did not take drugs to feel something further, but felt with hindsight that what was missing from his life was spirituality. He said:

> *I decided to go back to church because I felt something was*
> *missing in my life. I now know that something was missing from*

> *my life. When I went to church I did not at the time know what I*
> *was searching for. Returning to church helped on the Sunday. I*
> *felt good going to church but the rest of the time was back to*
> *normal. It was interesting but there was still something missing.*

Ajaz (9 September 2000) was working abroad and he used to work nights. When

there was no work he used to sit in the car outdoors, thinking about life. After a

while he returned home for a holiday. He said:

> *For the first time in my life I went to church in Wolverhampton.*
> *Yes I turned to God because I felt something was missing in my*
> *life. I needed something to believe in. I read the Bible but it did*
> *not make sense. I did not believe in it. The things they said*
> *about Jesus were very contradictory. In Genesis they talked*
> *about the creation of the world, but the way it was written did*
> *not make sense to me.*

Abdul Karim (23 June 2000) said that he looked at Catholicism because that was

what he was born into, but the more he investigated it the more contradictions he

found, particularly when he started looking at the material on the authenticity of

the Bible. He said:

> *One of the biggest problems I had was that if Jesus was God,*
> *which we were supposed to accept, when he was praying in the*
> *Garden of Gethsemane, it said, 'He prayed'. Now who did he*
> *pray to? He didn't pray to himself, surely, so who did he pray*
> *to? So he must have prayed to someone other than himself.*

Abdul Salam (9 June 2000) said that he wanted to understand the Bible more,

therefore he ordered a New Testament and received correspondence from the

Christians. He was asked to fill in forms and answer the questions on a Bible

course. He said:

> *Some of the questions they asked were "Where is God, Does*
> *God exist?" On form 2 or 3, I was asked, "Is Jesus the Son of*

*God?" After that question I stopped because I did not believe
that.*

To conclude then, the accounts given by those interviewed suggest that in general they had not previously achieved a firm religious identity because society had failed to create a social nexus for strong religious identifications. For them, the identity label as Christian or Jew was no more than a possible acceptance of a social convention, and as this label was imposed from outside it did not lead to real ego-involvement. Rather than accept social conventions, they found themselves questioning established norms.

5. 11 Prior to Conversion: Discussion

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, the general trend of the interviews suggests that the conversions did not occur as a direct result of emotional turmoil or personal distress. These may in some cases be associated with the conversion, but are not necessarily a predisposing condition. In the preconvert, there may be an unconscious conflict, and a psychological set, but these factors alone, in many cases, are not enough to be described as a cause, reason or precondition for conversion to Islam. There must, at the same time, be an immediate factor which acts as a catalyst. This catalyst is likely to be manifested in cognitive and existential questions. Cognitive quests were evident and they tended to be concerned with social and moral issues, religious doubts, and existential concerns which covered questions like 'What is the meaning and purpose of my life?', 'How does one deal with the fact that one is going to die?' and 'What should one do about one's shortcomings?'

The majority of the present sample reported preoccupation with cognitive concerns, feelings of aimlessness, lack of purpose or direction and meaning, incompleteness, etc.   It is clear that these preoccupations or intermittent questionings mainly arise out of cognitive and existential concern. Lady Aisha described herself as a seeker of ultimate reality. She said that in her mid twenties she had begun to wonder more profoundly about the meaning of life. Why were we here? She did not attempt at that time to do any studies; it was just something she thought about.   She said that in one way she was satisfied with her life because she had achieved a great deal materially, but the spiritual side of her life was not in tune.   Thinking back, she said that her life-style had been changing gradually, although she was not aware of it; her clothing had become more modest; she had gradually stopped going to clubs and bingo and drinking alcohol. She could now see that Allah had been preparing her so she would not find embracing Islam difficult. She said:

> *I had no perception of Muslims before embracing Islam because*
> *I did not know any. Therefore I had no positive or negative*
> *attitudes. I went to work every day. One evening I arrived*
> *home and I felt so empty. I thought every day is more or less the*
> *same. I said, "there must be more to life than this". That*
> *evening I asked God to show me, if there was more to life than I*
> *was living.* Alhamdulillah, *this brought me to Islam.*

Lateefa (12 June 2000) described how she started to be changed when she went to university (Appendix 7). For her that big lifestyle change was going to university. This eventually included her coming into contact with Islam. She used to drink, then she began to realise that she did not have to be what she had been before.

One day she was with another girl, a civil engineer. Lateefa described that evening:

> *We were all going to the cinema and we were walking along and*
> *I started asking her questions. She was wearing hijab so I knew*
> *she was a Muslim. I started asking. I think I was trying to catch*
> *her out, to see if I could find any gaps in her knowledge, or see*
> *if I could prove her wrong! I was interested, I couldn't catch her*
> *out. I found I was agreeing with her more than I was agreeing*
> *with my father.*
>
> *Nadia, whom I was asking all the questions on the way to the*
> *cinema, she didn't really remember the conversation. I reminded*
> *her of it about a year later. I said, "it was actually THAT*
> *conversation that started me thinking about converting.*

The stories of most converts to Islam in this work suggest that an active, continuous and relentless search for meaningful answers to such questions as the nature of life and death preceded their conversion. They had been asking questions about the meaning and purpose of human life and they had been compelled to re-examine and re-evaluate their previous life-styles and outlooks. These people believe that the cognitive problems that used to bother them are met by Islam because they feel that it offers them 'a philosophy of life; it proclaims the responsibility of man, a future life, and a day of judgement'. Islamic emphasis on life and life after death for example, motivated Yussif's (11 March 2000) conversion (Appendix 8). Yussif said that at the age of 20 he started to think about the meaning of life. He began to explore the idea that maybe God existed. He knew that he was not going to find happiness in all the things that he wanted or expected to be involved in, like money and women, or drugs and alcohol. He said:

> *I became 20 years old and realised that practically a quarter of*
> *my life had gone and I had done nothing with my life. I knew*

> *nothing about life. I wanted to know why I was alive; I knew*
> *death was coming but did not know what the purpose of life was.*
> *I needed to know; therefore I started to ask a lot of questions. I*
> *had to conquer my soul.*
>
> *After reading many books on different religions including Islam*
> *I decided that I was going to return to University and study as*
> *much as possible. I now believed that knowledge was to play an*
> *important part in my search to find the true religion. It was one*
> *and a half years' of searching after the initial attraction that I*
> *accepted Islam.*

Conversion experience, in many cases, was a search for meaning. The converts re-examined the ground rules dictated by their culture. They were discontented with ambiguities in their life-styles and society, and therefore were preoccupied with what was right or wrong, with universal questions of meaning. Their accounts centred on urgent spiritual needs rooted in the particular circumstances of their lives, and they described the fulfillment of these needs as the primary consequence of their conversion. Cognitive quests prior to conversion concerned ambiguities in their belief systems and those of society. These ambiguities became problematic as their lives progressed and they became actively involved in different situations and sooner or later felt an urge to have a faith, or a need to return to religion. Until this stage of their lives the majority of these people seemed not to have bothered about religion, but at this stage, when these needs became more manifest, they re-questioned their previous beliefs and, as a result, they felt confused or decided to give them up entirely. As the average conversion age (25 years old) for the present sample suggests, their conversion to Islam came after this stage. Re-questioning some elements of the old beliefs exposed them to different perspectives that later proved to have been closer to those of Islam.

5. 12 Summary

The interviewees' backgrounds differed as to ethnic group, religion and general socio-economic circumstances. However the majority of them had in common some kind of religious input during their childhood, either from home, school, or both. In all cases there was an awareness of some of the basic tenets of Christianity, sometimes only of the moral aspects and sometimes of church doctrine too. Many of the interviewees had at some time accepted these tenets to a greater or lesser extent. By late teenage some who were aware of them had completely rejected trinitarian doctrines, and a few had become atheists. However, the vast majority, whatever they otherwise rejected, maintained a belief in the existence of God, often held since early childhood. None of the interviewees seemed to think that there was something particularly exceptional about their upbringing that, in itself, precipitated their eventual conversion to Islam, but many said that aspects of earlier religious teaching had not, or no longer, made sense to them and that this was a factor prompting their questions about the meaning of life. For the vast majority a very important factor that prompted this questioning was the lifestyle of the surrounding society which they participated in to a greater or lesser extent according to the individual concerned. There was a common feeling expressed that the prevailing lifestyle, especially the social life and the materialistic outlook of society in general had provoked a sense of discomfort and rejection of the values they embodied.

It has been found that the generally accepted understanding of the word 'crisis', meaning life-shattering or devastating events, is not relevant to the experiences of

the interviewees, as a precipitant to conversion or to a search for meaning or faith.

However each interviewee, in hindsight, could identify an event, often at the time

apparently of little significance, that did indeed change their way of thinking and

direct them towards the quest to find meaning in life that eventually led them to

embrace Islam. Examples of such significant events range from finding

themselves in a new environment, (e.g. university), to catching sight of two men

by the roadside in Spain performing the Muslim *salat*. These 'significant events',

it was seen in retrospect, had prompted a changed perception of life. This

changed perception had initiated or energised the interviewees' quest to find the

meaning of life and/or a meaningful lifestyle. In some, but not all cases, the

significant event made them interested in finding out about Islam itself. Others

chose to find out about other religions or to take up 'good causes'. It should also

be pointed out that most of the interviewees mentioned not one, but several, often

apparently unrelated 'significant events' in their lives that they perceived in

retrospect to have nudged them towards their eventual conversion.

6.1   Introduction

This chapter analyses the fourth stage 'Encounter', followed by the next two

stages 'Interaction' and 'Commitment', though, in the case of the conversions to

Islam studied in this work, it has also been found, that the two stages 'Interaction'

and 'Commitment' are to a greater or lesser extent merged. The main reason for

this is that, unlike conversion to other religions, sects or groups cited in previous

research, the converts to Islam in this sample did not 'convert' as the result of

interaction with a group of people belonging to the target faith, but as the result

of, or during, reading a book.

As previously stated, the conversion stages do not necessarily follow a linear

progression. Having established an overall context for the conversions, examined

whether a crisis is necessary to start a quest for the meaning of life, and if there

was a quest or not, it is appropriate now to look at the converts' encounter with

Islam in detail. In Figure 6.1, I have placed the encounter stage in the centre to

keep in mind that this stage can be influenced by, or be part of, the others.

6.2   The Role of the Islamic Missionary in Conversion

In the Muslim *ummah* there are those who seek to restore their brothers and sisters

in Islam to greater piety, and some dedicated to inviting non-Muslims to Islam.

Until recently there was no such thing as a professional, full time missionary of

Islam[1]. Throughout Muslim history, the soldier, trader and saint have been considered important agents of Islamisation and Islamic conversion.
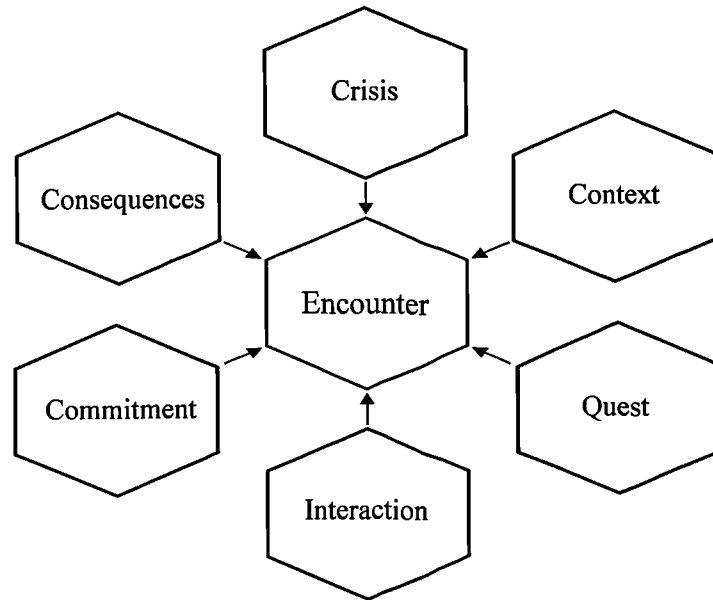

Figure 6.1: Stage Four, Encounter

Most scholars (e.g. Lapidus) reject the notion that Islam converted many people by the sword, but it is now agreed that Islamic conquest set the stage for Islamisation in that, after the secular opposition was defeated, Islamic institutions were created and maintained and eventually (over hundreds of years) the conversion process of individuals and whole societies was accomplished. Thus, the soldier, while not a direct agent of conversion, was a major precursor to conversion, making it possible for the Muslim merchant to travel in many parts of the world. Muslim traders often established trading posts in remote areas within

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[1] The Tablighi Jama'at movement is the prime example of this, although the funding is mainly by *sadaqah* (voluntary charity) as the proponents travel from place to place.

and beyond the borders of the Muslim frontiers. Sufi teachers often settled in these trading posts for *da'wah* purposes. Through intermarriage, trade and the establishment of Muslim institutions, the conversion process has been initiated.

In many areas, the Muslim teacher served to introduce people to Arabic and the Qur'an. As religious functionaries, they often stimulated interest in Islam and thus began the early stages of later large-scale conversion.

6.2.1 Encounter Between Islamic Missionary and Potential Convert

Many Muslims living in Britain today believe that the emergence of a distinctive Muslim identity is essential for effective *da'wah* (invitation to Islam) and that this can be achieved through the example of moral excellence set by Muslims living in the West which will itself send powerful signals to non-Muslims. According to Faruqi, for instance (1986: 7-19), the family is the 'best tool' for Islamic *da'wah* in the West by presenting the values of Islam through the medium of exemplary family life and hence, social life.

The Muslim who wishes to perform *da'wah* activity in Britain faces a complex situation. The Muslim, on the one hand, is commanded by the Qur'an (16:125) to: *"Invite (all) to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching"*. On the other hand, he/she lives in a non-Muslim environment where his/her religion is tolerated but not recognised by the state. So the activist Muslim in such a position has three options: the Muslim may choose to abandon his/her mission, or he/she may choose the way of calling individuals to Islam, or he/she may talk about Islam only when questioned by a non-Muslim individual or group.

Poston (1992: 117) quotes the attitude that living a Muslim life-style is sufficient to attract others to the religion. To use a Christian concept this approach may be called 'life-style evangelism'. A Muslim should not worry himself about whether other people will accept or reject his/her message. Instead he/she ought to behave as a Muslim. They believe that 'action speaks louder than words' and criticise direct *da'wah* activists who utilise word of mouth as the only means of propagating the faith while avoiding the importance of demonstrating the Muslim way of life in a practical way. A characteristic of indirect *da'wah*, on the other hand, is that if a Muslim, by chance, engages in conversation with non-Muslims, the Muslim tends to prefer to point out the common ground that Islam shares with other religions, rather than emphasising that Islam is superior to the others. Those Muslims who see their life-style itself as the main means of *dawah* are more likely to be introverts in the sense that they are primarily concerned with the maintenance of their religion, rather than with conveying the message of Islam to non-Muslims. The majority of Muslims who live in Britain today are classified in this group because, according to Poston (1992: 117), they have been more concerned with obtaining a comfortable standard of living in Britain. Having faced prejudice, economic difficulties, cultural differences and other uncertainties, they have tended to be defensive and passive and to have rather limited interaction with the non-Muslim majority.

From the above it can be seen that the majority of the Muslim community in the UK have not been pro-active as far as bringing non-Muslims to convert to Islam is concerned. It has been found that the experience of the 37 converts to Islam in the present sample confirms previous research in this regard.

6.3   Potential Converts and their Perception of Islam

When the current sample of converts began seriously to investigate Islam, (the

stage of their conscious 'Encounter' with Islam), none of them knew much about

Islam, Muslims, or Muslim communities, despite living in a country with sizeable

Muslim minorities in the towns and cities, and even in some cases, having been at

school with Muslims.   Several of the interviewees described ideas they had had

about Islam which later turned out to be false.   Most of them had negative

perceptions of Islam, to a greater or lesser degree, though some of the negative

perceptions had been mixed with positive ones that later the interviewees felt had

been true.   There was clearly both an ignorance of the religion and a negative

perception of it.   This situation tallies to some extent with the paragraph above

where it is stated that the majority of Muslims in the UK do not indulge in active

missionary work. For example Daud (10 August 2000) said:

> *I thought Islam was a city in Pakistan. I thought Muslims were*
> *the same as Hindus and Sikhs. I had a friend at school who was*
> *Muslim, his mother wore the hijab and his father had a beard,*
> *but they never told me anything about their religion.*

Safeeyah (3 February 2000) had a very negative perception of Islam. She said

that she was brought up to think Islam was wrong. In her early teens, during her

religious education she came across Islam and was given the impression that

Mohammed (PBUH) was a false prophet.   Because of this she said she was

prejudiced against Islam.   Safeeyah could not say why, but without really

knowing anything about Islam, she thought it was not a good religion. She

thought Islam was sexist, and now sees that this prejudice was based on

ignorance.   Aisha (16 September 2000), when she was asked about her perception

of Islam before approaching Islam, answered:

> *I had no perception of Islam before approaching Islam, except*
> *for what I was told when I was introduced to Islam. I had never*
> *heard of Islam, I never knew Islam existed.*

Abdullah Saber (20 March 2000) said that his perception of Islam in England was

that it was Asian.   For him Islam was Pakistani; Islam was not white and it was

not black.   That was how he saw Islam, it was an Asian thing. Khadijah (12

November 2000) said that she believed that the Muslims all came from Pakistan.

That was what she thought.   She said that she had no feelings about Islam, no

criticism; there was nothing.   She said that she knew about Christianity and

Judaism, but about Islam she had no idea, or what were the prophets' names, what

they believed, nothing.   The above evidence represents a fairly typical view held

by the interviewees before conversion, that Islam was an Asian religion and not

for their own people, or that Islam was a false or in some way inferior religion.

Some of the interviewees mentioned the effect the media could have on their view

of Islam.   Muhammad Asad (28 July 2000) said that before approaching Islam he

did not know anything about Muslims. He said that he knew from the news that

Muslims were accused of bombings, but he did not know if it was anything to do

with religion or was just political. Najyah (14 May 2000) said:

> *I did not know about Islam and Muslims, I did not know any*
> *Muslims. Therefore my perception about Islam was mainly from*
> *the society, media and my environment and how I was brought*
> *up to believe that every man only had one wife. I had this idea*
> *that Islam was not the right religion and was not the right thing.*

Ajaz (9 September 2000) provided an example of how some of the interviewees

had known Muslims some time before the conversion period, but had picked up

little information and some negative feelings about Islam:

> *I knew that Islam was very strict. There were a lot of things I*
> *did not agree with and found fault with. I had a Pakistani*
> *school friend who was Muslim, I visited his house occasionally.*
> *He mentioned about Ramadhan and fasting, but that was it.*
> *Muslims have a God called Allah and a Prophet called*
> *Mohammed (PBUH).*

The 37 interviewees' perception of Islam and Muslims was similar. So far, Islam

for most of them was an Asian matter, with negative images. In some cases, the

interviewees were even less informed and Islam for them was something

irrelevant, or something that had made no impact on their consciousness

whatever.

6.3.1   Potential Converts and their Encounter with Islam

According to McHugh (1990: 36) most converts come to know Islam through

personal contact and this plays a great role in conversion. However, the present

study does not support McHugh's view. It has also been observed that as far as

Muslim '*da'wah*' organisations are concerned, there is little evidence of progress

being made in their mission towards either Muslims or non-Muslims. Organised

da'wah is irrelevant to the conversions under discussion. Only one potential

convert attended an organised event in the form of an Islamic weekend. The other

36 converts interviewed for this research, had not got in touch with or been

introduced to Muslim organisations or groups in Britain during the process of

conversion and their introduction to Islam. For none of them was it a result of that type of direct missionary activity.

Each 'encounter' was different. Rokanne (26 September 2000) explained how she was first introduced to Islam. She was a teacher and one day she encountered a pupil who had been continually bullied because she wore the *hijab* and *shalwar kameez*. The pupil was very unhappy. One day she was sitting in a corner crying, so Rokanne got in touch with the pupil's mother and then they became good friends. Therefore at lunchtimes, both friends would sit and talk about Islam. One day her friend gave Rokanne an English translation of the Qur'an, and from there her journey to Islam started. Abdul Qader (3 July 2000) said how his Pakistani Muslim friend started to talk to him about Islam, and how that friend, during this period had started practising Islam again. Abdul Qader described how he had a liberal upbringing, his mother did not enforce ideas or ideology upon him and so therefore he had an open mind about other cultures that assisted him in his coming to Islam. This open attitude was helped by his upbringing and the locality in which he had lived:

> *I lived in an area where there were a large number of ethnic*
> *minorities, one of the largest in Leeds. My friends have always*
> *been different colours and from different religions.*

Kate (12 March 2000), first met Muslims when she was working as a teacher in a prison. She met two Afro-Caribbean men who were Muslim, and Indians and Pakistanis. She described how teaching them was very difficult. Kate said that by the time the men were good to her, she had learned not to judge people. She treated these men with kindness and equality, and eventually the men were very

appreciative of her kindness.   At that time Kate had no concept of Islam. She
said:

> *The Indian Muslim in the prison gave me a Qur'an. He said I*
> *was the kindest person he had ever met. I had given hope and*
> *as a returned gesture he would give me a Qur'an. He gave me a*
> *list of things I should not do while handling the Qur'an. He had*
> *nothing. He was in prison.*

The Indian's gift was instrumental in Kate's accepting Islam

So often the active investigation into Islam seemed to have started by pure chance,
for example unexpectedly coming across documents about Islam or by going to
the bookshop and picking up a Qur'an when looking for something else. Karima
(22 November 2000) and Muhammad Asad (28 July 2000) provided interesting
examples of such unexpected encounters. Karima as a child had been very close
to God.   Years later, one night she knelt down beside her bed and recited the
Lord's prayer, she said:

> *In the manner my father had taught me years before, I asked*
> *God to guide me along the right way, to forgive me of my sins,*
> *and to help me to do good for others, as I had lost my faith and*
> *strayed far from the beliefs that I once held.*

The next day she went out to buy a copy of the Bible to read it from cover to
cover.   She went to the local bookshop where she picked up one of the versions
they had for sale, and instead of taking it straight to the checkout, she started to
browse through its pages. As she was doing so, her eyes looked upwards and she
saw a copy of the Qur'an. This moment changed her life. Karima said:

> *I opened the book and was surprised to discover that Jesus was*
> *mentioned in it, as were various other prophets such as Noah,*

> *Abraham, and Joseph. I was amazed when I realized that*
> *Muslims believe in the same prophets as we did, and so I bought*
> *the Qur'an and took it home with me. I started to read it and I*
> *began to realize that the guidance I had asked God for the night*
> *before was right here in my hands. As time passed on, I came to*
> *realize that the message in the Holy Qur'an is for all of*
> *mankind, and so I became a Muslim straight away.*

Muhammad Asad (28 July 2000) said in conversation, that he had been looking at different religions. His life was also changed by a chance find in a shop. One day he wandered into a 'New Age' shop known locally as 'The Magic Shop' and came across a book about Islam in there. He bought it. It contained quotations from The Qur'an and had *hadeeth* of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He said that it was reading this book that persuaded him that 'Islam is the only religion that makes sense'. He went to the mosque but a man there told him to go away and come back after a year. About two years later Muhammad Asad returned to the mosque and took his *shahadah*. It turned out to be in *Ramadhan*. He started fasting and performing *salat* straight away.

For some of the interviewees their encounter with Islam was a very individual or personal matter. For some, they had a dream, and from there they started their conscious journey to Islam. Salamah (17 June 2000) had a very personal experience that is a good example that also included a dream. She said that her journey to Islam seems, on reflection, to have been such a long and complicated one, that now she feels that she had been making that journey, little by little, throughout her life. She said that her faith was Islam, the pure and beautiful faith that she was born into as a new baby. Salamah was pregnant and her baby was born. But five days later the baby died. It was very difficult for her when she left

hospital alone and without her baby. Salamah searched so hard looking for acceptance of that awful loss and tried to find reasons. Even then, she reasoned that her baby's short life had been part of a plan. The doctor who had told her this and talked to her about destiny, was a Muslim. Salamah held on very hard to that piece of hope. As the days went by, she was very calm and she worked hard at that word 'destiny', and for the first time she began to feel very close to God. Then came a dream. She described the dream:

> *One day I was resting on my bed, drifting somewhere in that*
> *space between sleep and wakefulness, when suddenly I found*
> *myself in a strange white place. All around me were people who*
> *I didn't recognize. They were all dressed in white, men and*
> *women, and even though I didn't know them I realized that I*
> *loved them, as I might love my own family. Everyone, including*
> *myself, was dressed the same and facing in the same direction. I*
> *looked around and found so much love surrounding me. I was*
> *loved by everyone, and although I didn't know them I loved*
> *them too.*

This dream kept coming back to Salamah in her thoughts. It was a powerful dream, something to be considered and examined carefully. For her it seemed to complement the word her doctor had left her with: Destiny. Then into her life came the Holy Qur'an. She had been looking at and examining other religions apart from Christianity and there it was, the Qur'an in her hands to read. Salamah said that once she started to read the Qur'an, it was impossible to stop. She described herself:

> *I read, put the book down, then had to pick it up again. I felt*
> *that everything I read was familiar and right and that all the*
> *questions that I asked myself and others previously were*
> *answered so easily and clearly.*

> *I couldn't believe what was happening. This book of God, who
> is Allah, is the guidance that I had been searching for. Only I
> didn't have to ask or search anywhere, because the search was
> happening within me. Then, at the right time, the book came
> into my hands. Was it my destiny?*

Some months later Salamah saw a film on television about Arabs. There was a
scene from Makkah showing pilgrims making the Muslim pilgrimage. That was
when she realized that she had really come home, and her dream had been of
Makkah and the Holy Mosque, towards which Muslims all over the world pray.
She said that when she began to read the Qur'an for the first time, there were a lot
of images that had to be put away for the moment. All the images of Islam and
the Muslims that she and others were fed came from Hollywood films and the
media. She said that she tried to read the Qur'an with an open heart and an open
mind. As a result, as she read, she felt her life was changing slowly, and all
because she was realizing her accountability to God, whom she now called Allah,
the only God.

Although she did not have a dream, Maryam (2 October 2000) was also impressed
by something she saw on television. She saw lots of women in *hijab* on TV
demonstrating for an old man who looked liked Moses (PBUH)[2]. She found
nothing in the media to explain his attraction, so she went and bought a translation
of The Qur'an to see if that would explain it. By the time she had finished reading
the translation she had realized that she was a Muslim.

---

[2] This was at the time of the Islamic revolution in Iran. The old man was Ayatollah Khomeini.

So far we have seen examples of how the current sample of converts experienced their first 'encounter' with Islam. These encounters, as has been seen, all happened in very different circumstances, and, although sometimes the interviewees were searching for meaning in life, most of the encounters seem to have happened because of some kind of coincidence, or chance. For greater understanding of the process the potential convert may go through, I will now discuss stage (5) Interaction and stage (6) Commitment. Previous research has tended to separate these two stages, but it has been found that in analysing the current sample of converts, the two stages tend to be merged as they centre on the role of the Qur'an in conversion to Islam.

6.4   Interaction and Commitment Stages

One inadequacy of previous research was that the researchers' individual specialisms limited their perspective. If any of their individual theories had been adopted for this work, significant aspects of the current interviews could not have been included.   Another inadequacy was that there are certain aspects of conversion to Islam found in the current sample that did not appear at all, in any of the previous research.   These will be discussed later. An holistic approach, incorporating several academic disciplines was needed.   This holistic approach was then found in the framework provided by Rambo (1993). Nevertheless, although his framework provides a broad approach and great flexibility, it has been found that two of his postulated stages of conversion, Interaction and Commitment, tended to be a *combined* process in the case of the sample of converts currently being discussed, rather than being either sequential or

concurrent (see Figure 6.2). It should also be pointed out that the actual

commitment to Islam on the part of the converts, or at least in some cases, the full

intention to 'become a Muslim' occurred a significant period of time *before* they

made their formal affirmation of faith (i.e. the *shahadah*) For this reason, the

occasion of an interviewee 'taking the *shahadah*' which is normally conducted at

the hands of an established Muslim, will in some instances, be left to the

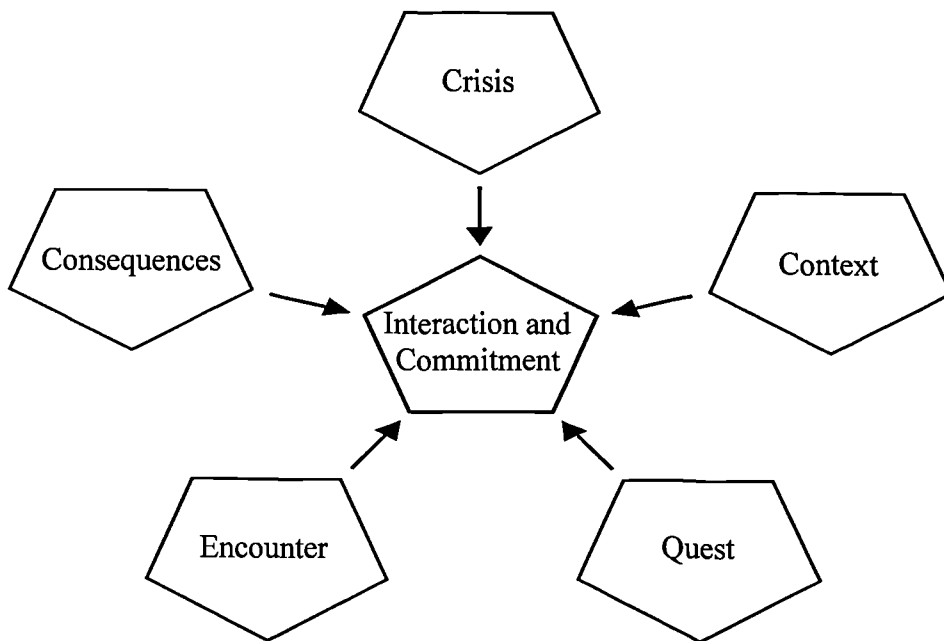following chapter under the heading of 'Consequences'.

Figure 6.2: Stage Five and Six, 'Interaction and Commitment'

Rambo describes the 'Interaction' stage as that stage in the process where people

have already encountered a new religious option and are now sufficiently

interested to spend time interacting with the religious group of people or

individual person who introduced him/her to it. The interaction with this group or

individual intensifies and during this period the potential convert learns more

about the teachings, life-style and expectations of the religion, becoming more

fully incorporated into it. It is, Rambo says, during this period, that the potential

convert either chooses to continue the contact and become more involved, or to

stop. He indicates a spectrum of passivity and activity on the part of the potential

convert. (Rambo,1993: 102)

6.5   The Three Dimensions of Interaction

There are three dimensions of interaction, (a) relationship, (b) rituals, (c) roles.

As far as the 'Interaction' stage is concerned, a certain correlation has been found

between experiences of the current group of converts and the first two dimensions

of interaction mentioned above (relationship and rituals). However, the third

dimension 'roles' has been found to relate more accurately to the post-

commitment stage of 'Consequences'.

a) Relationship:

According to Kirkpatrick (1992: 3-28), friendship networks are fundamental in

bringing about most conversions, just as they are influential in resistance and

rejection. Many people become involved in religious organisations through a

network of friends and /or family. Powerful faith group relationships can serve a

compensatory function, replacing previous relationships.

It has been found that none of the present sample converted to Islam as the result

of developing a strong relationship with an individual human being or group, in

the way described in Kirkpatrick's work. They did all, however, develop a strong

relationship, but it was with a book. To quote Kirkpatrick (1992: 3-28), the

potential converts found themselves 'in a situation of stimulation, safety and

support in an atmosphere of love', but it was between themselves and the Qur'an.

Reading the Qur'an was helpful to these people who 'were confronting the issues

in their lives and discovering and experimenting with new possibilities' (ibid).

Overall, what the converts had in common was their relationship with the Qur'an

that provided (and according to them continues to provide) 'an environment of

security that nurtures, supports, and encourages the new life of converts' (ibid).

Only 3 out of the 37 converts could be regarded as exceptions to this statement, in

that marriage to a Muslim was also involved in their coming to accept Islam, so

close socialisation with members of the target religion was a factor in these

conversions.   However, as we shall see later, their testimony comes down in

favour of the Qur'an and related Islamic literature having, in the long run, greater

influence than the spouse, as far as their view of their own conversions is

concerned.

b) Rituals:

According to Jennings (1982: 113-127), ritual is a way of acquiring, transmitting

and displaying forms of knowledge.   Ritual enables the potential and recent

convert to begin to understand and embody the new way of life that conversion

requires.   Ritual helps people to learn to act differently, as revealing the nature of

worship, obedience and celebration. Griffin (1984) asserts in her work that prayer

is a central ritual for many Christians and Muslims, fostering a sense of intimacy

with the deity through the experience of talking with God, using either structured

or free-form spontaneous prayer.

In this work it has been found that leading up to and during the interaction/commitment stage, most of the potential converts were praying to God. Some began fasting during *Ramadhan* and even performing the formal Muslim prayer, or repeating certain of the individual Muslim prayers shortly before and after conscious commitment to Islam, but in most cases before they had 'taken *shahadah*'. This relates closely to the findings of Jennings and Griffin. It is not possible, however, to prove whether these actions were only the result of early interaction with the information they had gained about Islam, or whether the early performance of these religious activities already indicated *commitment*, or on the other hand, whether these actions in themselves served the purpose of contributing to a later commitment. However the converts in the present sample had not been instructed by a friend or acquaintance to do these things. They may have been told that Muslims do these things, or read about them in books etc., or possibly observed Muslims doing them either in real life or on film or TV, but had not been personally instructed to do them by another Muslim. They had learned about *Ramadhan* fasting and the Muslim prayers and then started doing them voluntarily, often in private. Connecting with the Creator of the Universe in a personal, intimate way is indeed a powerful experience according to most converts to Islam who I have come across. The voluntary performance of some of these rituals by the interviewees in this study, suggests that they were beginning to '*commit*' themselves to Islam from early in the '*interaction*' stage.

c) Roles:

The role approach sees conversion as a change in a person's expectations, values and norms within the context of a social network. Bromley (1986: 197) argues

that many people may talk and act like converts when they are engaging in interaction with members of the target faith, but that they are merely experimenting with the new option; trying out the role. According to Balch (1985: 137) an important role for the convert is to be the 'student' of a teacher, a member who knows the ropes of the religion and the community and is able to teach the convert about behaviour patterns and beliefs that are expected in the new religion. 'Role' combines all the elements that make the new way of life, new set of beliefs and a new network of relationships crucial to conversion.

It has been found that some elements of the 'role' approach are relevant to the sample of converts under discussion, but other elements do not apply at all. As has already been stated, the majority of interviewees were not within a Muslim social setting at this stage, and so Bromley's suggestion of them play-acting the role because of those surrounding them, does not apply. Similarly, it is true that a minority of the interviewees did report lengthy conversations with a Muslim individual during the interaction/commitment stage; however, the picture painted by Balch, of the importance of the role of being the student of a teacher at the interaction/commitment stage, does not apply at all to the majority of the converts in the present sample, unless perhaps, we substitute the Qur'an for the human teacher. After the commitment to Islam, however, it is true that most of the converts did seek, or were given information by established Muslims. Those in the present sample tended not to adopt a student/teacher relationship with a single individual.

The information gathering and establishment of an adjusted role in society was more haphazard than this, and will be discussed in Chapter VII under 'Consequences'.

6.5.1   Encapsulation

It is a fairly common view amongst researchers and the general public that people convert to a religion or ideology as the result of proselytization by a group of people, who may put pressure on the potential convert in a number of ways. Greil and Rudy (1984: 265) identify the isolation of the potential convert from various familiar factors in his/her life such as outsiders, other ideologies, books and television, as one of these forms of pressure, and describe such a process as 'encapsulation'.   Studies of encapsulation strategies examine the degree to which potential converts are isolated or restricted from communication with others or the outside world.   Three varieties of encapsulation are identified as physical, social and ideological.   These are not seen as entirely distinct from each other, but overlapping and reinforcing each other. Physical encapsulation may be achieved by removing people to distant locations or remote areas where communication can be controlled. Social encapsulation means directing the potential convert into life-style patterns that limit significant contact with outsiders.   Clearly both these circumstances provide the opportunity for ideological encapsulation.

Not one of the 37 interviewees in the current sample described themselves as having been confined or pressured by the influence of any encapsulation strategies of a proselytising group leading up to their conversion to Islam.   The only interviewee to have mentioned an encapsulation experience was Maryam (2

October 2000) who at the age of 13 unexpectedly became encapsulated by a Christian group on a school holiday. Although they impressed her, the group in fact failed to change the views she already held at that time. This example is therefore of only peripheral relevance to this study as she did not begin to consciously 'interact' with Islam until 26 years later. None of the interviewees came under pressure from a Muslim or Islamic proselytising group, or had any form of 'encapsulation' imposed on them. Yet what has been noticed is that each interviewee recalled, either prior to the 'encounter' stage or during the periods of 'encounter' and 'interaction and commitment' beginning, of their own free will, actively to separate *themselves* from various aspects of their former way of life, or from the non-Muslim way of life around them. Examples have been quoted earlier. It should be noted that none of the converts shut him or herself off from the world in a form of 'self encapsulation'. It was rather that one might cut down on drinking alcohol and another might begin wearing more modest dress and so on. Yussif (11 March 2000) for instance, stopped watching television while Lady Aisha (9 August 2000) cut down on going to clubs. From the converts' point of view these changes were either seen as conscious (as in the case of Yussif) or unconscious expressions of their disaffection with the prevailing life style. Looking back, they tended to see these gradual and partial changes as a sign that they were being drawn to Islam, but at the time there was not necessarily a perceived connection with Islam. It is worth mentioning that the phenomenon of the interviewees beginning to separate *themselves* from certain aspects of their former lives took place in a typical western society where all of the converts had a

fairly free and flexible social life and access to information and travel.

Encapsulation was not a factor in this partial change of life-style.

6.6   The Qur'an and its Role in Islam Conversion

As mentioned earlier, it has been found that the interaction/commitment stage of

conversion to Islam for the sample of converts under discussion cannot be

characterised by encapsulation, willing immersion or continuous socialisation

with a group of Muslim missionaries or even with a community or group of

Muslims going about their daily business, except for the small minority of two

women, who married Muslims before converting. Contact with Muslims that was

common to all the converts, where it did occur, was mainly at the 'encounter'

stage, and often appeared to be quite fleeting and coincidental at the time, but was

seen in retrospect to have been significant.

It has become clear that there was an *interaction* which has some of the

characteristics of the interaction described by previous researchers and was

common to all the interviewees, but this interaction was not with people, but the

reading of a book, namely the Qur'an. Throughout the years during which I have

been doing this work, I have come across many other converts who have also

insisted on the important role of the Qur'an. In all cases a sort of relationship

developed between the potential converts and the Qur'an which led them to the

commitment stage. During the period when the potential converts were first in

contact with the Qur'an, some of them began to practise the *salat* (formal prayer)

or fast, if they were in the month of *Ramadhan*. (This last point shows that the

conversion was not going on in a vacuum and that there was some background

influence either from the media, or the practices of the established UK Muslim community, as otherwise the interviewee would not been aware that he/she was in the month of *Ramadhan* as it does not appear on most Western calendars).

Karim (9 August 2000) for example, said that it took him four years reading the Qur'an. A short time before he took his Shahadah he had read the Qur'an in eight days. Four weeks after *shahadah* he knew all his prayers in Arabic. Ajaz (9 September 2000) said that no one actively invited him to Islam, he read the Qur'an himself and the will of Allah guided him to Islam. He bought a Qur'an and started reading it, but first he thought it was boring. He had left it on the bookshelf for five years. When the trouble started in his life he felt he needed help. He was asking and looking. He started again to read the Qur'an all the way through. He said that reading the Qur'an opened his eyes to see things differently. He said:

> *I remember reading in Qur'an that Jesus was not dead. All these millions of people who think that Jesus is dead, they do not realise how bad it is to think the way they do about Jesus, it is really sad, very sad.*
>
> *It made sense to me now why Allah is protecting Qur'an, those who are searching for the truth will find it when they read the Qur'an, but they will not find it when they read the Bible because the Bible has been changed.*

Yussif (11 March 2000) said that no one invited him or introduced him to Islam. He read the Qur'an in translation. He said that the Qur'an spoke about the One God, and he believed in the One God; the Qur'an answered all his questions. He said:

> *If I drank or smoked while reading other religious books I did*
> *not feel guilty. I felt very guilty and dirty when I tried to read*
> *the Qur'an in that way. Therefore I felt I had to be clean to*
> *read the Qur'an. When reading the Qur'an I felt that Allah was*
> *speaking directly to me. The words of Allah are so powerful,*
> *especially when I read about the hypocrites. It was one and a*
> *half years after the initial attraction that I accepted Islam.*

Kate (12 March 2000) said that she had always believed in one God, but she did

not know it was an Islamic belief until she looked at the Qur'an that had been

given earlier to her by the Indian man in the prison. When she started to read

about Islam she already believed that she was a Muslim because she believed in

what she had read in the Qur'an and *hadeeth*. Then she started to read about the

prayers. Kate began practising the prayers. She said:

> *It was so complicated, but that was what I was hoping for. I*
> *was looking for something where I could see God in everything.*
> *I wanted God as part of my daily routine. God was not a*
> *Sunday visit.*
>
> *God was more complete than that. Surely God consciousness*
> *had to be total, it has to be everywhere. I now understood that*
> *Islam was a complete way of life; Islam was the truth.*

Kate took the *shahadah* one night in her bedroom, all by herself. She went back

to the college where she was working in her *hijab*.

Daud Talbot (20 August 2000) said that after reading the Qur'an he came back to

Leeds and he wanted to find where the Muslims were; he needed to know what

was required of him. He was convinced in his heart that Islam was the right way

of life for him. He said:

> *I practised Islam before taking my shahadah. Therefore it was a*
> *gradual process. I stopped doing things that were wrong as I*
> *learnt more about the religion. I heard about Ramadhan and*

> *that was a daunting task. It seemed a difficult task for me*
> *because that was not in my culture. I tried my first Ramadhan.*
> *My first day was hard. In the afternoon I had a headache and*
> *had to have a drink of water and rested. The second day was*
> *much easier and I completed the month of Ramadhan.*
>
> *Therefore I fasted and prayed before I took my shahadah which*
> *was not very long after the initial attraction.*

Amaani (6 November 2000) said that she did not think that she would become a Muslim, she was just full of insatiable curiosity. She began eagerly to read the Qur'an and for her that was the turning point. She instantly recognised it as the truth, the same as she had read in the Bible, the same as Jesus had said, but more powerful. It was more clear. She said:

> *I remember shaking and crying on the realisation that my whole*
> *manner of living was wrong, and that I was holding in my hands*
> *the very word of God. I wanted to follow Islam immediately, but*
> *I didn't know anyone who could help me. I was surrounded by*
> *non-Muslims and gradually my determination was worn away*
> *and I began to return to my former condition.*

Mohammad Sidiq (5 September 2000) described how much he was in touch with the Qur'an: when he read it for the first time, he could not put the book down; he read and read, searched and searched. He said:

> *I was astonished for I had never experienced such a wonderful*
> *marvel before. It was perfect; and no one could be the author of*
> *such perfection other than God. This realisation led me to that*
> *troublesome night and that devastating decision, but today I*
> *praise God for yet again heeding my prayer and helping to*
> *carry me through from darkness to light.*

He said that he did not throw himself into Islam immediately. It was around one year afterwards that he decided to take his *shahadah*.

The evidence shows that reading the Qur'an represented a turning point in the interviewees' lives. The responses were direct and personal. There was a clear perception that the Qur'an was speaking directly to the individual reader, and that it was the genuine article – the word of God to humanity. It not only touched their consciences at both a rational and emotional level, but also provided a view of existence in which everything seemed to fall into place and make sense. Most also implied in their responses that previously they had not known what Islam was and now they did.

6.7   The Converts and the Key Attractions of Islam

Apart from judging the conversion patterns that converts went through, each convert was also asked to identify the most motivating factor for their conversion, their response to the teachings of Islam with regard to religious beliefs, moral or social matters, and its spiritual aspect. For most of the converts to Islam in the present work, the key feature mentioned that first attracted them was believing in One God (*tawheed*). The converts who did not mention *tawheed* when questioned on 'the first or key attraction' mentioned its importance at other points in their interviews. It is true to say that all the converts regarded *tawheed* as the most important element in Islam.

Together with *tawheed*, other key features were identified. Andrew (20 June 2000) described what he liked about Islam. He said:

> *I like the simplicity of Islam. Priests are human ,after all. It is not necessary to have someone in between you and the God. In Islam there is the God and his creation and that is it.*

Maryam (2 October 2000) said that for her a most important feature was what was

said in the Qur'an. She said first Allah is Compassionate and Merciful; for her

that was the description of love. The next important thing was how well the

Qur'an described that we all come from one man and one woman and Allah made

us into tribes and nations and He made us in all our different colours, so that we

could get to know each other, and the best among us are those who are most God-

conscious. Three of the converts pinpointed the all-embracing nature of Islam as a

key feature in terms of explicit references to the unity of humankind. The Qur'an

affirmed that it was God who had chosen to create the different colours and

languages; people are judged by God according to behaviour and not race. It is

interesting that the three converts who mentioned this as a key feature of

attraction to Islam, were all women. Two of these were white and one was Afro-

Caribbean. This was Halima (17 April 2000), who said that in Christianity this

was lacking, and that there was no reference to colour at all except that any thing

that was black was evil, sinful and dirty. She said:

> *In Islam they say the Apostles have more colour. In Islam there is*
> *no colour. I saw my ancestral line within Islam, not within*
> *Christianity. Islam incorporates all nations, it is colourless.*

Sarah (26 September 2000) referred to the issue as 'race relations'

> *The key feature that attracted me was the race relations. I was*
> *conscious that where I lived with my parents there was a great*
> *divide between black people and white people. In Christianity*
> *they portray Jesus as being a white man with blonde hair and*
> *blue eyes. This is clearly not the case. There is no ethnic divide*
> *between Muslims. Everybody is equal, whether they are black,*
> *white or yellow. I liked that because that is one of the things I*
> *was very concerned about within the society as I got older.*

Zainab (16 May 2000) said that Islam gave her balance in her life, while the

balance of justice was also mentioned as important. For instance, Rahem (2 May

2000) said:

> *The justice that I read in the Qur'an; there is only One God and*
> *fighting for only a good cause, spiritual and physical fighting for*
> *good.*

It was noticed that most of the key features referred to the content of the Qur'an.

Lateefa (12 June 2000) referred to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) not being

learned in the accepted sense of the word:

> *I think that the most striking feature is how this amazing book can*
> *be produced from somebody who doesn't read or write. That's*
> *the most striking feature.*

Suliman (18 September 2000) said that the key features of Islam that first

attracted him were the Qur'an and the beloved prophet Mohammed (PBUH),

while Mohammed Sidiq (5 September 2000) said that for him it was not one

particular thing; it was a collection of things about Islam that finally convinced

him to accept Islam. Ajaz (9 September 2000) said simply, that the Qur'an had all

the answers to living a good and peaceful life while Abdul Salam (9 June 2000)

went into more detail about the qualities of the Qur'an itself:

> *I was first attracted to the beauty of Islam, one Ummah. The*
> *powerful words of the Qur'an, a very serious book. Although I*
> *was only reading the Qur'an in English, I still found it very*
> *beautiful. I am a bit of a poet; therefore I always ponder deeply*
> *when I am reading the Qur'an.*

To conclude this section, it is noted that, as in some of the quotations recorded in

the encounter stage and the section preceding this, the Qur'an played a major part

in attracting the interviewees to Islam and played a major part in the conversion

process.   The initial or key attractions to Islam varied, though it should be

mentioned that the key element of Islam was seen by all the converts to be

tawheed.

6.8   Conversion Motifs

Lofland and Skonovd (1981: 373-385) suggest six types of conversion

(intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalistic, and coercive). It has

already been established that none of the conversions in the present study were

revivalistic or coercive. Although, to some extent to open the Qur'an may be seen

as 'experimental', no other aspects of the conversions fit the 'experimental'

conditions described by previous researchers: beginning to practise Muslim

prayers or fasting, often took place in isolation and was presented by the

interviewees as embarking on commitment, rather than as experimentation. This

is one of the reasons for saying that the 'interaction' and 'commitment' stages are

merged, in the conversions under discussion. Coming to a state of submission to

God and belief in an afterlife, angels and so on, can be seen as mystical, but none

of the interviewees presented these things with a mystical style of language. In

fact, it was the reasonableness of the faith that they emphasised. Over and over

again the converts described how Islam made sense to them, and this included

social, moral and political considerations. Therefore I would suggest that Lofland

and Skonovd's definition of the *intellectual* conversion applies to the conversions

being analysed, to a certain extent.   They describe the convert as becoming

acquainted with alternative ideologies and ways of life by individual, private

investigation like reading books, watching television and other impersonal ways. They say that in the 'intellectual' conversion some individuals convert in isolation from any actual interaction with devotees of the respective religion. This applies to a significant number of the current sample. Lofland and Skonovd go on to say that, in intellectual mode, the individual is still likely to be socially involved with members of the new religion. As has been mentioned before, however, this does not apply to the majority of the current sample. Reviewing the Lofland-Skonovd's conversion motifs, Robbins (1988: 71) suggests that there is little or no external social pressure, that sometimes the conversion is a long process and that a reasonably high level of belief is attained prior to actual conversion. All this applies to the current sample, except that most of them regarded themselves as already believing, already being Muslims, prior to the formal affirmation or '*shahadah*'. The other motif postulated by Lofland-Skonovd, 'affectional', applies to some extent to three out of the 37 converts. These were Sufyan (30 September 2000), who became a Muslim in order to marry his Muslim wife, and Sarah (26 September 2000) and Nabilah (26 September 2000) who converted after marrying Muslim husbands. This is where, according to Lofland and Skonovd, personal attachment or strong liking for practising believers is central to the conversion process; though social pressure is present, it functions more as a 'support' and an attraction rather than as an 'inducement' and the process is relatively prolonged. This last fits more closely with the two women, than to Sufyan.

All the converts in the current sample were thinking, reasoning and investigating during their newly found interaction with Islam and these can be regarded as intellectual activities, necessary for them to accept the newly discovered belief

system. It should also be pointed out that the Qur'an explicitly appeals to the reason, observational powers, powers of analogy, 'common sense' and wisdom of the reader/listener. It also invites the reader to consider history and aspects of the natural world and universe. Reading the Qur'an and considering other Islamic literature there was found to be an interface between their questioning and the answers they found arising in response to their questions. It should, however, be pointed out that some of the understanding acquired in this way appealed to the emotions in a way that is more imaginative and poetic than rationalistic. Both intellect and feelings were involved.

For example Andrew (20 June 2000) said:

> *Very often in my journey to Islam, I was faced with intellectual and moral dilemmas. Was Islam not supposed to be cruel to women, roughly half of the world's population? One day, I was reading a translation of the Qur'an and came across a passage in which it described 'a wife as a garment for her husband, and a husband as a garment for his wife.' What beauty and what a sublime description!*

Andrew said that it was delivered at a time to a race who used to bury their daughters alive, so how could the author have possibly been a man? He was beginning to doubt the typical Western view regarding the origins of Islam. For him the Qur'an was far too other worldly, and very profound. He said that likewise, when he examined the life of the man whom non-Muslims falsely accused of composing the Qur'an himself, he said that he was extremely puzzled. Why did he, Muhammad (PBUH), give rights to all the disadvantaged groups in society such as women, slaves, animals and even trees? Most importantly, for

Andrew, why did Muhammad (PBUH) risk his life and instruct people to worship

the one true God instead of their tribal idols and charms?

One by one, the doubts that Andrew had entertained in his life ebbed away. At

the last moment, he felt as though he was standing on a bridge, apprehensive

about moving forward into Islam, but knowing that to return to his former way of

life would have meant rejecting the message which he knew to be true. Put into

context, he said, there was only one place to go, One God to worship, one religion

to follow.

6.8.1   Conversion Through Marriage

Many studies on religious conversion have shown that spouses are often

instrumental in inducing the individual to convert (Mayer, 1987). For three out of

37 converts involved in this research, marrying a spouse in the new faith seems to

have been a motivation for their conversion. An individual's perspectives are

likely to change when his or her social relationships change. The conversion

process then becomes a process of coming to accept the opinions of one's

significant others who in this case are Muslims.

In the present sample only Sufyan (30 September 2000) converted before

marriage in order to be able to marry his future spouse. He was on a trip to

Hampton Court and Windsor Castle, near London, when he met an Arab woman

on the same trip. He recalled:

> *There was an Arab lady on the trip. She was a practising*
> *Muslim in those days. She was not taught much by her parents*
> *in those days. She was the first Arab I met. Baheer was very*
> *generous and friendly. I liked her. I took her out to play table*

> *tennis and I invited her home to meet my mother. My mother*
> *liked her. I told her that I would like to marry her. She,*
> *(Baheer), told me that she could not marry someone who was*
> *not a Muslim.*

Sufyan then said that Baheer briefly told him that she believed in One God, that

all the prophets, including Jesus, came with the same message to worship One

God. The message was completed with Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). He said

that he did not have any difficulty believing these things. He said that he had

always thought that there was something good about Jesus, but he did not feel that

he should be worshipping Jesus. That was the answer that Sufyan needed: that

Jesus was a prophet, and that people do not worship prophets. It was so obvious

to him, that all the messengers came with the same message. But he said, in

Christianity they do not think of it that way. He went on:

> *I liked Baheer and the concept of Islam: One God, and One*
> *Message for all mankind. At this time I stopped drinking*
> *because I understood that it was wrong. It was a gradual*
> *process. I started to learn more with the help of people in the*
> *community. Therefore I gradually changed through*
> *understanding.*

According to McHugh (1990: 36) many women get involved with Muslims and

they turn to Islam through marrying Muslims. I do not agree with him that

women come to Islam in general through marrying Muslims. In my present study

I found only two cases of women marrying Muslims and then becoming Muslims.

These were Sara (26 September 2000) and Nabilah (26 September 2000). In my

sample I found no women who had converted in order to marry a Muslim. When

I asked Nabilah (see Appendix 9) she said that she met her husband through

college and they decided to marry. Her father did not like the idea of his daughter

marrying a Muslim, or the possibility of his daughter thinking about accepting

Islam. After Nabilah got married she started to investigate Islam. She said:

> *The investigation started when my husband used to bring home*
> *books from the Mosque. I used to find that people outside Islam*
> *would question why a man is allowed to have more than one*
> *wife and women can have only one husband. Women outside*
> *Islam find it very difficult to understand this; they have asked me*
> *so many times.*

Nabilah said that her husband explained to her some of the facts, but mainly she

learnt herself by reading books and attending religious study circles. She said that

she wanted to take *shahadah* when she understood what the meaning of it was and

why she was saying it. She said:

> *The differences between Christianity and Islam were that in*
> *some parts they were the same and then they branch off. The*
> *information that I received from my husband was hard to accept*
> *at first. I had to study and find out for myself. I was curious*
> *about Islam because when I married my husband I was not a*
> *Muslim, but I had to defend him when people were saying bad*
> *things about him or the religion of Islam.*

Nabilah spent a number of years studying Islam; she wanted to know why people

spoke badly of Islam. Then she took her *shahadah* in Ireland. She had been

married for four years before she decided to take the *shahadah,* willingly,

knowingly understanding it.

It was during Ramadhan that Sarah (26 September 2000) met a Muslim man with

his friend whilst teacher training in Leeds. She visited their room. They were

breaking their fast and sharing a plate of fruits. They invited her to share the plate

with them. They explained to Sarah that it was Ramadhan and they had been

fasting. The relationship with one of them started to develop and he gave her

books and videos to watch. Sarah decided to marry her Muslim friend and a year

after her marriage she took her *shahadah*. She said:

> *My husband introduced me to Islam gradually. I practiced*
> *fasting and praying the year before I accepted Islam. I stopped*
> *doing the things I used to do when I accepted Islam. My*
> *husband is an Arab Muslim, therefore some of the things were*
> *immediate.*

Sarah said that her husband had good Muslim friends; and there was a friend of

Sarah who had converted to Islam a little while after she did. On the whole she

was surrounded, as she said, by practising Muslims who gave her good support.

This research does not claim to ascertain what proportion of conversions to Islam

in Britain are for the sake of marriage. The interviewees who converted through

marriage stated that their Muslim partners took Islam more seriously than the

interviewees did their own religion. It is quite understandable that when a Muslim

partner has a strong commitment, and the non-Muslim partner has a relatively

weak commitment, there is a strong probability that the latter will convert.

The two who converted after their marriage expressed the view that through living

with Muslims and by studying and discussing various religious problems with

them, they became acquainted with the rationality and truth of Islam. Nabilah

said that her father-in-law and mother-in-law decided that it was a good idea for

her to speak to a religious woman about Islam, who was working in the mosque.

So they arranged a time for Nabilah to meet with the religious teacher, so that she

could introduce her slowly to Islam. Sufyan had also received gentle help from

the Muslim community:

> *I started to learn more with the help of people in the community.*
> *Therefore I gradually changed through understanding.*

These experiences of Sufyan, and of Nabilah and Sarah who, as wives of

Muslims, converted after finding themselves within a Muslim environment,

contrast strongly with the experiences of the other 34 converts. They are an

exception.

6.9   Overview of the Conversion Experiences of the Current Convert Sample

No single process model can account for all cases of conversion. This study

confirms the assertions of Snow and Phillips (1980:444), Greil and Rudy

(1984:318) and Köse (1996: 121-122) that the conversion process may well be

different in different kinds of groups, as the conversion process of the current

sample did not fit neatly into any previously proposed model.

Some investigators, notably those who have investigated NRMs, have seen

conversion as a phenomenon where people who join a particular group have

similar background characteristics to those within the group. This does not apply

to the present sample for three reasons. The first is that all but two converts did

not join the Muslim community until after conversion. The second is that the

receiving community is mainly composed of people with different geographical,

ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds from the converts. The third reason is

that the converts in the sample did not have the same backgrounds as each other.

Their ethnic and economic backgrounds and places of upbringing were also different from each other and they had attended different types of schools. Although all were educated, their formal levels of education varied from GCSE to higher degree level. What they did all have in common was the experience of going through the English state education system up to fifteen or sixteen years old. It could be that aspects of this education, which in theory aims to encourage independent thinking, use of initiative, and investigative skills, was an effective common influence[3]. All the interviewees revealed an active curiosity and questioning. Some had done private research into several religions. Most of them had actively investigated Islam on their own initiative although they had not planned to do so. The initial and intensifying interest in Islam had, however, been sparked off by a wide variety of different stimuli.

The converts had in common that they had all become dissatisfied with the religion, or some of the moral values, of their upbringing. They had each spent some time without any formal attachment or close attachment to any religion. They had each found, during the period prior to the conversion process, different levels of disaffection with the values and lifestyle of the society in which they lived. In some cases this had resulted in activism on behalf of certain causes that confronted the status quo. A very small minority had been in active rebellion. Apart from the two women who married Muslims prior to conversion, the converts did not recall having had any close contact with the Muslim community.

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[3] For more information on *The School Curriculum and the National Curriculum: values, aims and purposes*, see http://www.nc.uk

For some, it was there in the background. But it had not appeared to affect their lives in any way. None had had contact with any Muslim missionary group. They had not been aware of *da'wah* organisations, although some of the Islamic material that they eventually studied must have emanated from *da'wah* organisations as, apart from the Qur'an, Islamic material is not available in the usual bookshops. Many of the sample reported that, over the years, they had had little awareness of Islam and/or that they had had negative views of Islam, based mainly on hearsay or the media.

Despite this lack of contact with the Muslim community, most of the converts did mention having had a conversation with a Muslim at some time prior to the conversion process. Most of these contacts appeared to have happened by chance. Some were seen as significant at the time. Others were not seen to have been significant until much later. Some of these contacts seem to have precipitated the conversion: the Muslim may have handed the potential convert a copy of the Qur'an or happened to answer a key question. This answer may have directed the convert towards further investigation or even acceptance of Islam. Others of these contacts seem, on the face of it, to have had less connection with the conversion. These apparently chance contacts varied a lot in content and intensity. In view of the rest of the convert's experience, it is therefore impossible to assess whether the chance Muslim contacts were a necessary part of the conversion process. It is not possible to assess whether the convert would have converted if they had not had this 'chance' contact. Most converts thought that a whole series of (apparently) unrelated incidents brought them to conversion. Because they now believe in the power of God, they do not now regard these incidents as accidental.

It should be mentioned that most of the interviewees did not know each other and could not have influenced each other's accounts. Apparently random and unrelated events, circumstances and chance happenings had led these people, most of whom were disaffected with at least some aspects of their present life and society, to the point where they read a translation of the Qur'an, and this reading had proved central to their conversion. Thinking about all this, it suddenly struck me that what I was looking at was *hidayah,* a phenomenon familiar to me through my Islamic education in Saudi Arabia.

In the Islamic view, a series of apparently unrelated incidents leading towards a decision or action relating to the faith is termed *'hidayah'* (the guidance of God). In Islam nothing happens 'by accident' and several of the interviewees reported that they thought that they had really always been Muslims. The implication is that *'hidayah'* brought them, through God's natural means, to embrace Islam and take their *shahadah.* In Islamic psychology this view is confirmed, in that the child is viewed as having been a Muslim, i.e., in a natural state, called *fitrah,* at birth. As the child grows up and lives his/her life on earth it then becomes *fitrah* to have choices to make. It is natural for the human being to be tempted this way and that, and the believing Muslim is expected to achieve a balance between his/her lower selfish impulses *(nafs),* the *aql* (intellect), and his/her 'innate spirit linking to God' *(al ruh).* When a person has all these things balanced, his/her consciousness is centred in the heart *(al qalb).* The heart is the seat of intelligence and (healthy) emotions.

The crucial part played by the Qur'an, or in some cases parts of it, in the conversion process was clear in all the interviews, especially in the 34 out of 37 converts where marriage was not involved. As stated previously, the converts' interaction with the Qur'an in many cases precipitated conversion, often while in the process of reading it. This interaction replaces the 'interaction with a group of people' that most previous researchers have identified as a key part of the conversion process. It is clear that the converts were responding to the Qur'an, but is it clear that the Qur'an was responding to them? Both are needed for 'interaction'. Here it is pointed out that the converts in general felt that the Qur'an was actually speaking to them personally, even answering their questions, as they were reading. As Rahem (2 May 2000) said in conversation,

> *Each time I have a question, the answer comes up, in the*
> *Qur'an. It's the most precious thing I've got apart from my*
> *faith.*

The interviewer questioned Saif (13 October 2000) when he was talking about the power of the Qur'an. As a native Arabic speaker the researcher was surprised that the Qur'an could have such power when it was only in translation. He said that of course Allah has the power to speak through the Qur'an in English (if that is the only language the reader can read it with).

It was mentioned earlier that the *'intellectual'* motif mentioned by Lofland and Skonovd applies to some extent to the conversions in the sample. However, as Andrew made clear, beauty and sublimity were also found in the Qur'an, while Maryam (2 October 2000), for example, had mentioned love as one word summing up God's qualities of compassion and mercy, constantly mentioned in

the Qur'an. It has been found that the responses to the Qur'an and conversions to

Islam were not only intellectual. They involved both intelligence and emotions or

feelings. At the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and ever since, the heart

(al qalb) has been regarded as the seat of the intelligence and (intelligent, i.e. true)

feelings in Arab culture, and thus in Islamic culture. Since the Qur'an was first

revealed to the Arabs to persuade people to submit to Islam, it is not surprising

that the Qur'an appeals to the heart *(al qalb),* in the Arab sense of 'seat of

intelligence and feelings combined'. As mentioned in the literature review and

above, the *aql,* or intellect, is not regarded, on its own, as a balanced way of

understanding things, because it does not represent the whole balanced

personality. Because human intellect is limited some things still have to be taken

on trust. Therefore, it is fair to say that the conversion process which takes place

in reading the Qur'an involves the whole personality, in a balance of intelligence

and emotions, rather than the partial response of intellect alone.

6.10 Summary

The conversion process varied in length from several years to a few weeks. In all

cases it involved readjustment of world view, socially and politically. It also

involved reassurance, because by finding the context and purpose of life as a

whole readjusted, the converts found much more made sense. Some also

mentioned finding reassurance in the Qur'an because it confirmed views they had

previously held, but had not found confirmed elsewhere. Life was now also seen

in the context of an after-life where judgement, reward or punishment would take

place. By seeing their lives as dependent on one God, as Creator and Sustainer,

from whom they came and to whom they would return in the hereafter, the converts felt that they could now see things clearly. Their questions were answered. Everything now made sense. Their relationship to God, to other people, creatures and the rest of creation had become clear. They felt that they had attained peace inside themselves because they had returned to the way of life and view of life that they had been created for. The attitude of the converts at this stage of interaction/commitment came across as one of humility and trust. They had quiet determination rather than excitement and a sense of celebration. All the converts appeared to have their feet firmly on the ground. Although they had the opportunity, none of them spoke in terms of mystical experience, but rather as now seeing their place in an integrated system that encompassed spiritual and material elements. Their conversion had given them the opportunity for a new start in life, but this new start was regarded as a 'returning', and several converts said that they preferred the term 'revert' to the term 'convert'.

7. 1   Introduction

In this chapter we shall examine the experience of the interviewees after they had

become fully fledged Muslims by taking *shahadah*. We shall look at the extent to

which their new faith affected them, both in the personal sphere of religious

practice, their relationship with the Muslim and non-Muslim communities, and

how they have responded to their changed situation.

7. 2   The Variety of Consequences

The consequences of conversion are complex and multi-faceted in their study and

explication.   An important aspect is to assess an individual's conversion in terms

of the internal criteria developed by the group he/she is entering. This approach is

important for many reasons, chief among which is to highlight the fact that the

process of conversion is, after all, a religious conversion within a religious

community and tradition (Wilber, 1980: 51-52).

How many aspects of life are affected by conversion? How extensive are the

changes conversion brings? To what extent are converts alienated from or

reconciled to the wider world? When evaluating degree of change, one must look

beyond the immediate results. Many contemporary scholars believe that authentic

conversion is an ongoing process of transformation.   Initial change, while

important, is but the first step in a long process. More profound changes may

come in the months, and even years, after the initial conversion takes place (Gelpi,

1989: 1-30). Nothing reported by the current sample contradicted this finding.

Gelpi (1987: 175-180) proposes five dimensions of conversion: affective,

intellectual, ethical, religious and social. The affective dimension of conversion concerns passions, feelings and intentions. Examining the nature of one's emotions challenges one to grow into emotional maturity by confronting and eliminating such things as, for example, racism and sexism. Moving from selfishness to the love of others demands a fundamental shift in emotional direction and intensity. Gelpi recognises that there is a difference between initial and ongoing conversion. Initial conversion is the first phase of moving from irresponsible to responsible behaviour in some area of experience. Ongoing conversion is the interaction between various dimensions of conversion and the continuous process of change throughout life. Integral conversion is a commitment to living out these fundamental changes in all areas of life - emotional, affective, ethical, intellectual and social (Gelpi, 1987: 180-192). All the above findings of Gelpi apply individually and generally to the current sample of converts to Islam during the ongoing post-conversion period of their lives. It is important to keep in mind that when discussing the consequences of conversion, the other stages may continue to affect the subject's experience (see Figure 7.1).

The consequences of conversion involve a continuing process of change. The convert is more, or less, aware of the nature of the experience he/she is going through. For some people the consequence is a radically transformed life. Their patterns of beliefs and actions are significantly different from what they were before. On the other hand, some, as was found in the current sample, may see the consequences as an inevitable step in an on–going process, especially as far as their internal experience is concerned. The social repercussions, though, may vary from mildly significant to quite profound and/or unexpected. Some of the

converts gained a sense of mission and purpose, and yet others acquired a very

quiet sense of security and peace. Researchers in this area such as Wilber (1980)

and Gelpi (1989), have found that converts are in a very weak position, that they

and members of their new faith must take great care to keep the new commitment

alive, and that the converts need a community with similar beliefs to encourage
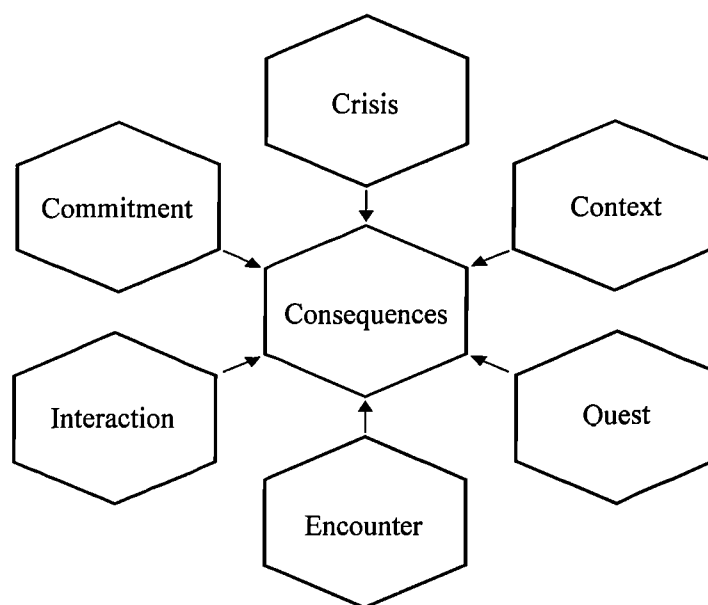
and care for them.

Figure 7.1: Stage Seven, Consequences

As far as the present sample of converts is concerned, it would be more suitable to

say that the amount of immersion into the established Muslim community has

varied, that the experience has been both positive and negative, and that the

interviewees' spiritual confidence and development seems to have continued

regardless of their relationship with the established community. A majority,

however, mentioned the positive encouragement provided by their post-

conversion contacts with other converts and/or individuals from the traditional

community.   It also became clear that as the converts developed spiritually, their understanding became more sophisticated and they reviewed, reinterpreted, and re-evaluated their experience, but this did not cause their commitment to Islam to falter.

7. 3   Matter of Definition: Revert or Convert?

As stated earlier, Muslims believe in the concept of *fitrah*, that a person is born by nature as a Muslim and inclined to Islam. However, there is some element of free choice in deciding one's *deen* (way of life), which adds a second dimension to the concept of *fitrah*. One has also to reaffirm one's *deen* by understanding and accepting it, publicly affirming it and putting its teachings into practice (Adnan, 1997: 5). Neither the Qur'an nor the *sunnah* refers to new Muslims as such, however, both are directed towards bringing people to Islam or, if they are already believing Muslims, to increasing their *taqwa* (God consciousness). Once a person utters the *shahadah*, that person is just the same outwardly as people who were raised as Muslims. Muslims are only differentiated by their degree of *taqwa*.

The interviewees had been asked if they were happy with the term 'convert', or if the word 'revert', a popular alternative, is better and more accurate. The majority were not happy with the word 'convert'. Thirteen explicitly favoured the term 'revert': Rokanne (26 September 2000) for example, replied:

> *No, the correct word is revert, we are all born Muslims;*
> *throughout our lives our parents diverted, took on different*
> *paths, and as their children we follow in their footsteps. As we*
> *get older we find the truth. Therefore the correct word is revert,*
> *not convert.*

Sixteen of the current sample thought the term '*fitrah*' and to 'embrace' more

accurately described their position. Yussif (11 March 2000) comments:

> *I do not like either. Islamically, reversion is incorrect. Fitrah is*
> *something that you are born with; Islam is an active thing.*
> *Islam in the technical sense happens at puberty. At that point*
> *the child is responsible and he can declare that he believes in*
> *Islam and he wants to become a Muslim. Up until puberty a*
> *child is not responsible. Therefore he is not reverting; he*
> *reverts to fitrah only. It does not happen overnight. I do not*
> *like the term 'conversion'. I would say that I am a person who*
> *has embraced Islam.*

The remaining eight do not like the terms convert or revert, and would rather be

known as Muslims only, but they do not think it is of major importance. Lateefa

(12 June 2000), one of these, said:

> *I think it doesn't really matter what you call it, because at the*
> *end of the day it's still the same effect; it's coming into Islam.*
> *Most people prefer the term 'reversion', because we were all*
> *born Muslims and we're just coming back into it, but at the end*
> *of the day the effect is the same. People argue about this point*
> *but there's much more important points to be argued about.*

The term 'conversion' was not acceptable to most of the interviewees partly

because knowledge of Islam has to go hand in hand with putting that knowledge

into practice, and truly committing oneself to Allah and to the *deen*. The majority

of the interviewees felt that Islam embodied everything they believed in and was a

development that had taken place partly as a culmination of their previous

knowledge and outlook, rather than a break or diversion unconnected with their

previous experiences, and partly as a return to 'the natural way' for which and in

which they were created. I must emphasize that it is purely for academic reasons

that I am using the term 'convert', in order to include people from a variety of

religious and social backgrounds in the discussion as mentioned in the definition

given earlier, and not to suggest that 'converts' are less 'Muslim' than traditional

Muslims.

7.3.1   The New Being

Religion is a very effective context for analysing identity as it is generally

accompanied by moral systems which support identity by establishing basic

values of right and wrong, good and bad, and by regulating interpersonal conduct

(Shafranske, 1992: 167). It is in this context that the conversion experience

provided the current sample of converts to Islam with a social and moral identity.

Religious conversion is often defined as a definite break with one's former

identity such that the past and the present are antithetical in some important

respects. Investigators of conversion, such as Barker and Currie (1985: 305) and

Gillespie (1991: 67), seem virtually unanimous that conversion involves a radical

change in one's identity, beliefs, ideas, values, and personality.

In both structural and subjective dimensions of religious change, the interviewees

reported an identity change of significant magnitude. The converts said that this

had emerged naturally. With conversion the purpose and meaning of life had

taken on major importance for the convert. The decision to change formed the

basis which enabled him/her to view life from a different perspective. The change

caused by conversion fundamentally transformed their conception of the world

and their place in it. Becoming a Muslim resulted in a change of identity at both a

personal and a public level. Their purposes in life became clear on a very

personal level. Saif (13 October 2000) said:

> *Emotionally I have changed; I am more at peace with myself,*
> *more understanding, more accepting of the world around me.*
> *Far less to judge - I try not to judge, whatever their belief,*
> *traditions or customs. My life gradually became so much more*
> *calm and peaceful. My actions, the way I conducted my life, and*
> *my dealings with others began to reflect this. Everything was*
> *clear and straightforward. As I read and thought, there was a*
> *total acceptance and submission to Allah, to His plan and to His*
> *will, both in my mind and in my heart.*

The majority of the converts did not report going through any postconversion depression as identified by Rambo (1993:136). This may partly be explained by the fact that the conversion process had taken a long time, during which the individuals weighed the pros and cons of their conversion, and also by the general feeling of the converts that they were returning to 'the natural way'. Such a view was not likely to lead to depression. According to Beit-Hallahmi (1989: 101), religious groups require their new members to change their formal identity by adopting a new name which is a way of fostering higher involvement through external identity symbols and stronger identification with the group. One of the first things that converts to Islam tend to do is to take an Islamic name. It is almost always done when the convert takes the *shahadah* in front of others. It is suggested to the convert that he/she takes a new name, although this is not required in Islam, unless the existing name has a bad meaning. *Imams* in mosques usually have available a list of male and female Arabic names associated with the prophets and devout followers of early Islam. If the convert is in a mosque, when he/she has taken *shahadah*, he/she is invited to take a new name from the list, if they wish. Sometimes a pleasant aspect of the convert's personality will suggest a name to the *imam* and he will offer this to the convert. The *imam* may also notice that the convert's original name is similar to a Muslim

name and suggest, for example, Daud for David or Maryam for Mary. The

converts are however, perfectly free to keep their original names or choose their

Muslim names themselves. Thirty four of the 37 in the current sample now bear

an Islamic name. Most of those who have taken an Islamic name use their new

name within the Muslim community while they tend to allow others from their

former social groupings to continue using their former names, when addressing

them. It has been noticed that the Afro-Caribbean converts had seen changing

their names into Islamic names as a major issue so as to get rid of their 'slave

names', as they called them[1]. Halima (17 April 2000), for instance, said that it

was important to her as an individual to change her name, but some people, as she

said, might not consider it as important as she did. Her opinion echoes that of

many Afro-Caribbeans in the sample:

> *Our slave masters have insisted for four hundred years to*
> *change our names. They knew how important names and*
> *languages were. That is why they forbad the slaves to speak*
> *their languages and use their original names.*

Only one of the Afro-Caribbeans in the current sample had changed his name by

British law, and he now uses it in all of his interactions and transactions. For the

rest of the group some of those who did not take an Islamic name expressed the

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[1] For more reading relating to the Afro-Caribbeans' background, their concerns about identity and
hence, insistence on name change, see *The New International History of the World*, Oxford:
New Internationalist Publications Ltd., 1989: 196. And also Abdullah Quick *Deeper Roots:*
Muslims in the Americas and the Caribbean: from before Columbus to the Present, Ta-Ha
Publishers Ltd., 1998.

view that by keeping their name they were able to show people that it is possible

to be both English and Muslim. Andrew (20 June 2000) said:

> *Some people say you should change your name because it would*
> *strengthen your iman. At present I do not see the need, but I do*
> *have a name in mind when I am ready.*

Most of those who took an Islamic name preferred the common traditional names,

such as; Safeeyah (3 February 2000), Daud (10 August 2000), Aisha (16

September 2000) and Yussif (11 March 2000). Lady Aisha (9 August 2000)

commented on this point:

> *I believe when you hear a name like John or Peter you link that*
> *to Christianity, therefore when you hear a name like Aisha or*
> *Muhammad, yes it should be distinctive, and link you to your*
> *belief. However, these days other people are choosing Muslim*
> *names as a matter of fashion or simply because they like the*
> *names and their meaning.*

Sohail (23 April 2000) said:

> *I think it is important to have a Muslim identity. If I was in the*
> *Mosque and someone shouts you as Andrew, I do not feel like I*
> *am a Muslim. I think having a Muslim name reminds me of who*
> *I am.*

It has been proposed that converts tend to denounce their own preconversion life

as sinful and immoral (Ullman, 1989: 15). However, only four of the converts

involved in the present study regarded themselves as exceptionally sinful in the

past. Twenty seven of the subjects regarded their previous life as reasonably

fulfilling. Six described their preconversion life as purposeless, ignorant, or in the

wrong direction. Kate (12 March 2000) said how new she felt by changing her

name:

> *I changed my name because I wanted an Islamic name. I*
> *wanted to start again. I believed that all my prior sins had been*
> *forgiven when I became a Muslim. I am now satisfied with the*
> *meaning of life; I understand what the meaning of life is and my*
> *position in the design. The fact is that I now have peace in my*
> *heart. I have an understanding; I have a fulfilment. It is like I*
> *have been thirsty for thirty years and I have just drunk a glass of*
> *water.*

The converts felt that they were cleansed from all the dregs of the past. They felt

that by their accepting Islam *Allah*/God had forgiven them and they were wiped

clean of their former sins. It is, in fact, the Islamic precept that made them feel

that way. According to Islam when a person takes *shahadah*, he/she is forgiven

his/her previous sins.

7.3.2   New Beliefs: Practices and Habits

In terms of religious practices, converts expressed the opinion that they did not in

general find them difficult. Since they went through a preparational period before

taking their *shahadah*, their commitment to some practices occurred naturally.

Several of the converts, as has been mentioned earlier, said that they had begun

Islamic religious practices before they took their *shahadah*. Rachel (7 February

2000) said this about her experience:

> *When I took the shahadah it was meaningless, because I had*
> *adopted some of the practices from when I read the Qur'an. I*
> *started fasting and I did alter my life. I stopped having a bank*
> *account with interest; it was a gradual process. My clothes*
> *were more modest. I was already aware that I could not do*
> *some things because they were wrong.*

However, no matter how much they felt that they were prepared to commit

themselves, some aspects still remained hard to digest and observe, since Islam

brought a lot of restrictions to them. But in general, they committed themselves to

observing these restrictions. None of the converts in the present study became

Muslims without going through a preparational period, and all had a sound basic

knowledge of Islam and the essential Islamic teachings. In learning the elements

of Islam, and committing themselves to the new faith, some were very eager and

dynamic, while others took it more gradually. Mohammed Sidiq (5 September

2000) said:

> *I started to read about the prayers. It sounded so complicated,*
> *but that was what I was hoping for. I was looking for something*
> *where I could see God in everything; I wanted God as part of*
> *my daily routine. God was not a Sunday visit. God was more*
> *complete than that. Surely God consciousness had to be total; it*
> *has to be everywhere.*

Halima (17 April 2000) described how long it took her before she took her

Shahadah:

> *It was around one year. I did not throw myself into it*
> *immediately. I gradually practised what I learnt about Islam.*

The converts interviewed seemed to have initially started to obey the prohibitions

of Islam (those things termed *haram*) and then later started to become more

involved in the new duties they found in the Islamic way of life. From the start

they were likely to abstain from pork, alcohol, and sex outside marriage, and to

observe prayers and fasting. Salamah (17 June 2000) said:

> *An old myth about Islam is that it takes the freedom away from*
> *women. 'What freedom?', I ask. In my so-called free days I*
> *was dependent on so many things, from cigarettes to drugs, to*
> *the attention of men. Only now do I feel truly free and*
> *respected, dependent only on God, and He is the best of friends.*

> *I no longer have any desire to do things which are not pleasing*
> *to Allah, and I am no longer as impatient with life. I do not ever*
> *have the slightest desire to break the laws of Allah. The freedom*
> *to go deeper and discover the worlds within the human being*
> *rather than fleeting pleasures on the outside without Allah.*

Regarding dress, all the 20 men I interviewed were wearing a European style. They had not thought it necessary to dress like a different ethnic group, just because they were Muslims. Most of the converts had said that Islam is for all people and that cultural traditions like style of dress were not necessary to be a Muslim. The male converts' European clothes fitted the Islamic dress codes for men in that they were fairly loose and, therefore, modest. If I had seen them walking down the street I would not have identified them as Muslims. Only one male convert wore a Muslim – style cap and even this could have been seen as a fashion statement. Some wore beards and some were clean - shaven.

Islamic dress codes presented more of a challenge to the women than the men, because in Islam, due to her physical attributes, the woman is required to cover her body and hair. Of the seventeen women, two did not wear a head scarf. The majority of the women wore European style clothes with long sleeves, and long skirts or loose trousers. Rachel (7 February 2000) said she did not see a scarf as necessary and she preferred to concentrate on changing herself inside:

> *I have always thought it was a bit of a strain. It was mostly to*
> *do with the style of dress. I always feel that I am not accepted.*
> *Some people want me to cover up more; I do not feel I need to*
> *wear shalwar kameez and hijab. I feel that because people have*
> *a negative impression of it, every time you say you are a Muslim*
> *you have to explain everything. Therefore what I tend to do is,*
> *when having a conversation and someone says something, I tell*
> *them that Islam says the same thing.*

Lateefa (12 June 2000) described her experience with the prayer and *hijab*. She said that at first she found it difficult to pray five times a day. She felt as if she had just finished one prayer when it was time to start again. She was thinking that she was going to spend her whole life doing *salat* because her recitation was very slow then. That was difficult, and then, when she started to wear the scarf, people started to stare and, she said, they still do. However she just ignores them now. It does not bother her as it did then. It was difficult, but it is not now. She said that doing all these things made her feel good.

So regarding former habits and practices, the present sample covers people who gave up habits and took to the new practices immediately, and people who still keep some of their former habits or customs, e.g. a minority still smoke cigarettes. Many, for instance, continue to give birthday cards. Thus it may be concluded that change from some of the values, habits and culture which the converts had inherited from the past did not come automatically, nor was it always considered necessary. It should also be mentioned that most of the interviewees came from a Christian background and all of them live in a 'post–Christian' society. Therefore some of the positive values and customs that they have inherited are similar to, or do not contradict, those of Islam, because Islam is presented in the Qur'an and *sunnah* as an affirmation of the authentic teachings of earlier prophets, e.g. Moses (PBUH) and Jesus (PBUH). Principles remain the same though the details of social practice differ. The interviewees see their conversion as a continuing process, rather than a cut-off point. It is hard to compare the converts' commitment to Islam with that of life-long Muslims. Beit-Hallahmi (1989: 100) distinguished two different kinds of religious involvement: one is the 'low-

involvement religion', the religion of identity, learned within the family of origin

and having little emotional significance; and the other is the 'high-involvement

religion', often the religion of converts, who learned it outside their family of

origin and invest much emotional energy in it. This comparison may be valid but

detailed investigation is beyond the scope of this research. However, to express a

personal view, it may be said that the current sample of converts seem to be on the

same level, if indeed not more committed, and take their religion more seriously,

than do many life-long Muslims.

7. 4   Continuation and Socialization

The maintenance of a new persona requires a structure to make it workable,

moreover commitment often flourishes in that structure. Conversion has also

been described as a process of resocialisation with distinctive ideas and values. A

new vocabulary and life-style become a part of the convert as he/she takes on a

new definition of his/her own personality and of the social context in which

he/she participates (Wilson, 1982: 119). The commitment that can follow

conversion often forms a sociological bond in a community. According to Fowler

(1981:286-287) after conversion it matters a great deal how the new community

provides for the ongoing 'sponsorship' of the new convert. In this case,

sponsorship can be seen as the way a person or community provides affirmation,

encouragement, guidance and models for a person's ongoing growth and

development. The interviewees reported that they had received not sponsorship,

but differing amounts of help from the Muslim community, whom they had

approached after they had recognized that Islam was for them. It is clear that

most of the converts did not find themselves continually surrounded by a warm

nurturing community, and that in most cases they 'remained converted' owing to

their faith and faith practices rather than because of successful, satisfactory, or

continuing socialisation with the established group. Most of the converts said that

they were welcomed by Muslims raised in the faith, with great warmth because

they had embraced Islam willingly. Converts also warmly welcomed other

converts.

Muhammad Asad (28 July 2000) said that the local Asian Muslim community was

welcoming. They had helped him to move house, taught him to recite the prayers

and to read Arabic script. Lady Aisha (9 August 2000) said:

> *The established Muslims were very happy for me. They hugged*
> *me and said Mubarak. This was all new to me. The best*
> *response I remember was from a revert. When I meet other*
> *reverts who are practising Islam there is an instant love between*
> *us sisters. I think that it is because we knew what we left*
> *behind, what we gave up. Moreover, we are genuinely very*
> *happy for each other. This experience is privy to no other*
> *human being.*

The person who wants to remain converted must engineer his/her social life in

accordance with his/her purpose. This may require the individual to disassociate

himself from previous associates or groups that constituted the plausibility

structure of his/her past religious (or non-religious) reality, while the person

associates himself with people belonging to his new religious reality. Long and

Hadden (1983: 8) suggested that conversion is understandable as an instance of a

more general process of socialization, rather than being a qualitatively unique

phenomenon which requires concept-specific explanation. As has been discussed

earlier in this work however, despite the socialization aspects, the process of

'conversion' to Islam, does appear to be a qualitatively unique phenomenon.

Greil and Rudy (1984: 317) argued that when someone has a new identity by

establishing a relationship with a community, he/she establishes an identity for

both himself/herself and others to facilitate meaningful interaction. The convert

reflects at great length on his/her change. The convert and all others see his/her

change as monumental, and he/she is self-identified and identified by others as a

new or different person. The above comments concur to a large extent with social

aspects of the current interviewees' post-conversion experience. However, in the

present sample, the converts to Islam saw no contradiction between being both

Muslim and English/British, living in Britain. Lateefa (12 June 2000) said:

> *I think that I'm more British now than I ever was! My new*
> *Islamic identity; I'm at home with it.*

Daud Talbot (20 August 2000) said that he was still the same person, but his

belief was now different. The converts to Islam in this study, still regarded

themselves as members of their original society and they did not favour isolation

from it. Most of them rejected the idea of isolating themselves from their families

and former friends and wanted to be surrounded with Muslim friends as well.

They also felt that Muslims should not be divided among themselves and should

establish a common Muslim identity. For example Yussif (11 March 2000) said:

> *We need people spending money on Islam. There are not*
> *enough Islamic Schools. I do not believe in segregation among*
> *the Muslims. The Muslims should not divide themselves. They*
> *should unite themselves.*

The British converts in this work believed that Islam is a universal religion. They wanted and expected to practise an Islam that tended to be more in accordance with the Qur'an and with the traditions of the Prophet (PBUH), than with some of the cultural practices and attitudes that the majority Muslim community had inherited, especially from the Indian subcontinent. In contrast, the interviewees were fully conscious and aware of the universal aspects of the faith they had adopted, as well as their own original environment. Most still kept their previous names, jobs and so on but their Muslim names were used with other Muslims. More importantly, they saw no contradiction between being Muslim and English/British and living in Britain. However, many did not find their new identity central to all interactions in society, but it did tend to be the main motivation for their interactions within the Muslim community. Their interactions with the main (non-Muslim) society were now adjusted by their Islamic view of life, but they had not cut off from it. They continued to interact within family relationships, the neighbourhood, work colleagues and clients, health, welfare and educational institutions, some former friends, some sporting and social activities, while in the main their interaction with the traditional Muslim community tended to be on the basis of their shared Islam, except, of course, where marriage into the traditional community was involved. Education was seen as a problematic area. Nabilah (26 September 2000) said that she was trying hard to bring up her children well and teach them well. She continued:

> *People can accept me for what I am, who I am, and call me whatever name they wish, it is no loss. This is the conclusion that I have come to now.*

A concern is raised here regarding the British converts to Islam: will they westernize Islam or will they become Islamised and assimilated into the cultural milieu of Muslims around them? Or will they go through a cultural transition? The answers to these questions varied according to the changes each convert had experienced. Of the 37 interviewees, just one convert had changed his name formally. The way they dressed was European (except for the women, who beside their normal appearance wore *hijab)*. They still kept to some of their previous cultural practices and values. An important point needs to be emphasised here. Conversion to Islam did not require rejecting British or any other nationality. Most of the converts seemed not to have transformed culturally. They had not wiped out their culture completely, even though they had undergone some cultural changes over the years. Amaani (6 November 2000) said that all her family was not Muslim, but she could not turn her back on them. Islam forbids this, unless the family is hostile. She took her children to see her parents. She had told them that they did not celebrate Christmas, but she still bought presents for her parents because it was to honour and respect her parents. She would buy something small for them and allowed her children to wrap it up and give it to her parents for Christmas. Amaani said:

> *I would buy a halal Turkey and take it to my parents and we were there to celebrate with my family; that is what family is all about. When it was Eid my parents would come to my house and buy my children Eid presents and come and celebrate Eid.*
>
> *Just because someone is not Muslim, it does not mean that you cannot give as much to him or her as you would to Muslims.*

The converts did not feel that by becoming a Muslim they had to be 'Pakistanised' or 'Arabised'. They felt that they were still British and saw no major conflict between cultures before becoming Muslim and afterwards. Sufyan (30 September 2000) reflected what most of the interviewees seemed to agree upon:

> *I think we need to develop a British Muslim identity. We are Muslims first but keep the British culture. There is nothing stopping us from using the good things about the British way of life and being Muslims. It is important that we establish a new community in this country. So many English Muslims marry Arabs, Pakistanis and Malays. The common link is Islam. It is not nationality, so this needs to be developed.*

As has been noticed, the converts expressed the opinion that it was an advantage to have access to both Islamic and Western culture, since they were able to take what they felt was most Islamic from both. However, the convert sometimes faced the problem of being between two cultures, especially those who had children. Kate (12 March 2000) said:

> *I fear for my children. I do not know what the society is going to be like; I am scared all the time for my boys. I try to teach them Islam but everything they see takes them away from it. I do not know how to give them it strongly enough so that they can hold on to it. Allah himself will protect them because I cannot protect them. The Muslims are to be blame; they cannot blame anyone else. They need to reacquaint themselves with their religion.*

Daud Talbot was married and had children (20 August 2000). He commented:

> *The Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims are very cultural people. They stick to their traditions and culture. I am a white Muslim and I am concerned about the teaching of Islam for my children, in English.*

Nabilah (26 September 2000) was very concerned:

> *One thing that I hate about Leeds is that they do not have a*
> *proper Muslim national school. It is vital. My children at the*
> *moment go to school until 3.20 p.m. I then have to collect them,*
> *take them home and feed them and take them to madrassa from*
> *5 until 7 p.m. My six-year- old daughter is tired when she walks*
> *through the door from English school. Then she has to eat, and*
> *then she has to go to madrassa. They also have to cope with*
> *Maths, English and reading, spelling as well as all that. It is*
> *impossible.*

Nabilah was not the only one to have found this a difficult problem. Most of the

converts who had children of their own found it a highly unsatisfactory situation

as had the author, with her children. Rahem (2 May 2000) emphasised the need

for good Islamic schools for both boys and girls:

> *The Muslims should get together and build three Islamic girls*
> *schools and three good quality boys schools. They should*
> *provide the facilities needed in all the schools, including top*
> *quality teachers, and they should pay these teachers a good*
> *salary. They should put their money where their mouths are.*

7. 5   The Media Impact on Reactions of Families and Friends

Converting to Islam in a non-Muslim society may mean social suicide and boycott

for some converts. But sometimes objections by the family and friends encourage

the convert to carry on their new life. The reaction of the converts' parents to

their conversion seemed to have varied. According to the converts' perception of

their parents' attitude towards their conversion, their parents may be classified

into two types: (1) those who were hostile or extremely unhappy about it and (2)

those who were surprised but soon resigned themselves to it. The response Kate

(12 March 2000) received was of the first type and was the only one. When she

told her father that she was a Muslim, he told her she would be 'like she was

dead' to him. Kate's father did not speak to her for ten years. (This case was

exceptional, because Kate herself had been through very difficult family problems

prior to the conversion, and that was one of the reasons why her father took that

attitude). The second type of response was much milder. The surprise expressed

was because Islam did not appear to be an attractive option, basically owing to the

negative image of Islam in the media. Amaani (6 November 2000) said that her

parents were very surprised when she first told them that she had become a

Muslim. She saw this as the result of Islam's negative image:

> *Because of the negative image that Islam has and because it is*
> *so strict, well, compared to Christianity, my parents attitude was*
> *'you should be getting out there enjoying yourself'.*

Suliman (18 September 2000) remarked that he visited his parents after being

Muslim for three months, to tell them that he had accepted Islam and was now a

Muslim. He described his mother's first reaction:

> *She took it quite well. My father was not home at that time. The*
> *following day there was an atmosphere in the house; my mother*
> *had told my father. He wanted to know where he went wrong*
> *bringing me up. This went on for a while, then he said, it is your*
> *life, your decision and I have never stopped you from doing*
> *what you wanted.*

Karima (22 November 2000) said the reactions of the people she knew were very

negative, especially the women, because she used to be a strong supporter of

women's rights and they thought that she had deserted them by accepting Islam.

Abdul Qader (3 July 2000) gave a very good explanation of the reason why

families and friends react as they tend to do:

> *Unfortunately people's opinions are biased by negative media*
> *portrayal of Islam over here. Many people will recognise the*
> *negative portrayal of Islam at the moment. Everything they*
> *portray is about terrorists. The reality of it is the oppressive*
> *Governments are the real terrorists, not the Islam. It makes my*
> *heart bleed that Islam gets such negative portrayal.*

7. 6   Problems the Converts Share

When a person first enters the fold of Islam, there is initially much joy, celebration and congratulation directed towards them from the population raised as Muslims. However, it has been noted in this study that usually this initial period of celebration wore off and the new Muslim was often subjected to a lot of pressure from the established Muslim community to conform to the traditional practices of the community, or they might lose interest in the new Muslim. The main reason for this appears to be that many of these cultural practices had become integral to Islam, in the minds of the traditional Muslim community, and to deviate from them almost seemed like apostasy to them. Often no allowance was made to take into account the fact that the new Muslim came from a completely different cultural background and did not need to follow these cultural practices in order to follow Islam.

Many of these practices seemed quite alien or even distressing to the new Muslims. For example: the tendency to have an un-Islamic 'caste' system among the South Asian Muslims and their adherence to arranged marriages, sometimes to the exclusion of personal choice, opposed some of the very principles of Islam that had persuaded the new Muslims to convert in the first place. Both of these un-Islamic tendencies within the South Asian community also militated against

the opportunity for converts to marry into that community, although it was not

impossible. (Two of the converts, Muhammad Sadiq and Daud, had married into

the community). The converts entered Islam expecting that un-Islamic practices

and attitudes would have been put aside hundreds of years ago, in favour of the

Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), but unfortunately they found that

this was not the case, and often could not understand why this was. Suliman (18

September 2000) made the following statement regarding this:

> *The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) traded with everyone,*
> *Christians, Jews, everyone. He maintained contact with all*
> *society. People who are converts need their own organisation,*
> *own social activities (because of certain cultural barriers*
> *thrown up by the traditional community, including imams who*
> *do not speak English). Sooner or later that community will need*
> *an Imam. Where would they get one?.*

Most of the new Muslims were experiencing difficulties in their relations with the

traditional, mainly Asian, Muslim community. This was partly due to language.

Most of the imams and elders in the mosques, who might have been expected to

welcome them, and give them sound advice about Islam did not speak English.

The women converts found language a greater problem than the men. It was

difficult to establish sisterhood with the mature women in the traditional

community because many spoke no English. The men did not find language a

major problem as the men from the traditional community tended to mix more

with the English speaking majority and so had developed their English skills and

ability to relate more easily to people of different cultures. For the women

converts there had also been a problem of finding experienced female Muslims to

consult or study with, owing to the language barrier.

Sometimes, the newly converted Muslims faced problems to the extent that they

found that the established Muslim population did not even believe that they were

truly Muslims. Khadijah (12 November 2000), a Caribbean convert to Islam,

recalled the following situation:

> *Do you know what, I am tired of people telling me (when) I tell*
> *them 'Assalaamu Alaikum', and they say, 'So you are a Muslim.*
> *Where do you come from? How long have you been a Muslim?'*
> *Why do they want to know that? I didn't ask them that!.*

Even if the converts did not face these problems, some instead found that the

Muslim community simply saw them as inferior to them, and viewed them as

being in some way ignorant of Islam, simply because it was not the religion of

their upbringing. Kate was one such person who experienced a problem of this

nature:

> *I started to teach in the Islamic school in Dewsbury. The girls in*
> *school approached me, and I was shocked that the girls thought*
> *I had to be a Pakistani and speak Urdu to be a Muslim.*

This situation highlights the problem that the converts often faced when they

noticed that a practice observed by the 'born-Muslim'[2] population, was not in

accordance with the religion of Islam as they had learned it from source, rather

than from culture. Often when they pointed this situation out, or tried to correct it

in their own practices, they were criticised and told that what they were doing was

wrong. The cause of this would appear to be the fact that many of the 'born-

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[2] An English expression used by Muslims in Britain to refer to Muslims who were born into
families that are already identifying themselves as Muslims, to distinguish them from converts to
Islam whose parents were not Muslim.

Muslim' population were so set in their traditional ways, and had come from such strong cultural backgrounds, that they were unable or unwilling to consider differing points of view with regard to their religion. This was true even if the differing viewpoint was more 'authentic' than the ones that they currently held.

Another of the points that have come out of this study is that, for the most part, the problems faced by both men and women were the same. They both had problems of being accepted by the 'born-Muslim' population, most of whom were either Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Arab. The problems faced by the converts stemmed mainly from either language barriers or culture gaps and affected them not only socially, but also in the area of studying Islam.

One issue that concerned the converts in general, was the content of the Qur'an. All the converts felt that knowledge of the Qur'an was very important and that if possible it should be read in the original Arabic. Abdul Qader (3 July 2000) said he had always had the feeling that he wanted to learn Arabic and that this would greatly benefit him. He went on:

> *I have read some variant translations of the Qur'an and I definitely want to try and gain a better understanding of Arabic, but that will come with time. The basic understanding of the Qur'an I can gain through a translation, to a degree.*

Muhammad Asad (28 July 2000) was learning Arabic through home study and when asked whether it was important to read the Qur'an in Arabic, replied:

> *Yes, because it is the language the Qur'an was revealed in, and you get more of a deeper meaning if you read it in its original language.*

The converts had discovered that traditional Muslims who were familiar with the content of the Qur'an turned out to be relatively rare. Although nearly all of them could read and recite it in Arabic they did not in fact understand what they were reading nor were they very familiar with the Qur'an in their own languages. *Hadeeth* and traditional religious stories were often mistakenly attributed to the Qur'an and given the same authority. This distressed the converts and created social and practical dilemmas. For instance, how far should they try to correct the traditional Muslims, and how far should they keep their peace for the sake of good manners? Who could they consult to find out what was accurate?

The general opinion among the converts was that, at the very least, Muslims should read the Qur'an and *sunnah* in their own languages. They were also dismayed to find that the traditional Asian community were reading Arabic text without understanding it. The converts had not found mosques where the meaning of Arabic was taught. Some studied Arabic at university, others followed home study courses.

The converts had not expected to find a Muslim community based on 1400 years of tradition, rather than the original texts. Because the traditional community often did not make a distinction between the essentials of Islam and cultural accretions, the converts were sometimes told that something was in the Qur'an which they knew was not. Problems therefore arose. Some cultural practices did not contradict Islam, for instance wearing the *shalwar kameez*. But some traditional Muslims thought that if a convert was not wearing *shalwar kameez*, then he/she was not a Muslim. On the other hand, some practices did contradict

Islam. This again distressed the converts and presented them with a series of

dilemmas and some social difficulties. A few of the converts mentioned a need,

not only for more English speaking imams and scholars, but also for more

Islamic literature to be translated into English. As Abdullah Saber (20 March

2000) said:

> *Most of my Muslim revert friends have this problem. We need*
> *someone to translate classical works. There is a need for Islam*
> *in the English language.*

If the converted Muslim decides to attend their local mosque, maybe for the

Friday *jum'a* prayer, they will very often find the sermon being delivered in Urdu

or less often in Arabic. In the vast majority of cases there was no attempt to

translate it into English. Sara (26 September 2000) made the following statement:

> *Some people think that they are better than you are because they*
> *are born into Islam. We feel a little bit isolated sometimes*
> *because of the languages; I do not speak Arabic or Urdu and I*
> *am not from a big Muslim family. I was on my own to start with*
> *and I have to build relationships with people, but Alhamdulillah,*
> *my husband helps me a lot and he is very supportive.*

Suliman (18 September 2000) and generally most of the converts that I have

interviewed made similar comments on the issue of language and culture. He

said:

> *We want to see a learned person that is born and brought up*
> *here to teach us about Islam, not someone from Pakistan or*
> *Arabia. This person will speak our language and understand*
> *the situation that we live in.*

The language gap becomes even more significant when the new Muslim tries to

read the Holy Book, the Qur'an, as it is written in Arabic. Despite the fact that

there are many translations available, they are never of the same calibre as the

book is, when read in its original Arabic form. On the other hand, Abdul Qader (3

July 2000) raised the following points:

> *The reason for the Qur'an being in Arabic was specific. When*
> *you come to Islam the understanding of the Arabic language is*
> *very important. (on the other hand) Some people unfortunately*
> *misappropriate Islam as being an Arabic cultural thing, and*
> *that you have to learn Arabic to understand Islam.*
>
> *I do not think you necessarily have to learn Arabic, to*
> *understand Arabic, to understand Islam, it is just a guide, and it*
> *aids you greater. If you alleviate your understanding and your*
> *Iman and various aspects of understanding of the deen, I think*
> *that is important. It is not a prerequisite law; something that we*
> *should feel obligated to do.*

It seems that despite the fact that the society as a whole, both Muslim and non-

Muslim, continues to believe that the new Muslim will face greater problems from

their own non-Muslim relatives etc., this was not the case for the converts in this

sample.   It can be seen from the interviews that the new Muslim faced far greater

problems with being accepted by the established Muslim community than they did

from their non-Muslim friends and family. According to Adnan (1997: 42) this

problem can only really be overcome with a lot of patience, understanding, time,

and above all 'give and take' from all the communities involved. As one convert,

Rachel (7 February 2000), said:

> *Ideally, I would love a 'World Islam', not Pakistanis in their*
> *mosques and Arabs in their mosques. We should think about the*
> *real issues and learn from each other, revise our options.*
>
> *I love diversity; we are all from different nations, but Islam*
> *brings us together as one and we should not be divided. There*
> *should be more provisions for women in the mosques who have*
> *just entered into Islam. Someone friendly and welcoming that is*
> *what we need initially.*

Another of the problems that the converts to Islam faced was the question of how easy it would be for them to find a marriage partner. In the religion of Islam, the institution of marriage is very important, and is often described as being 'one half of the faith'. All the unmarried converts wanted to marry another Muslim, and in the case of women it is obligatory for them to take a Muslim husband. Most of them said that they would prefer to marry 'born Muslims' not only to strengthen their faith but also because they were thinking of their children's futures. They saw the value of the children having Muslim aunties, uncles, cousins and grandparents who could support them in their faith, help their sense of identity and make *Eid* and *Ramadhan* social rather than lonely occasions. Arranged marriages prevalent in the traditional Muslim community are contracted between families who already know each other well. In normal circumstances this rules out marriage to a convert whose family is unknown. One convert, Abdul Salam (9 June 2000), drew attention to this problem:

> *It is difficult finding a wife but Allah knows all things. Some of the brothers told me their experiences. Some families think you cannot become a Muslim, you have to be born a Muslim. Families will not agree to mixed nationalities. This is an issue we need to address. Nobody knows each other; it is a communication problem.*

This problem existed despite the fact that, in Islam, marriage between the different nationalities and races is perfectly permissible, and the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was to marry women from different backgrounds and nations. However, the converts found the culture of the established Asian Muslim communities in particular did not allow for this. Most seemed to prefer marriage within the fairly immediate family.

A big difference in post-conversion experience was found between the Afro-Caribbean and white converts. In general, the white converts found it easier to be accepted by the majority Asian Muslim community, as people, and as Muslims, than did the Afro-Caribbean converts. Both male and female Afro-Caribbean converts reported problems of acceptance, both on a personal level and as Muslims. To some extent this could be accounted for by the fact that, in general, the white converts did not see themselves as having been previously any more distanced from one ethnic minority in Britain, than another: both minorities came from elsewhere to Britain and have been on the British scene for some time. On the other hand, it would appear that in every day life, the Afro-Caribbean community tends to relate more easily to the white community than it does to the Asians, and similarly the Asians tend to relate more easily to the white community than to the Afro-Caribbeans. There could be a geographical and historical factor in operation here, regardless of different cultures. The above could to some extent account for the difficulties found in social relations between the Afro-Caribbean converts and the traditional Asian Muslim community. However, the Caribbean converts felt that something else was at work here. They reported this with reluctance, as briefly as possible, with sorrow and sometimes with frustration and astonishment. Despite the careful words that they used, they preferred their comments to be summarized rather than quoted. They had regarded the traditional Muslim community as their newly found brothers and sisters in Islam, but had received distressing rebuttals that were clearly the result of racial and colour prejudice on the part of the Asian Muslims. Sometimes these would only be minor irritations. Sometimes, though, the reaction could be far more severe.

The Afro-Caribbean men, for instance, described how they had found themselves

to be unwelcome in many mosques set up by Asians, some to the extent of having

colour prejudiced nicknames directed at them, or even being thrown out. None of

the converts wanted to identify other Muslims as racist, but one or two of the

Afro-Caribbeans volunteered that they could see no other explanation for the

negative attitudes and treatment with which they were sometimes confronted.

Despite the problems that many of the converts were facing, they were clearly

happy with the decision to convert. Rokanne (26 September 2000), an Afro-

Caribbean, made the following simple statement:

> *Therefore it seems that despite the fact that newly converted*
> *Muslims face a multitude of problems, they do, with the help of*
> *their newly found religion, find means to overcome them. This*
> *may be a difficult task for them, but they do seem to manage*
> *quite well to cope.*

The converts in this study completely rejected the idea of isolating themselves as

British converts through any sort of activities or organisations. Nevertheless

culture and language remained a big issue when they wanted to communicate and

participate with the Muslim community in general. This was less of a problem in

their relations with younger traditional Muslims, but cultural difficulties

remained. Some of the converts to Islam in this work showed considerable

awareness of the culture or tradition of Muslim communities around them. They

stated that some elements of different, sometimes non-Muslim ethnic

communities, had been inserted into Islam and were regarded as part of it.

Therefore, the converts understood Islam differently from Muslims of other ethnic

backgrounds and brought an inquisitive mind to their new fellows' cultural

understanding of Islam and showed a desire to break some of the un-Islamic

practices and attitudes prevailing in the Muslim community. In general, the

converts felt that many Muslim families, by tradition, had confused culture with

their religion.

Despite the problems in their relations with the established Muslim community in

Britain and their concerns about Islamic education, all the converts in this work

continued to consider themselves members of both the British and international

Muslim *ummah*.

7. 7   Wider Horizons for the Converts

As Epstein remarks (1985:283), any religious option may offer a more or less

comprehensive, coherent and compelling framework. Religious beliefs can serve

as an intellectual system enabling people to make sense of historical

developments, the nature of existence and their place in both. A religious option

can also offer a wide range of emotional gratification like a sense of belonging or

community, relief from guilt, development of new relationships and excitement

and stimulation. This applied to all the converts in the current sample, although

'enthusiasm' seems more appropriate than 'excitement'.

In the present work it appears that the converts had developed a feeling of

belonging to the world-wide *ummah*. Halima (17 April 2000) said that she now

had much wider horizons, had become more open-minded and was looking for

ways to improve the local community as well as the *ummah* at large. Abdul

Salam (9 June 2000) affirmed that he now had far broader horizons. Since he had

embraced Islam, he had met people and visited places that he would not have

gone to as a non-Muslim. He had visited Makkah and made *hajj*. He felt that the

Muslims generally are nicer people.   When Kate (12 March 2000) was asked

whether she now had wider horizons or not, she broke in to say:

> *Absolutely, I feel that I am responsible for what happens in*
> *Somalia, Brazil, as well as what happens next door. I send*
> *sadaqah* (voluntary charity) *to these countries. I teach the*
> *Muslim girls now, to get a better generation of mothers. I am*
> *writing a book, to try and promote a better understanding of*
> *Islam among English women, dispel some of the myths that*
> *people propagate about Islam and trying to bring up my three*
> *boys to be good Muslim men, which is very difficult.*

Najyah (14 May 2000) too, had noticed that she had become more aware of things

that were happening elsewhere.   Karim (9 August 2000) said most emphatically

that his life now had wider horizons. He said that now he was super-rich in terms

of what was in his mind and heart. Yussif (11 March 2000) said:

> *I was only concerned about myself before but now I have*
> *concerns for the Ummah in the sense that it is my concern.*
> *When I was a teenager I would wonder how I would bring up my*
> *children. I promised myself that I would not bring up my*
> *children the way my parents brought me up. I would never put*
> *my children through the education system of this country.*

The converts were unanimous in recognising that they now had wider horizons.

Some took this literally, in that their conversion had prompted or enabled them to

travel further than ever before, learning about new places, people and cultures in a

practical way. Many understood it in terms of increased interest in and awareness

of distant, international or global issues and their increased concern for the well-

being of people in other countries, especially where Muslims were known to be

suffering.

7. 8   Summary

To conclude, in this chapter it has been found that the individual convert to Islam does not completely forget the previous meaning of his/her social world, even after transition. Change requires a process of resocialisation, and some aspects of this had been problematic, owing to cultural differences with the receiving community. An individual tends to reshape or modify his/her world view when he/she, as a convert, enters the new province of meaning. Sometimes the convert tries to reinterpret the past province of meaning and then reshape it. As has been mentioned earlier, this does not present a general rule for the present sample who are converts to Islam. Although often dissatisfied with their previous life, it is not true to say that 'they tried to reinterpret' or 'reshape' their past province of meaning. The evidence points to their interaction with the Qur'an and other Islamic information having presented to them a new and coherent view of existence and their place within it. In some aspects this new view coincided with conclusions they had come to during their earlier disaffection with aspects of non-Muslim society, during a period where life seemed empty or meaningless, or during an active search for a meaning to life. A new and comprehensive view was presented to them, which they then accepted as true. It was not, therefore, necessary for them to try and re-shape their view themselves, as part of the conversion or post-conversion process. For most of the converts in the present sample, transition to the new world view was not accompanied by a complete change of social world. Some activities were dropped, along with the associated people, e.g going to night clubs and public houses, but others, associated with

family, neighbourhood and work place, were maintained with only minor adjustments.

Although the lives of the individuals studied here changed markedly as a result of their conversion experience, in adopting new beliefs and life-styles, one may question whether, for the vast majority, these changes entailed a transformation of the self. Most saw it as a continual development and 'return to their real selves' rather than a 'transformation'. This chapter has focused on the study of personal identity as the social self (roles, relations, and interpersonal traits). Evidence has been found that for most converts important components of their subjective identity changed in consequence of conversion but they still saw themselves as overall the same person. However, conversion brought different consequences for each individual, not in the content of their new belief system, but in the degree of commitment. For two, their religious commitment totally transformed their lives by enabling them to adopt all aspects and rituals of the new faith and also to immerse themselves in the way of life of a Muslim country. These were Yussif (11 March 2000) and Idrees (28 April 2000). The degree to which the converts had been subsumed socially and culturally into the 'receiving' Muslim community in Britain varied from full participation for a small minority of the sample, to quite tenuous or intermittent contacts. All the converts mentioned good friends who were also converts to Islam, and many pre-conversion social ties had not been severed. For none of them did their continuing adherence to their faith appear to be dependent on the degree to which they had been embraced by the traditional community of British Muslims. In sum, most of those interviewed reported changed outlooks, and feelings of purpose. Changes were seen to be

ongoing, but related to the probability of continuing to live within the overall cultural context of Britain.

Looking to the future, there was concern about their own Islamic education and that of children born to Muslims in Britain. These concerns centred on issues of language and culture. It was felt that there should be more teaching of the meaning of Arabic, translation of more Islamic material into English, and more *imams* and *ulama* who spoke English and were conversant with western society. Parents in particular, expressed the desire to see more schools where the Islamic way of life and education were part of the curriculum. While they saw themselves and their children as part of the main society as well as the Muslim community, they were concerned about their children's happiness and sense of identity, and hoped that their children would grow up accepting the faith. Mainly for these reasons most of the unmarried converts would have preferred to marry into the established Muslim community, but were finding difficulties which were put down to cultural practices, or in some cases, racial prejudices, on the part of the majority Asian Muslim community. Most of the converts displayed or expressed a desire to take an active part in *da'wah* and some were already making efforts to promote the *deen*.

8. 1   Introduction

There has been a great deal of research into the phenomenon of conversion, but less on conversion to Islam. Of this, most has been done in the USA, and as far as I am aware, only one major academic work has been completed that focuses on British converts to Islam and the reasons for their conversion. This is *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts*, Ali Köse, 1996. Using a psychological and sociological approach, Ali Köse succeeded in identifying a list of factors that characterised some or all of the conversions to Islam in his sample, but he was unable to find a single theory that could identify a cause, or reason, for these conversions. He was unable to answer the question I hoped to answer in my own research: 'Why convert to Islam in view of the negative image of Islam in Western society?' I chose to base my research on data collected from in-depth interviews with British converts to Islam, to allow the subjects to tell their own story in their own terms and for their voices to be heard in the final draft of the thesis. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions, and largely non-directive. In addition to prepared questions, spontaneous questions were used for focus or encouragement. Most of the interviewees were contacted by a snowball method. They came from a wide variety of backgrounds and their education ranged from GCSE to higher degree level. Of the thirty-seven interviewees, twenty were male and seventeen were female. Twenty-four were white, including English, Irish and Scots, ten were Afro-Caribbean, two were Asian and one was Chinese.

One of the major problems in doing the current work has been that available theories and data on religious conversion do not apply consistently to the evidence I have been analysing, or, on the other hand, where isolated features of the evidence applied, the conclusions that previous researchers had drawn from these did not appear valid in regard to conversion to Islam, as presented by my own data. Two reasons for this problem became apparent. One was that, apart from that of Köse, most of the earlier work did not refer specifically to conversion to Islam. The other reason was that most of the most relevant theories, including those employed by Köse, were based within western psychology and sociology, which increasingly proved to be too limited for the present investigation. Köse's approach is too reductionist, whereas my work treats the religious variable seriously. Additionally, partly because none of the converts in the sample had encountered a proselytising group whose activities could be interpreted as a major cause of, and explanation for, the conversions, the entire life experience of the converts had to be re-considered. This was an extremely wide subject involving a wealth of considerations and there were problems of selection of relevant information, in order to narrow down the area of close study within workable limits. Eventually, however, the evidence provided by individual converts began to reveal some common features or patterns. Nevertheless, most of these could not be accounted for by the Western academic disciplines. In order to account for the common patterns that were becoming apparent, I found it necessary to incorporate in my work the Islamic perspectives that are mentioned in the literature review. My work improves on Köse's in synthesising western academic and Islamic perspectives. This broad approach, including Western and Islamic

scholarship, was made possible by using the holistic academic framework for studying conversion proposed by Lewis Rambo.

8. 2   Major Themes and Issues

The primary objective of this research was to analyse the process of conversion to Islam, by studying the experiences of the thirty seven British converts to Islam in order to provide, as far as possible, a coherent reason, or reasons, for conversion to Islam. The aim was to understand the human nature behind conversion, employing Western academic literature and Islamic Literature examined the psychological and sociological roots of conversion.

The research examines issues such as motivation, and whether a complete personal transformation was involved. It investigates what forces and processes were sufficiently powerful to bring about conversion to Islam, including whether there were long-term predispositions that made the conversion likely or inevitable. The research attempts to describe any transformations brought about by the conversions, and goes beyond the moment of formal entry to the community of Islam, to discover if British people who adopt Islam and join the British community of Muslims find what they expected to find, in terms of acceptance, guidance and support. Has the community of Muslims in Britain been affected by the entry of western converts? These have been the main aims and objectives of this thesis.

My understanding of conversion is as a wide category of transformation in which the convert is at times both active subject and passive object of a range of processes of change. This is not a specific category of changes or religious

experiences in its own right, but incorporates an array of transforming experiences, which will be unique to the individual. The subjects of this study are 'converts' in this wider sense, and I employ the concept, regardless of whether they identify themselves or others view them within the narrower sense.

All the subjects in the present study came to Islam individually and apart from the two women already married to Muslims, did not find a ready-made group either to invite, encourage or coerce them into Islam, or that was organised to provide for their spiritual, social or psychological welfare after conversion. As the literature review showed, many of the Western studies on religious conversion dealt with samples who had had this experience, eg. Lofland and Stark (1965), Lofland and Skonovd (1981), Richardson, (1985), and Ullman, (1988). It was found, as in the work of Wilber (1980) and Gelpi (1989), that after conversion the converts' internal and social life continued to develop and change. However their suggestions, that conversions are extremely fragile without the continued nurturing support of the newly entered community, were not borne out in the present study. The converts' strong convictions appeared to carry them through, whatever setbacks they encountered. Most of the sociological and psychological works that were reviewed seemed to see the converts as victims of circumstances, and that it was because they were victims that they converted. There was no evidence for this in the current sample, neither in their own accounts, nor my assessment of them. (Only one conversion, categorised as a 'rebellion conversion' could possibly be associated with victimhood.) This again rendered some of the previous research inadequate for providing a theory or framework for my own study.

It was at this juncture that I realised that the framework for analysis of conversion, provided by Lewis Rambo's stage model (1993), could solve the problems of the limitations I was finding in the discipline-specific analyses of conversion previously reviewed. The framework proposes seven stages in the conversion process: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences. This framework allows for different academic disciplines to be used as vehicles for analysis at different stages in the process, and therefore allowed me to include Islamic scholarship as one of the vehicles. The flexibility of the model also took into account that stages in the conversion process are not necessarily sequential. A stage could be seen as either a particular element or a period during the process of change. As elements of change, the stages could be seen to interact with each other. There could be a going back and forth between stages, or they could be concurrent. In the present study it was found that the first stage, 'context', had of necessity to be analysed first, as it covered the subject's life history up to conversion. It was found appropriate to look at the 'crisis' stage next, as in many previous studies a crisis had been seen as an important factor directing the potential convert towards conversion. Although crises had occurred, there was little evidence that they had precipitated conversion to Islam. It was found appropriate to explore the 'quest' stage next. At the equivalent stage in the lives of my sample, they were more concerned about disaffection with their own lifestyle or society in general, or had a sense of meaninglessness, rather than a conscious search for meaning. Some had been fairly contented with their lives prior to encountering Islam. A few, however, had been exploring different belief systems in a search for meaning.

The 'encounter' stage follows. Several of the converts had known a few Muslims in the past, perhaps at school, in circumstances where Islam itself had not really impinged on their consciousness, and all took the 'encounter' to imply their first meaningful encounter with the teachings of Islam, as opposed to encountering a Muslim individual. In only a few cases had it been a Muslim individual who pro-actively first introduced them to the teachings of Islam. It was from now on that the stages proposed by Rambo began to telescope and merge into each other. Nevertheless, a first meaningful encounter can stand out on its own, regardless of how swiftly or slowly other events follow, or how inter-related or mutually dependent were the elements involved. As has been stated earlier, the vast majority of the subjects had little, if any, socialisation with Muslims prior to embracing Islam. Initially this produced a problem when analysing Stage 5, 'interaction', and Stage 6, 'commitment'. Most of the available literature described the interaction stage as an interaction with a proselytising group of people who welcomed the potential convert into their community and then, through a variety of means, persuaded him or her that he or she might like to try out the new faith. After a period of interaction with this community, a potential convert would start experimenting with the ideas and religious practices. He or she might not then proceed to the 'commitment' stage. On the other hand, continuing within this welcoming community, he or she might then reach the 'commitment' stage.

Apart from the two women already married to Muslims, none of the social circumstances described for the interaction and commitment stages applied to the current sample. The difference was that the ' interaction' stage involved, not an

interaction with a proselytising group of people, but interaction with a book, the

Qur'an, and to a lesser extent, associated Islamic literature, including material

about the Prophet Muhammad's life (PBUH) and sayings *(hadeeth)*. The next

thing found was that the subjects, during the very process of reading the Qur'an,

or shortly afterwards, decided that they were Muslims, or wanted to be Muslims.

Many also mentioned that they had begun to perform the Islamic prayers, or to

fast, or to cease activities that were un-Islamic, just before, during, or immediately

after reading the Qur'an. This was seen as 'commitment', rather than

'experiment' and I have identified it as such. For all these reasons, I found it

necessary to view the two stages of 'interaction' and 'commitment' as neither

sequential, nor concurrent. These two stages were merged into one. Therefore in

my work, I have found six stages in the conversion process, rather than the seven

proposed by Rambo. I do not propose this as an improvement on Rambo's model

or recommend it as a general principle. It is a compliment to the flexibility of his

model that I was able to use it and adjust it according to the evidence of my data.

8. 3   Findings Related to Rambo's Stages of Conversion

8.3.1   Context Stage

All the converts had grown up in Britain and still lived there. Only one had spent

a considerable time abroad, her childhood and youth being divided between the

UK and the USA. All of them had been through the British education system.

One had grown up in Northern Ireland and one in Scotland. The rest went

through the English system. All were taught some aspects of the Christian

religion as part of their school curriculum but there was no evidence that they had

been taught anything about Islam as part of their formal education. Some had

known Muslims at school, or later at work. Others had not.

The ethnic group, religion of upbringing and its intensity, varied considerably as

did the general socio-economic circumstances in childhood and adulthood.

Location of upbringing varied from countryside to inner city area. The place of

residence at time of interview varied from small town to inner city area. This

sample of converts had a greater proportion of people who had diplomas, degrees

or higher degrees than is found in the general population. For most, but not all,

their current type of employment reflected their education. Some were not in paid

employment at the time of interview.

They had in common some kind of religious input during their childhood, some

through home and all through their schooling. In all cases there was an awareness

of some of the basic tenets of Christianity. Sometimes this amounted to the moral

aspects only and sometimes it included church doctrine regarding vicarious

atonement on the cross and the Trinity. It was clear that many of the interviewees

had a clear and favourable perception of the personality of Jesus (PBUH) whether

or not they had adhered to any church in childhood. Both Protestants and

Catholics were represented, but a majority of those who identified themselves as

having had a Christian upbringing did not indicate allegiance to any specific sect.

By religion, the exceptions were, one Jew, one Sikh, one Buddhist and one who

suggested that there had been no moral or religious input in his upbringing. It

seems that in thirty six out of the thirty seven cases, ie. those who acknowledged

moral or religious input in their upbringing, their having grown up and lived in

British society and attended state schools in Britain gave the converts more in common with each other, than did the differences in their upbringing.

By late teenage some of those who were aware of them had completely rejected trinitarian doctrines, and a few had become atheists. However, the vast majority, whatever they rejected, maintained a belief in the existence of God, often held since early childhood. None of the interviewees seemed to think that there was anything particularly exceptional about their upbringing that, in itself, precipitated their eventual conversion to Islam, but many said that aspects of earlier religious teaching had not, or no longer, made sense to them and that this was a factor prompting their questions about the meaning of life. This is an example of how we may say that the 'context' stage can be seen to be concurrent with the 'quest' stage in some aspects. For the vast majority a very important factor that prompted questioning during later teenage or maturity was the lifestyle of the surrounding society which they participated in to a greater or lesser extent according to the individual concerned. There was a common feeling expressed that the prevailing, often hedonistic lifestyle, especially the social life and the materialistic outlook of society in general had provoked a sense of discomfort and rejection of the values they embodied.

8.3.2   Crisis Stage

Several of the converts mentioned a crisis or crises that had occurred in their lives. It is reasonable to suggest that there are few people who have not experienced a crisis at some time or another. It has been found that, as a precipitant to conversion, or to a search for meaning or faith, a 'crisis' in terms of a life-shattering or devastating event, cannot be identified as a precipitant to all or even

most of the conversions in this study. It is true, however, that in a small number

of cases, the loss of a loved one threw an individual into a state of

meaninglessness. Previous assumptions about life, or what it had to offer, having

been shattered, two of the interviewees had embarked on a self destructive course

and it was not until some time later, in a way apparently unconnected with the

crisis, that they became aware of Islam. On the other hand somebody like

Salamah, who had lost her baby, clung on to one word a kindly Muslim doctor

had said to her, the word 'fate', in connection with the loss of her child, and

through this (along with other events), she ultimately became a Muslim.

For some of the converts, the only event remotely resembling a 'crisis', in terms

of a life changing event, was very mild indeed and would be described more

accurately as 'a change of environment'. The most obvious of these is the move

from parental home to university or college. Such a move not only introduced the

student to new influences, but also provided the opportunity to question the view

of life inherited through or inculcated by the parents, guardians or school

education. Several of the interviewees saw Muslims for the first time at university

and in some instances this either aroused their interest in the Muslim lifestyle, or

gave them the opportunity to ask Muslims questions about their faith or practice.

There was little evidence that many Muslims at university or in the university

cities initiated conversations about Islam themselves. Sarah, however was invited

by a young man and his friend to break their Ramadhan fast with them and this

eventually led to marriage. It was some considerable time after the marriage that

Sarah became a Muslim. Idris, too, could be regarded as an exception, in that two

converts to Islam in his Arabic class at university were concerned about him

because he was very unhappy at a certain time and took him to watch a video by

an American convert, Sheikh Hamza Yusuf. This interested him and he

eventually became a Muslim. In general, however, such significant 'encounters'

with Islam did not occur at institutions of higher education. It is fairer to say that

attendance at these institutions appears to have contributed to some extent to the

interviewees eventually becoming Muslims and that this was partly because it

provided 'a change of environment' that assisted in a reassessment of lifestyle and

outlook.

8.3.3   Quest Stage

Another aspect of the converts 'beginning the process' that led to conversion, can

be identified loosely as either within the so-called 'crisis' stage or as belonging to

the 'quest' stage. This aspect has been identified as 'significant events'. Each

interviewee in hindsight could identify an event, often at the time apparently of

little significance, that did indeed change his or her way of thinking and direct

him or her towards a quest to find meaning in life that eventually led him or her to

embrace Islam. Losing a loved one or going to university could both be regarded

as 'significant events', as can being amazed by something on the TV news, or

catching sight of two men by the roadside in Spain performing the Muslim *salat*,

or coming across a book by accident about Islam in a bookshop or library, or

having an unusual dream that later proved to be about Muslims, or listening to

Bob Marley's songs and deciding that God must exist. All these events were

identified as 'significant' by interviewees in this sample and many more were

mentioned. These 'significant events', it was seen in retrospect, had prompted a

changed perception of life. This changed perception had initiated or energised the

interviewees' quest to find the meaning of life and/or a meaningful lifestyle. In some, but not all cases, the significant event made them interested in finding out about Islam itself. Muhammad Asad's finding a book about Islam in a pagan magic shop and Maryam's buying a Qur'an because of curiosity about a TV news item, are examples of where a 'significant event' led directly to investigation of Islam. In other cases, the 'significant events' merely changed their perceptions or may have prompted them to find out about other religions, take up 'good causes' or join a political party. It was noted that most interviewees mentioned several often apparently unrelated 'significant events' in their lives that they perceived in retrospect to have nudged them towards their eventual conversion.

There was considerable evidence that the interviewees had all spent some time, intermittently rather than continually, questioning the meaning of life and seeing the way of life and view of life around them as meaningless and/or unjust. Although most had, at some stage, become disaffected with the lifestyle and outlook, the period generally regarded as a 'quest' stage by other researchers, tended to be a more or less extended period of meaninglessness, perhaps even a sense of limbo, rather than an active and practical quest to find all the answers. Several, however, reported that as they had become increasingly disaffected with what the surrounding society had to offer, they made efforts to adjust their way of life. Many provided evidence of reading or examining the productions of popular culture with a critical eye. An active quest to find out about Islam itself did not appear to have taken place until the 'encounter' stage.

8.3.4   Encounter Stage

The majority of Muslims in Britain today do not indulge in active missionary work.   They tend to talk about Islam to non-Muslims when they are asked, rather than initiate such a conversation. In towns and cities the Muslims whose families originated from overseas are a clearly visible minority and some districts have been transformed where there is a local Muslim majority. However, when the current sample of converts began seriously to investigate Islam, none of them knew much about Islam, Muslims, or Muslim communities. To most of them Islam was seen as an 'Asian' matter, or had negative images, mostly picked up from the media. In some cases interviewees had been even less informed and for them Islam was something irrelevant, or something that had made no impact on their consciousness at all. Organised *da'wah* was found to have been irrelevant to the converts in this sample.   It is therefore unsurprising that the interviewees' 'encounter' with Islam, when it finally occurred in any meaningful way, was both unsought and unexpected and, since it did result in conversion, tended to cover a fairly short and intense period in their lives. Unlike approaches to some other faiths discussed by researchers, the 'quest' stage appears as directionless. Focus, pace and direction became much clearer during and after the first meaningful encounter with Islam. For only one of the converts did the meaningful encounter involve an organised Islamic event and contact with a large group of Muslims and this was for one weekend.

Just as the earlier 'significant events' had been very different, so was each 'encounter' different. Some examples are: meeting the Muslim mother of a pupil; teaching prisoners, one of whom handed over a Qur'an; picking up a Qur'an in a

bookshop when looking for a Bible; coming across a book about Islam in a library

in Papua New Guinea; studying Islam after a chance conversation with a Muslim

woman on the way to a cinema; visiting a mosque and liking the atmosphere

(followed by private study). After these 'encounters' either with a person, place

or Islamic book, the process of conversion accelerated, the time to conviction

varying from a few days, more usually a couple of weeks with the longest time

being four years.

8.3.5   Interaction and Commitment Stage

As has been stated earlier, the interaction and commitment stages were merged in

the case of the converts in the current sample. This is accounted for mainly

because, in all cases, although the initial meaningful encounter may have been

with a person, the 'interaction' took place with the Qur'an, and to a lesser extent,

associated Islamic literature. It should be mentioned that the Qur'an was read in

English translation and that it would be very rare indeed for an English translation

to lack an introduction explaining that the Qur'an was revealed to one man, the

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) piecemeal between the years 610-632 CE, and

including a brief biography of the Prophet. The 'associated Islamic literature'

would all have been based on Qur'anic teaching including the sayings of the

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) which are again based on the Qur'an, presented in

the context of his life and by analogy relating to life today or at any other time.

As previously mentioned, it was while they were reading that the converts came to

recognise what they saw as the truth of Islam and also that they either were in fact

Muslims or wanted to become Muslims. It was also during this period that many

of them began certain Islamic practices, notably the formal *salat*, fasting and the

wearing of more modest dress and began to give up certain un-Islamic practices such as drinking alcohol (although some had started giving up certain activities at an earlier stage). Because they started these practices of their own accord, without specific instruction by an individual and also without being in the bosom of a community who conducted these practices, and because of the way the interviewees themselves described these developments, they have been assessed as indicating 'commitment' during the 'interaction' stage, rather than experimentation or an affectional response to similar behaviour of those around them. That the subjects began Islamic practices prior to the formal affirmation of faith, cannot be interpreted as 'experimental' in the terms used by Lofland and Skonovd (1981). Rather, the subjects began Islamic practices because they had become aware, in their minds, of the 'authenticity' of Islam. Starting these practices indicated an early stage in their commitment to Islam.

Apart from the three interviewees for whom marriage was a factor, all the converts came to Islam mainly through private study. Sometimes they were assisted at this stage by helpful Muslim acquaintances, but they had not encountered nor were interacting with any welcoming or proselytising group belonging to the target religion. It was also found that 'encapsulation', where a potential convert is isolated from the outside world and/or pressurised by a proselytising group, had not happened to any of the converts in the sample. They all made it clear both explicitly and implicitly that their study of and conversion to Islam had been done of their own free will and in their own time.

The general opinion expressed by researchers into *da'wah* activity in Britain is that it is ineffective and lacking in efficient organisation. Despite the converts'

statements that they were unaware of any *da'wah* organisations prior to conversion, and that they knew little about the Muslim community, both must have made an impact, albeit in the background. While the Qur'an can be purchased in most well known bookshops, 'other Islamic material' including books, booklets, leaflets and videos, all of which were mentioned, can only be obtained through *da'wah* outlets. It is therefore apparent that although the potential converts were in general unaware of the activities of *da'wah* outlets, those established Muslims with whom they had contact at this crucial time, did have *da'wah* materials available and must themselves have been aware of the *da'wah* outlets. Thus, although in the interviews there was no evidence or awareness of 'organised' *da'wah*, nevertheless *da'wah* material became available, just when it was needed. Similarly, despite the interviewees' stated unawareness of the Muslim community, those going through the 'interaction/commitment' stage during Ramadhan, started fasting for Ramadhan. This can only be because they were aware that the Muslim community was fasting at that time. Similarly, as the ritual of *salat* is not described in the Qur'an, they could only have learned it from *da'wah* material where they had little or no contact with established Muslims, or from Muslims if they did have contact. It cannot be denied, therefore, that to some extent, the presence of the Muslim community in Britain contributed in some way to the interaction/commitment stage of the conversions. At the very least, we can say that the Muslim community was there in the background and that this presence helped rather than hindered the interviewees as they came to embrace Islam.

Unlike most previous research into conversion in general and Islam in particular, I found that, although there had been an 'interaction' stage (in the case of my sample merged with the 'commitment' stage), because the interaction was with a book, the Qur'an, Western academic disciplines did not provide any theories to account for this. The flexibility of Rambo's stage model allowed me to incorporate an Islamic perspective into the analysis of the data at this stage. Although this did not enable me to answer the question as to why it was that these particular individuals and not others, embraced Islam, it did shed light on why, when they read the Qur'an, they interacted with it to such an extent that it convinced them that Islam was the way ahead for them. It should be noted that although 'associated Islamic literature' of the type the converts read is based on Qur'anic teaching, they all identified the Qur'an itself as of greatest importance. Apart from the two women who had married Muslims prior to conversion, the converts all came to Islam apparently by accident. They had not made a conscious decision to investigate Islam as an option for themselves. In most cases the converts' acquisition of the Qur'an and reading of it was the result of a chance incident, or series of happenings, that apparently bore little relation to any conscious desire to become a Muslim. The common pattern that the researcher found in the conversions, was that they all involved a series of dissimilar and apparently unrelated incidents, accidents and coincidences that each nudged or drew them towards a point where they read the Qur'an and hence embraced Islam. Looking back from the interaction/commitment stage, these 'accidents' and 'coincidences' were later seen by the converts to have been part of a plan, or guidance, from God, termed *hidayah* in Islam. According to the teaching of Islam,

human beings have limited free will and can make their choices, God is All Seeing, All Knowing, and All Powerful. He has an overview that is beyond our comprehension and has control of what is going on, a control of which we are only intermittently aware. Thus the happenings in this universe are in a constant state of organised flux, so that whatever we do, God takes account of it and has already taken account of it. The 'accidental' happenings, therefore, that nudged or drew the interviewees towards eventually reading the Qur'an and becoming Muslims were seen as part of God's plan, as were the conscious decisions taken by the interviewees. In Islam there is no idea that God created the universe and then left it to its own devices. On embracing Islam, the interviewees therefore stepped from a world view where belief in God (if they had it) meant that He created the Universe and never, or only intermittently, intervened, to one where everything has a meaning and purpose, because ultimately everything continues to be in the control of God, who is both Compassionate and Just. He either makes things happen, or allows them to happen, and by submitting to Him, the converts recognised *hidayah* in their own lives. This new perspective, or clarification, enabled the converts to understand more clearly the meaning of life, the world, the universe, and their place in it. They accepted the Qur'anic teaching that they are in this life to worship and hence obey God, serve humanity and care for the natural world. This is placed in the context of having come from God in the first place and returning to Him in the afterlife, where human beings will be judged according to their behaviour on this Earth. Such a scenario had removed the interviewees' sense of meaninglessness or frustration and answered their questions about the meaning of life and what they were supposed to do in life. As can be

seen, although clearly their lives would need to be conducted within some form of

society, it was not necessary to be immersed in a Muslim society to accept the

concept of *hidayah* which is an integral theme in the Qur'an.

8.3.6   'Consequences', The Final Stage in Rambo's Stage Model

None of the interviewees in this study completely forgot the previous meaning of

his/her social world after conversion had taken place[1]. Change requires a process

of resocialisation and some aspects of this were found to be problematic, owing to

cultural differences with the receiving community. These will be discussed in

greater detail later. Although often dissatisfied with their previous life, it is not

true to say that the converts 'tried to reinterpret' or 'reshape' their past province of

meaning. The evidence points to their interaction with the contents of the Qur'an

and other Islamic information having presented them with a new and coherent

view of existence and their place within it. In certain aspects, this new view

coincided with conclusions they had already come to during their earlier

disaffection with non-Muslim society. A new and comprehensive view was

presented to them, which they now accepted as true. It was not therefore necessary

for them to make efforts to re-shape their view themselves as part of the post-

conversion process. For most of the converts, transition to a new world view was

not accompanied by a complete change of social world. All but one of the

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[1] This decision by converts not to reject their previous lives is significant for future studies of conversion, as it goes against the traditional Augustinian view of rejecting the past. It also raises questions about the nature of the individual and his/her personal identity. This decision may arise from the nature of Islam itself as an Abrahammic religion.

converts was able to maintain their relationships with their families and all wanted

to.

Islam in fact, encourages people to remain on good terms with their families and

to treat them with kindness and respect. Certain adjustments had to be made, for

instance regarding diet, and decisions had to be made regarding the celebration of

Christmas and Eid. In general indications were that the converts did their best to

continue harmless family customs, such as sending Christmas cards and generally

maintaining normal contact. There was no cutting off from friends of the family

or neighbours and converts continued to send their children to state schools and

have contact with non-Muslims through work-place, educational, welfare and

some sports and recreation facilities. Some activities were dropped, along with

the associated people, for instance, going to night clubs and public houses. The

response of personal friends to their conversions varied according to the way of

life and attitudes of these friends. Some accepted the change, while some were

hostile. The converts did not appear to regard these changes as a major problem

in their lives. Most of the converts saw their conversion as part of a continual

development in their lives and a return to their 'real selves', rather than a

'transformation'. Nevertheless, important aspects of their subjective identity had

changed. Most found that they were more confident and more calm than before.

There was now a purpose in their lives. Although sometimes they became upset

by things that happened, they now perceived themselves to have a set of coherent

criteria with which to assess events as they took place and also to take action

regarding them. The researcher felt that the consequences of conversion differed

from one convert to another, not so much in the set of beliefs, but in the degree of

commitment to all aspects of what submission to Islam is normally regarded to require. The converts themselves often described certain aspects of practice that they had only gradually come to terms with and each would seem to have been at a different stage, depending on the individual personality and circumstances. This confirms the findings of previous researchers who have observed that even after 'formal' conversion, the converted life continues to develop. Changes in their lives were seen to be ongoing and the vast majority saw these in the context of probably continuing to live within the overall cultural context of Britain.

Looking to the future there was concern about their own Islamic education and that of children born to Muslims in Britain. The concern was not just for their own children, but also for the children born to the traditional Muslim communities living in Britain. Parents in particular expressed the desire to see more schools where the Islamic way of life and education were part of the curriculum. There was little evidence that, at the time of the interview, any of them saw themselves as having the potential to be instrumental in bringing this about. While they saw themselves and their children as part of the main society as well as the Muslim community, they were concerned about their children's happiness and sense of identity, and hoped that their children would grow up accepting the faith. For similar reasons the unmarried converts said that they would prefer to marry into the established Muslim community, so that the children would have Muslim cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents and so that they could enjoy happy family festivals, instead of being lonely. Most of the converts displayed, or expressed a desire to be active in *da'wah* and some were already actively promoting the *deen*.

The degree to which the converts had been subsumed socially and culturally into the 'receiving' community of Muslims in Britain varied from full participation for a small minority, to quite tenuous and intermittent contacts. All the converts mentioned good friends who were also converts to Islam. The converts who were fairly isolated from a Muslim community, did not say, or give the impression, that this had made their faith more 'fragile', nor did their faith appear to be dependent on the degree to which they had been embraced by the traditional community of British Muslims, but is the rise in conversion affecting the British Muslim community?

8. 4   Comparison with Köse's Work on British Converts

Although Köse's interviews were conducted in 1990-1991 and mine in 2000, it has been found that some significant factors in the conversions that Köse studied were also significant in the present thesis. Others do not apply. In the following point by point comparison between the factors he identified and my own, I am referring to his final chapter (1996:190-194). Like Köse, I found no strong relationship between conversion and childhood or adolescent turmoil, although there was a very small minority of exceptions[2]. Like Köse's, the current sample tended to have had had a fairly average level of happiness in childhood. Also like his, my sample suggested that the teenage years involved some questioning of aspects of religious upbringing, but, as in Köse, most interviewees were on the verge of adulthood or already adults before they seriously questioned their own

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[2] The converts who were exceptions varied according to the aspect of conversion being addressed.

way of life or that of society. Köse proposed that conversion is a gradual psychic process and the present research agrees strongly with this. Age of conversion in Köse is wide, ranging from early teenage to sixty-five. The average age was 29.7, the majority falling between twenty-three and forty-five years old. The current sample was younger. Ages ranged from sixteen to forty, the average age was 25 and the majority fell between the ages of twenty and thirty.

The present study agrees with Köse that a significant factor in the conversions was rejection of the moral permissiveness or materialism of society. On the other hand, there was little evidence that the current sample as a whole had set out to investigate Islam as a viable alternative. I agree with Köse that 'an effective crisis' could simply cause a process, which leads to conversion and is not necessarily a predisposing condition. Only a small minority in the present study pinpointed a crisis as being of major importance, and this was mentioned as contributing to, or precipitating a re-assessment of current beliefs or loss of meaning. This could in some cases have triggered a search for greater meaning in life, but had not prompted a decision to investigate Islam. Köse said that the conversions had involved 'a major transformation in basic religious identity' but in the current research the converts' previous religious affiliations tended to be already weak or non-existent prior to the conversion process and so the term 'major transformation' would be an exaggeration. Most of the converts felt that they had returned to their original, but unknown, faith, rather than having had their basic religious identity transformed.

A factor common to Köse's sample and the present one is that cognitive and existential questions were being asked by all the converts. In the present sample

this was a dominant factor during the key 'interaction/commitment' stage. Reasoning was far more important than affectional considerations for all of them although, for the three for whom marriage was a factor, an affectional element cannot be ignored. In both studies the converts perceived that Islam answered their questions. In Köse's sample an affectional element was reported by the converts who had embraced Islam through Sufism. This was not the experience of the current sample, none of whom came to Islam through Sufism and had had little or no socialisation with a Muslim community prior to conversion. Whereas a significant number of Köse's sample reported a mystical element, none of the present sample emphasised mystical consciousness or experiences as an important motivational factor. In both samples the interviewees entered Islam after a period of study, the length of which varied. In the current sample, even those for whom marriage was a factor did not accept what their spouses told them at face value without also reading Islamic literature, prior to conversion.

As Köse found in his work, the present data does not prove that contact with a Muslim is necessary in order for a person to accept Islam (although the *shahadah* itself is taken at the hands of a Muslim). It can only be said that contact with a Muslim may have increased the likelihood of conversion and in a few cases was instrumental in the process. Conversion in Köse's sample 'rarely occurred without human contact'. In my sample, none occurred without some kind of human contact. The contact varied from apparently the insignificant, to seeking out a Muslim and having long conversations. The potential converts in my sample were not all on an 'active quest' at the time of contact, as Köse suggests. Köse reports that many of his converts said their conversions were the result of

the positive examples of Muslims (meaning people they met and/or socialised with).   Here my findings are very different. Apart from the three for whom marriage was a factor, the current sample tended to have had negative views, or insufficient contact for this to be the case. This difference may be accounted for by the fact that just under a third of Köse's sample came to Islam through Sufism, a process that involved interaction with an embracing Sufi community. Only the two women married to Muslims can be said to have found a more or less complete social identity.   The Sufi groups had a high proportion of converts. The converts in my sample, however, often came to Islam in relative isolation and had looked for socialisation within the established, mainly South Asian, Muslim community and expected greater acceptance than had happened so far. As far as local participation in 'the universal *ummah*' is concerned, most of them had found some disappointment.   It should be mentioned that although new social identity is inevitably part of any conversion, in the current sample, the converts' evidence suggests that they were more interested in finding a meaning to life, than a social identity for themselves.

8. 5   Pivotal Role of the Qur'an and Qur'anic Teaching

The interviewees said that while they read the Qur'an they were coming to the realization that it was true, even that it was speaking to them personally. Some mentioned how the Qur'an was answering questions as they came into the readers' mind, or confirming conclusions they had previously come to. They had not all immediately read the Qur'an from cover to cover, though some had. However the conversion process was clearly accelerated by the reading of the Qur'an, and all of the converts indicated that it was a pivotal element in their

embracing the religion. Such was the power of the Qur'anic argument, even in English translation, that many, in the very process of reading it, came to think that they must be Muslims, or now wanted to be Muslims. In the analysis of the conversion processes in the sample, it was found that every convert cited the Qur'an itself as a whole, or aspects of the message they had found in it, to be the reason why they had become Muslims. The researcher found that the reading of the Qur'an was the common element that linked all the conversions to Islam in the present study.

The overall journey to Islam had been an extended process. The length of time varied with each interviewee. Some expressed the feeling that they had always been Muslims without realizing it. The Islamic concept of *fitrah*, as discussed in the literature review, can account for this feeling. Put briefly, *fitrah* holds that babies are born as natural beings, exactly as they were created to be (in a state of *fitrah*). As they grow up they come under the influences of family and society and may be led away from ' the natural way'. To come to Islam, meaning to submit to the will of God Who created us, is therefore a return to 'the natural state or condition' *(fitrah)* that we were born in.

The period of the interviewees' conscious investigation of Islam clearly involved active thinking and reasoning, while their response to the Qur'an itself and to information about the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had also involved emotional and imaginative responses linking with the mystical (e.g. life after death etc.), although mystical elements were not emphasised. From the Islamic point of view this is seen as responding with the heart (*al qalb*), the seat of the intelligence and intelligent feelings. A response of the heart is the response of

the complete and balanced personality. It is well attested that one element of the

Qur'an's content and approach is based on many aspects of balance. Aspects of

balance and how these relate to *hidayah* and *fitrah* have been discussed in Chapter

III.

All the converts were found to have been active during their conversion process,

rather than passive, and interactive in their reading of the Qur'an. For all the

converts, the key element in Islam, taught in the Qur'an and *sunnah*, proved to be

'*tawheed*', the 'One-ness' of the Almighty God. Everything else in Islam flows

from awareness of *tawheed* and it was through this awareness that the converts

now interpreted their view of existence and their role and place in it. Awareness

of *tawheed* was a necessary precursor to recognition of *hidayah*, guidance from

God.

Other aspects of Islam that flow from *tawheed* and were found in the Qur'an,

were identified by the converts as key features that attracted them. These included

the lack of priests as intercessors and administrators of sacraments. This was seen

to make for an attractive simplicity. The ordinary human being has a direct

relationship with God, with no need for intermediaries. That Islam is offered to all

humanity, regardless of race, was seen as important, as were the statements in the

Qur'an that all the varieties of colour and language are created by God and

therefore of equal value. Islam was seen to 'incorporate all nations' and it was

mentioned that the Qur'an declares the best people to be those who are most God-

conscious (having *taqwa),* rather than those of a particular tribe or nation. Despite

the varieties of human beings, humankind is declared to be one overall race,

descended from Adam. The balance of justice was also quoted as a significant

feature, while the repeated mention in the Qur'an, of God being 'Compassionate

and Merciful' was seen as a description of 'love'. Others mentioned that the

Qur'an had all the answers to living a good and peaceful life, that all the Muslims

in the world are one *ummah* and that Islam had given the convert balance in

his/her own life. Others mentioned the life example of the prophet Muhammad

(PBUH) himself, as a key attraction to Islam, subordinate, however, to the concept

of *tawheed.*

The question must be asked why are British Muslim converts – who are

secularised and individualised – attracted to any sacred book or scripture,

especially one which focuses on the community of believers? How do the two

ideas fit together – scripturalism – scriptural authority – Qur'anic authority v.

individual authority.

8. 6   Relations with the Established Muslim Community

The success of the post conversion encounter with the traditional, mainly South

Asian, British Muslim community varied along gender and ethnic lines but all the

converts had been disappointed. The disappointment had centered on doctrinal

and social matters. In general, on a social level, all the converts had initially

received a warm and sincere welcome, but had found the welcome to have its

limitations. The limitations in the welcome and assimilation into the traditional

Muslim community can be attributed to cultural and linguistic differences as

discussed in Chapter II, since the basic principles of Islam are shared by all

Muslims. While the new Muslims were conversant with the principles and

original sources of Islam, in general, they had proved unaware of the implications

of the traditional Muslims having grown up in an Islam that was the product of 1400 years of tradition in a mainly peasant culture. Some of the traditions were not part of the original teaching, but were seen as such by many of the South Asian Muslims with whom the new Muslims had most contact. Disagreements and dilemmas had therefore arisen. As a whole, the converts displayed a certain naivety, in that they had not expected traditional Islam to differ from the original that they had studied, albeit in English translation, and some were clearly inexperienced in developing relationships with people of another culture or who did not share their mother tongue. Nevertheless, some enduring friendships had resulted from the approach to the traditional Muslim community.

Both Afro-Caribbean and white converts had found that there was little opportunity of marrying into the Asian Muslim community. This had disappointed them on several counts. In Islam, people are encouraged to get married. There is no suggestion that to live singly indicates any special virtue: to be married is better. Muslim women are instructed by the Qur'an that they should marry Muslim men, but Muslim men can also marry Christian or Jewish women. Since the vast majority of the British Muslim community are South Asian and there are relatively few converts or settled Muslims from other backgrounds, the converts had had a tendency initially to look to the South Asian community for potential spouses. As they had discovered in the Qur'an and in the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) there are supposed to be no 'racial' or colour divisions in Islam. To learn that it was highly unlikely, though not impossible, that an Asian Muslim family would permit one of their members to marry a white, Chinese or Caribbean Muslim, was quite shocking to those converts who were not already

aware of the cultural attitudes. Several converts had married Arab Muslims and only one had married into the traditional Asian community. Others remained unmarried although they would like to have been married.

It was not long after taking the *shahadah,* that the social experiences of the converts regarding their relationship with the South Asian Muslim community began to show differences. The female converts' experience differed from that of the males, and the Caribbean experience differed from that of the other converts.

The female converts had greater difficulty than the males in socialising, establishing friendships, studying Islam or seeking advice within the traditional community. As Muslims they expected , and were expected to seek women rather than men for advice and friendship outside marriage, but this proved difficult, especially for the more mature women converts, because many of the mature Muslim women in the South Asian community spoke little or no English. The male converts did not highlight a similar problem as the South Asian male Muslims had been out and about more and tended to have picked up more English than their women folk. Some of the Caribbean women had had less experience than the white women in communicating with people with different mother tongues. This, together with the Asian women's tendency to find it difficult to relate to a Caribbean woman being a Muslim, meant that the Caribbean women's efforts at socialising and sisterhood were even less successful than those of the white women. Communication with younger women from the traditional community who had grown up in Britain and spoke English fluently was easier, but assumptions about what was and was not Islam, together with pressure from

older members of the traditional families continued to create problems in some cases.

In the long term, as they came into contact with the traditional South Asian Muslim community, the Afro-Caribbeans of both sexes found greater difficulty in being accepted , as people, and as Muslims, than did the other converts. Some had more or less given up trying. There was a feeling that many South Asians did not really accept that they were Muslims and also that there was a clear reluctance on many occasions to make any attempt to allow the Caribbeans to socialise with them, or in the case of the men, to allow them to pray peacefully in the mosques. Marriage to a South Asian Muslim appeared, to the Caribbeans, to be out of the question. The difficulties ranged from small misunderstandings, to hostile behaviour that in some cases was openly racist. It may be, however, that these circumstances were exacerbated by there being a greater distance between the culture and expectations of the Caribbeans and the Asians, than there is between the whites and the Asians. However, the Caribbeans had regarded the traditional Asian Muslim community as their newly found brothers and sisters in Islam, and had received distressing rebuttals that were clearly the result of racial and/or colour prejudice. Sometimes these had caused only minor irritations. Sometimes, though, the reaction and behaviour of the South Asians had been far more severe. The Afro-Caribbean men, for instance, described incidents that had occurred in mosques. Some had had colour prejudiced nicknames thrown at them while they were praying and others had even found themselves carried or thrown outside. None of the converts wanted to identify other Muslims as racist, but most of the

Caribbeans volunteered that they could see no other possible explanation for the negative attitudes and treatment with which they were sometimes confronted.

It became apparent that in their relationship with the South Asian Muslim community the converts had not, in the main, taken certain issues into account. In the context of their shared Islam, they reacted to the South Asian Muslim community as though the South Asians were a confident majority. However, within the context of the wider society, the South Asians are an ethnic minority and, as such, have, over the years, established boundaries as a mechanism for communal preservation. They have, to a large extent, preserved the culture of the place of origin within their communities in Britain, as is discussed in Chapter II. This culture is so strong and often has such a local origin, that it has created barriers that make it difficult to engage fully with the wider society in Britain. In their case, the effort to maintain their communal identity as a minority has involved a very close identification of the place of origin with all its traditions, including language, secondary dimensions of their faith system and other ethnic practices with Islam. Initially, the South Asians had shown joy and a warm welcome to these people from other communities who had embraced their faith. Later they showed difficulties in relating fully to the converts who were from a different, mainly western culture. The majority of the South Asians continue to have a strong link with their peasant background. Their Islam had been learned through tradition and from their own leaders whom they respect with very little question, as authorities on Islam. They were unprepared for the encounter with the converts who, as ordinary Muslims, cited textual authority for their different views on what was and was not Islamic practice. The converts, on the other hand,

had been unprepared for the lack of knowledge of the content of the Qur'an and the failure of the mosques to teach the meaning of the Arabic when teaching Qur'anic recitation. This failure was cited as one of the reasons for the South Asian Muslims' tendency to be ignorant of what the Qur'an does and does not say.

As is discussed in Chapter II, numbers of younger South Asian British Muslims, together with forward looking Muslim intellectuals, are looking for ways for the traditional Muslim communities living as minorities in the West to engage more successfully with non-Muslim society. One of the ways would be through an increased use of the language of the country they are living in, for better understanding between different communities and also for a more successful *da'wah* both to non-Muslims and new Muslims. Most of the converts in this study expressed the opinion that new Islamic institutions were needed. Some of the reasons for this were the strong ethnic identity and defensiveness found in some of the mosques, the lack of facilities for women, the lack of English of many imams, the failure of mosques to teach the meaning of the Arabic language of the Qur'an and the shortage of Arabic teachers in general. There was also seen to be a need for increased English language input in the teaching of Islam outside as well as inside the mosques and better presentation of Islam to English speaking non-Muslims, that would take into account the realities of Western culture, a reality that included some good qualities, as opposed to the myths and media presentation of Western culture. For the sake of their children's sense of identity and general happiness, it was felt that it would have been better to be married to a member of an established Muslim community.

This study is necessarily limited and therefore cannot present the experiences of all converts to Islam. Therefore caution should be exercised when generalising from the present findings. However, I hope that readers of this thesis will gain new insights, not only into how and why conversions to Islam take place, but also into the personal experience of some converts to Islam, presented from their own point of view.

8.7   Suggestions for Further Research

From my perspective as a native Arabic speaker, part of whose study field is the crucial role that the Arabic language plays in the Qur'an's profound effect upon people, it was fascinating to discover that even in translation into another language, namely English, the Qur'an still had a profound effect on the converts in this study. It therefore follows that it must have been the content, rather than the language of the Qur'an, that came into play. It is recommended that a study of the psychological effect that the Qur'an has on its readers and the role of the Qur'an in conversion to Islam would be of great interest to people with many different mother tongues. A good recent study in this field is '*Al Qur'an wa Ilm al Nafs*' ('The Qur'an and Psychology') by Najaaty (2001).

In my study, several issues arose in looking at the conversion experience that merit more detailed analysis. It is recommended that further research on specific aspects of the post-conversion experience of Muslims in Britain should be carried out. These might include a study of how far converts or Muslims brought up as Muslims serve as role models; the converts' contact and relationship with other converts; a comparative study of the post-conversion experiences of new Muslims

from different ethnic groups; and a detailed study of how converts adapt their life-styles to the British environment and how far they try to change them to accommodate their own and their children's needs.

More research could be done on conversion to Islam and personal identity development. It would be interesting, for example, to see a study comparing British converts to Islam with British converts to Christianity and New Religious Movements. This study invites us to ask what Islam offers to British people that other religions do not.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Standard Ethics Protocol

Date:

Dear (name of interviewee)

My name is Maha Alqwidi. I am a Ph.D. student in the School of Theology and Religious Studies at The University of Leeds. I am currently working on my thesis on conversion of British people to Islam and why they converted. It is based on interviews with British men and women who were not born to a Muslim family and not brought up as a Muslim, but later became Muslims.

May I explain that I am interested in your life experience and opinions that may relate to your conversion to Islam, from childhood, through conversion to your life after conversion, for the purposes of research only and that the object of the research and my questions are in no way intended to judge, challenge or change you in regard to any of your beliefs or practices.

To ensure that your rights as a participant in this study are in no way violated or compromised, I would like to explain several safeguards to you. If you would like additional information, clarification, or you do not fully understand any of the following points that I am explaining to you, please do not hesitate to ask questions.

First, the interview will be confidential. You do not have to provide your name, or full name, unless you are happy to do so any information or characteristic that you do not wish to be used, will not be used. Second, this study is completely voluntary and you may need to stop at any time you please, during the interview. Third, you will have complete and unquestioned freedom to refuse to answer any question or questions during the interview that make you uncomfortable for any reason. Fourth if at any time you wish to change your replies you will be free to do so. Fifth, I would be happy to answer any questions you might have about any aspect of the study before, during or after the interview.

The design of the interview is very straightforward. I would like to sit down with you, in private, and allow you to talk about your life, prompted by my questions; firstly about before you came into contact with Muslims or Islam; second about how your conversion happened and third, about your life after having become a Muslim.

The questions I have prepared are the same for all the interviews are open ended. Sometimes I may ask some extra questions prompted by interesting things you tell me, so all the interviews will not be exactly the same. Some of the prepared questions are about your background and some are more directly related to your decision to become a Muslim and your experience of living your life as a Muslim.

I hope that the interviews will be very relaxed and in a conversational style. You will be able to say exactly what you like and will be given plenty of time to think about your answers and make yourself clear. You may go back to any question or change what you have said, at any time, if you wish to. With your permission I shall be using a tape recorder to make sure I have understood all your statements and also so that I can transcribe them and use some of the material you have provided in the final draft of my thesis. I may use this material to make general comments and sometimes I may report what you have said or quote what you have said. The object is to gain a picture of British converts to Islam, not to give individual biographies. There is no set time limit for the length of the interviews. We can stop where it is convenient for you and hold the interview wherever you would feel most comfortable.

If you have any questions that you would like to ask me about the study and any comments you would like to make on the topic, I will be happy to discuss these with you. Please feel free to consider whether or not you would like to participate in the study.

Thank you very much for your co-operation.

Mrs. Maha Alqwidi

School of Theology and Religious Studies
University of Leeds

Semi-Structured In-depth Interview

This questionnaire is in three parts

Part one is about the background of the interviewee.

Part two is about the interviewee's conversion to Islam.

Part three is about the interviewee's experiences after his/her conversion to Islam. In this part I shall be also asking questions about his/her entry to, and relationship with the Ummah, viz. Muslim Community, and with non-Muslim society.

Date of interview

Name of interviewee

Introduction

Your personal details

What is your original name?

What is your name after conversion?

How old were you when you converted?

What year was this?

What time of year was this?

How would you describe your ethnic origin?

Where did you grow up?

Are you married?

What is your highest level of education?

PART ONE

<u>Part one questions are about the background of the interviewee before coming to Islam.</u>

We are now going to look at your background.

Your answers to some of these questions may relate to certain periods of your pre-Muslim life and not to others.

For convenience we have divided your life into five stages, a, b, c, d and e. You may refer to any of them. It is not necessary to say 'a, b, c, d, or e'. You merely have to identify which stage of life you were at.

a- Up to the age of five.

b- Primary school age, about from 5 to 11.

c- Secondary school age, about 12 to 16, early teens.

d- Late teens to early twenties (6th form, or college or start work).

e- Twenties and above

Can you describe your relationship with your parents?

Did you believe in God from an early age?

Did your parent (s)/carers give you, or arrange for you to receive any consistent religious or moral teaching?

If you did receive religious or moral teaching, could you please describe it briefly?

Before coming to Islam, did you ever have any unusual experiences that at the time or later struck you as being significant?

Were you happy with the society around you?

Did you believe in the paranormal or the spiritual, or that there was more to life than what can be seen?

Did you wonder why we are here, or wonder about 'the meaning of life'?

Were you fairly satisfied with your life? If you were dissatisfied with your life, what were you dissatisfied with?

Did you try to change your lifestyle to make it more satisfying, at any time before you took an interest in Islam?

These days even young children are presented with issues like, global warming, pollution, depletion of the ozone layer, species of animals becoming extinct, starving people on television. Did such issues affect you? Did you respond in any way? Did you feel that 'thing weren't right with the world'? Or did you try to ignore these issues? If you tried to ignore these issues, did you do anything to help you ignore them? e.g. drinking, drugs, active social life ...... etc.

Through the media we are presented with the effects of terrorism, wars, and liberation struggles, government clampdowns ...... etc. How did you respond? Did any particular events have a strong effect on you, or not?

PART TWO

Part two questions are about the interviewee's conversion to Islam.

This is about events ...... etc., in the lead up to your conversion and actual conversion Islam.

Are you happy with the term 'conversion', or do you prefer another term? If so why?

What was your perception of Islam before approaching Islam?

Was there anything you already liked, feared or disliked about Islam?

Did you have any positive or negative attitudes regarding Muslim people before you became a Muslim?

Had you lost interest in your current life style or become disillusioned with it?

Were you looking for something better in your life?

Did you consider any other religions?

Did you have any spiritual/mystical experience that triggered your approach to Islam, or your conversion?

Did something happen in your personal or social life that triggered it like a broken marriage?

Before you became a Muslim, did any Muslim actively introduce you too Islam, or actively invite you to Islam?

When you took an interest in Islam, was this because of the way of life and behaviour of any Muslims you know? Were these people who had inherited Islam, or were they new Muslims?

Did you hear about Islam via lectures, speeches, tapes, videos ......etc.?

How did you investigate about Islam? Did you read books, leaflets ......etc. or seek out people to ask?

What were the key features of Islam that first attracted you?

How long was it after this initial attraction, that you accepted Islam?

If you feel that you were attracted to Islam for a long time before you took your *shahadah*, why do you think this was?

What were the key elements of Islam that finally convinced you to accept it?

Was there anything you read or experienced that could have turned you off from embracing Islam?

After you first realised that you were a Muslim, or that you wanted to become one, what did you do?

PART THREE

Questions in part three are about the interviewee's experiences after his/her conversion to Islam.

You are now a Muslim. We will look at if and how your life has changed, how your life changed at the beginning

Did you adopt all the Islamic practices and outlooks that you know of, immediately, or was it a gradual process? Why do you think this was? Did you in fact start adopting them before your *shahadah*?

Were there any things you stopped doing? Was this immediate or gradual? Why do you think this was? Did you in fact start to give up these things before *shahadah*?

Do you think that is important to be able to understand the Qur'an in Arabic?

Have you made any efforts in this direction? If so, how did you get help?

Did you feel the need to adopt outward signs of Muslim identity for instances, *hijab*, beard, or change of name'?

Initial reaction of other people to your conversion

Describe the initial reactions of people you already knew, e.g. your family, and non-Muslim friends and work colleagues, your Muslim friends, if you already had any.

Describe the initial reactions of people you now met for the first time, e.g. established/traditional Muslims, other converts, *da'wah* organisations you may have approached, new colleagues at work ...... etc.

Did you find your new Islamic identity a strain at first, or did you feel at home?

As the weeks and months went by, the changes you may have noticed in yourself and your relationship to Ummah

Did you as a person change?

Have you noticed any psychological effect? e.g. more or less self confident, change of self identity.

How did members of the traditional Muslim community and converts, respond to you?

Did you establish new and enduring friendships with other Muslims, now that you had joined the Ummah?

If you felt you needed any kind of help from the Muslim community, was it social, for companionship, or so that you could learn more about the teachings and way of life?

Did you find advice and information about Islam given to you by fellow Muslims helpful? Were these new Muslims or established traditional Muslims? Was your main source of knowledge from your personal Muslim acquaintances, or from books, tapes, lectures, study circles ......etc? What books ......etc, did you find most helpful?

Did language cause any problems in relating to other Muslims? If so, were these overcome?

Did you find any problems relating to or with established/traditional Muslim because you came from a different cultural or geographical background?

It is part of Islam for adults to be married. Women must marry Muslim men; though Muslim men can marry Unitarian Christians and Jews. If you were single when you converted:

Did you have any difficulty finding a spouse? Did the community help you? or did you go to Muslim Marriage bureaux ...... etc?

There are different traditions within Islam, *Wahabi, Sufi,* Modernist ......etc. Would you describe yourself as being attached to any of these traditions?

Your relationship to non-Muslim society after conversion

Now that you have been a Muslim for some time, how would you describe the reaction of the non-Muslim people you encounter in various situations?

Did your attitude to your previous society or culture change after you came to Islam? How do you see your former life? In the wrong direction, sinful, lost...? Has there been any change in your attitude regarding

i) Your previous social belief and activities

ii) Your political beliefs and activities

Do you wish you had been born to a Muslim family?

To what degree do you regard it as desirable and/or possible to integrate your life as a Muslim with wider British society?

Do feel now, that your life has wider or narrower horizons than before?

Appendix 2

Extract from evidence provided by Fadil

I was born into a Christian family, non-church going, who nevertheless sent us to Sunday school for religious instruction. The existence of God was taken for granted quite naturally. We all had a sense of His presence as part of our lives, watching over us, whether we did good or bad. In my teens I became fervently religious and seriously considered becoming a monk and entering a monastery. I became 'confirmed' in the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England, which encompassed all the ceremonial I so loved; statues, bells, incense. I can recall my confirmation service. I was genuinely devoted and practised regular prayer, meditation, fasting and self denial.

Then, all of a sudden, I lost my faith. Something happened to somebody for whom I had prayed. For the first time I felt that my prayers were not being answered. I had, in a childlike way, seen the world as good and belonging to God. I viewed the world now with newly acid eyes, questioning everything I hitherto believed in. Terminal illness, disability, earthquakes; all of these things pointed, in my mind, to the fact that God did not exist. It was all a trick, and everything was a lie. I felt total emptiness, loneliness. I had no one with whom I could discuss my feelings. Slowly, contemplative lives, far removed from the material world, helped me to believe again. I somehow found Him again. However, while faith in God returned, faith in the church did not. I still questioned the complex doctrines and ceremonies, and challenged everything.

I began to study other religions, from Judaism to the 'Hare Krishna' cult. I admired the Jewish religion for its monotheism and close community, but was dismayed that they saw themselves as the chosen people and rejected converts. What little I knew of Islam focused on media portrayal, satire. I decided to visit a mosque; the event was a real revelation and turning point. The wonderful feeling of family pervaded the place, with all generations mixing together. There was no solemn or false atmosphere, and I met hospitable people who became firm friends. I started to study Islam. I found the Arabic prayer exceedingly difficult and many other things required effort to adjust to.

Visiting my first Muslim country, Pakistan, was traumatic for me. Conditions there shocked and repelled me, the squalor, corruption, injustice, and often anti-Islamic cultural habits. I quickly discovered that Islam as a religion is one thing, and a nation's cultures and practices are another. I have since always concentrated on following the inner life of Islam, by reading, studying and devotion, and have stayed away from ethnic, cultural or political opinions. This has enabled me to carry on as a Muslim, never getting disillusioned with Islam, as I have discovered the spirit of true Islam. I pray that, God willing, I will always have this strength.

Appendix 3

Extract from evidence provided by Idris

My name was Andrew. I am English. My name is now Muhammad Idris. I was 19 years old when I converted. It was Eidul Fitr, January 1998, when I embraced Islam. I grew up in Maidstone, Kent; it is in the south east of England, the nearest part of England to France. I did not believe in God from an early age. My mother took me to church. She encouraged me to be a Christian at a very young age. I went to Christian camps between 10 and 15 years old.

My relationship with my mother was very strong at a young age. My dad told me not to smoke, don't upset people, try to be good to other people, respect other people. My father said that as long as I didn't hurt anyone else I could do what I wanted in life. At the age of 13 my parents divorced and my dad lived with his girlfriend. I lived with my mother and my sister for three years. Later on my mother remarried and I lived with them. I did not get on very well with my stepfather and that is what changed me. I did not like any authority telling me what to do. Whenever I was told not to do something, I would do it. This took me away from Christianity. I went to live with my dad and his girlfriend. My dad gave me a lot more freedom and I could go out more with my friends; I did not feel restricted.

My grades were good enough to do my 'A' in a grammar school. I did my 'A' level in a boys grammar school, which was all boys. I had done my GCSE previously. The biggest turnaround was my 'A' level results; I did not get the grades I wanted. Even though I was doing very well with my studies. This was the biggest effect on me doing my 'A' level. I did Art, English Literature and Ancient History. This was the most radical time of my life. I was searching for something but I did not know what I was searching for. I was growing my hair long, going to parties, into music but did not know what I wanted to do as an adult. I was trying to find something that would help shape my life. I thought it was music, so I started to take lessons. I got into drugs, I was hanging around with different crowds, and they were into drinking and drugs. I wanted to try new things and I tried new things. By searching for these new things, there was something inside me that needed fulfilling; I was searching for a balance in my life. I went to parties, mixed with different friends to be happy.

I came to Leeds to study. When students have the option to study they choose the furthest university from home. I chose to come to North Leeds. My friends were going to Leeds University. I spoke to the university because my grades were not what I wanted. They gave me an option of Chinese, Russian or Arabic. For some reason I chose Arabic.

I thought when we die we die. I thought that by taking drugs I would experience something else. I wanted new experiences; life was very depressing at this time. I was very dissatisfied and unhappy with my life. A lot of my friends were getting

messed up. A lot of us were confused; we did not know what to do with our lives. One of my friends died by committing suicide, he hanged himself. I knew him well when we were younger. We knew he was very unstable before, he was visiting psychiatrist and slashing his wrists. I did not know why I was doing the university course.

I started to drink very heavily after the suicide of my friend. I was going crazy; I needed to find a balance in my life. I then started to search. I was sick of drinking, I was not interested in having a relationship, and everything became so mundane. I was searching for something that I would not get bored with. I was only interested in myself at that time. When I saw things on the television I did not take much notice. I had no preconceptions. At this time I was not doing well with my Arabic. I failed 'listening and speaking' in the first term exam.

At the university I started trying to do something morally right. I picked up some leaflets from 'animal cruelty' and sent off for some leaflets and became a member. I thought it would make me happy. I was vegetarian for three years. After three years I ate meat for one year because I did not know why I was vegetarian. Later I understood why I was vegetarian. I did not like the way they killed the animals in the factories or how they kept them, so I became vegetarian again.

Where I lived in the south, you are either Christian or nothing. In Leeds I saw women with hijab and men with big beards. I had never seen any thing like this in my life. I was very surprised. I did not know what Islam was, or who Muhammad was, (PBUH). I thought he was a boxer. The first time I saw the Muslims I thought they were very strange. I went back home to my friend and told him that I do not know what course I am studying, but this man looks like an Irish Farmer. This refers to a person who leaves the community and the society and lives on a farm. With respect I have told him this before. That was how I saw him in the beginning. I was very scared of the sisters. I thought they were very sacred. In the lessons I would sit in a corner on my own, not knowing anyone. I felt very strange.

I lost interest in my current life. I hated the drinks and I lost interest in girls. I was looking for something to change and shape my life. I needed someone to tell me how to live a decent life that would make me happy. I wanted something that was all- encompassing. Some days I was up and some down, I was very confused and depressed, I needed something spiritual in my life. Basically the death of my friend triggered me thinking. I thought that could have been me. I started to talk to the Muslims in my class.

I was studying Islamic History also. I did not know anything. I had no preconceptions about what Islam is. I did not know of any Muslims or about Islam. I was so ignorant I thought Pakistanis spoke Arabic. Yes, Abdullah and Yusuf, these two Muslim converts, were very active in the class. I saw Islam as strange before, almost alien - different. English people are very pop-star orientated.

Abdullah and Yusuf took me to watch a video by Hamza Yusuf. He is a White American, smartly dressed, very handsome. I saw him as a role model, someone to look up to. He looked cool. The talk was about the Dajjal, how America was ruling the world. I have never thought about these things before and I found them very interesting. Listening to these things brought me closer to Islam.

The most important thing about these discussions were they made me think and gave me new ideas, and new thoughts about the society. Yusuf gave me some books and a Qur'an. He told me not to touch it without washing my hands. I gave it a lot of respect. I put the Qur'an on the table. I was scared of it. I was reading the Qur'an back to front because I did not know that the Qur'an starts from the right hand side. I always keep the Qur'an on a high place.

I did not know anything, and I did not consider any other religions; Islam was in front of me so I accepted Islam. When I took an interest in Islam it was not because of the life or the behaviour of the Muslims. Thanks to God, he showed me Islam before he showed me the Muslims.

The key feature that attracted me was that it was something to reshape my life. Islam was instructing me, it was telling me what to do. I was happy to do anything that Islam required of me. I am not really sure. I spent a lot of time with Yusuf during Ramadhan, talking about Islam. I told him that I was very depressed and unhappy and I asked him if he felt some kind of balance being a Muslim. Yusuf said yes. I sat nine days with Yusuf because I was not completely sure; I needed a bit of encouragement, I so much wanted to change my life. I thought Islam would give me balance in my life. It was approximately one month after the initial attraction that I accepted Islam.

Appendix 4

Extract from evidence provided by Karim

My original name was Karl. My name after conversion is Karim Abdul Shaheen. I was approaching 29 years old when I converted. It was in the month of Ramadhan, 17 April 1989. I am principally an African of Jamaican descent, born in England and called a West Indian. I grew up in north west London. I moved to Leeds in 1977. I was brought up to believe in God. Their view of God was not that He was two or three. Their view even in Christianity was that the God was one. So we have Trinitarian and Unitarian. There exists a Unitarian church in Leeds near City Square.

My life seemed pretty normal to me, whatever normal was. A young mother brought me up, she and my father had separated and she had two other children besides me. However, from my perspective it was normal because I knew nothing else. All the problems associated with it were normal. That is what is considered as living in a state of ignorance. This all took place in London.

I was excluded from school at the age of 13 and a half. I was reinstated at the age of 15 years old. At the age of 15 they gave me an IQ test and it was found that I had an IQ of 148. This put me at 0.1% of the population. I was then given six months to study some 'O' levels after not being in education for over a year. During the year I was being taken care of by the London Borough of Brent. They were the ones who denied my education. I took four 'O' level exams and passed them. We consider education, or inculcation, to be the killing fields, particularly for young black people whom the system and the society does not want to see aspire.

I have never been satisfied with this country because it has never recognised the people that are born in it that are black; they want to keep them back in this country. All my work is designed to smash the stereotypes, because they (the stereotypes) say that if you are black, poor, ignorant you are not capable of much.

Up until 1979 I knew nothing of Muslims or Islam. I was a young criminal, I was sent to Borstal for six to nine months. During this time I read the autobiography of Malcolm X. I was in my 19th year. When I read the book, I saw myself in some of his experiences. We were similar in looks and complexion; he was a fair skin black. Prison for a young black man is not good. You go to prison. You do not want to commit any crimes, but the environment you are in - you have been rejected from school, then the work place. While we have suffered all this rejection, we still want to make it in the society, you still want to achieve all the things everybody else is achieving, At that time, I had a girlfriend that had just had a baby and she was making demands on me to supply the child's needs, so what should I do? This happened to me in 1979, and many others.

I saw a dream or vision while I was in the hospital that I would be helping my brother, sisters, my family, and my community; I saw all these things. I saw that I would be praising Allah everywhere I went. All this happened while allegedly I was having a nervous breakdown, allegedly going crazy, allegedly having a psychotic episode. At that time I was considered as extremely dangerous - allegedly.

When I came out of prison, I came out to many depressing things in November 1979. After reading Malcolm X, I knew he was a Muslim but at that time I did nothing about it. It was three days before my birthday and I needed money. No one actively introduced me to Islam. I woke up one day and realised that I was a Muslim. After the entire trauma in my life, going to a mental institution, I decided that the only thing I wanted to fear was God. I did not want to fear the people that were trying to send me crazy. It made sense to me to be a Muslim because that was the only refuge for me.

I am the Director of a Community Radio Station. I was once interviewed by Channel Four; they were planning on doing a documentary about what I do here in Leeds in Radio. It was just about the black community. They asked me if I knew how many people they have doing each job that I am doing on my own. I told them that I did not go to college. Allah gave me the ability to do what I do. They want to isolate the black community from the rest of the wider community of this city, so that they do not get to see people like me. I am not an accident in my community; there are a lot of people like me in the community.

I have suffered racism all my entire life. Everyone I know has experienced racism in one way or another. The one thing that I expected not to find when I came home, when I woke up to Islam was racism. I found it prevalent in those who consider themselves top class Muslims.

In 1986 I went through a lot in my personal life. Also a lot of things started to happen to me in 1986. The crisis I experienced resulted in me having a nervous breakdown. I ended up in hospital. I believe that my experiences were preparing me for my journey into Islam. I regard everything that happened to me right up to becoming a Muslim as basic training for being a Muslim. I know what minds go through because I have been in a straight jacket. This mind now knows a tremendous amount of peace.

After my recuperation I started to look at Islam again. After a month I read the Qur'an in eight days. Four weeks after that I knew all my prayers in Arabic. I have never looked back since. I read the Qur'an through regularly. The idea of God being One, the idea of submitting to Him, and fearing Him and Him alone really appeals to me because I have been a bad boy. I did not fear anybody before so it made perfect sense. I had to have fear for somebody.

My heart now has faith it never had; my mind has never felt so secure. I have never felt the type of peace I feel now. Even in the most adversity I feel peaceful.

Appendix 5

Extract from evidence provided by Saif

I had no sense of direction in my life. In those days I was drinking alcohol on social occasions and was fully occupied with concern for obtaining the material things in life; for example, the new car every three years or so, the house, the inevitable mortgage as a result, and all the mod-cons of the materially oriented society that we live in today".

I was a heavy smoker. I think I had a reasonable sense of right and wrong, but I was morally lacking. In those days, those dark days before Islam came into my life, I knew absolutely nothing about Islam. Praise be to Almighty Allah, I was soon to learn that which had been hidden from me, and is still being hidden from the people of our country. When an incredible truth struck my heart and my mind, and turned my way of life upside down. All because I came to believe in the oneness of God, Who is Allah.

On reflection I think I had been examining and analysing my own behaviour and my own way of life, and I was beginning to ask deep questions about myself, such as; 'Who am I?', 'Why am I here?', and 'What will happen to me when I die?'. I know that I had been developing a deep aversion to the contents of the daily tabloids. I kept changing my newspaper to try and get away from the sex and consistent violence that is continually portrayed. At this time, just a few years ago, I had no idea that Islam was just around the corner.

I was getting so depressed with the behaviour of our society as a whole, and the part that I was playing in it, that one dark and clear starry night while I was out walking our dog, I looked up to the sky and said out loud, 'If there is anybody out there, please come and help us out of this mess'. I was referring of course to the mess that is our society and I didn't know then, that Allah was soon to answer.

A short time later, I was working with a man from Pakistan, helping him with his work. He started talking a lot about Islam, but I confess at that time I wasn't really listening. However, some days later he gave me a book called 'The Bible, the Qur'an and Science'. I took to reading this book in my tea and dinner breaks. Before long I was reading the book with avid interest. Anyhow, two weeks later I was given my first copy of the Qur'an by my friend. I opened and I read the Qur'an in awe and absolute wonder and a week later, I made the confession of faith at the Mosque.

My life changed very quickly after embracing Islam. I stopped drinking alcohol and amazed my family one evening by throwing all the alcohol in our home down the sink. I've never had a family to call my own, in that I mean a Mum and Dad, in the true sense of the word; and I didn't have any brothers or sisters. Mum and Dad died in 1982. Now I have a family of millions, and I do consider them to be my brothers and sisters.

Appendix 6

Extract from evidence provided by Daud

I am from a Methodist background, which is a branch of Christianity. I stopped visiting Church after the age of 16, except for funerals, weddings and christenings. I was looking at my lifestyle and those of my friends. I thought it was not how I would like to spend all my life. Going to drink and so on. This was when I was 18 years old onwards. There was something about family life that was more important and worthwhile. I did not see myself at the age of 40 still having a social life of going regularly to the pubs. I was not happy. Those that had money had much better opportunities in life. Those that did not have any money did not seem to get chances in life; this is how it seemed to me at 18 to 20 years onwards. After being in the Communist Party for a year it changed me. I felt drained; there was something spiritual missing in my life. After a few years I applied to an organisation to work abroad in third world countries. I thought I could do some good and learn other cultures.

I was accepted to go for two years to the north of Australia. Just before leaving England I was working part-time in London and again I began to think of my life. I was not happy with being around people drinking all the time. At the age of around 25 I heard that there was a religion called Islam where the people who are called Muslims do not drink alcohol. I was looking for a different way of life that did not include drinking. I wanted to get married.

With hindsight I was more concerned with the religious/spiritual aspect of life. I was generally busy trying to sort out my education and training for the future. I had an interest in football. Religion did not play a strong part of my life at that time. At the age of 24 to 25 I felt that there was something missing in my life. I was dissatisfied with my life. All I saw were my friends visiting the pubs regularly and I could not imagine living a life like that when I reached 40 years old. This worried me. I did not want to live a life, which involved drinking alcohol for the rest of my life.

I was looking for more social justice. I wanted to join the Communist Party. This was supporting the rights of the working people. Educating the working people of their rights for better pay and conditions etc. This lasted approximately one year. I did not have any perception of Islam before approaching Islam.

While I was in Papua New Guinea I went to the library and found a book on Islam. I saw pictures of people praying in this book and I started to follow the teachings of the book. I did not know why, I had no one to explain things to me but I tried to practise what I read in the book. I knew that Muslims prayed five times a day and the time of day they prayed by reading this book. On my return from New Guinea I had to investigate Islam and find the Muslims. I was convinced in my heart that Islam was right. I did not think as deeply at that time or come across anything about it. I knew Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) existed

because his name was mentioned in the book about Islam that I got from the library. I accepted that Jesus came before Prophet Muhammad. I always believed that there was only one God. I knew they were not supposed to drink alcohol. I knew that they did not drink or eat pork.

After reading a book on Islam which was given to me by a Muslim it helped me to understand more about the prophets and what they believed. It encouraged me to find out more about Islam. I was travelling at the time and did not know whom to turn to. On arriving back in England I made sure I investigated Islam. I had already decided within myself that Islam was the right way of life. Therefore I do not believe anyone could have deterred me from that. I had a belief in Islam and all I needed to know was what to do.

On my return from New Guinea I came back to Leeds and I wanted to find where the Muslims were. I needed to know what was required of me. I was convinced in my heart that Islam was the right way of life for me. I met Muslims at Leeds University. There was a talk there in Arabic and English one Friday. This was a big change for us to hear about Islam in English. All talks previously were in Urdu. I started to spend more time with the Muslims from the university. I practised Islam before taking my shahadah. Thereafter it was a gradual process. I stopped doing things that were wrong as I learnt more about the religion.

Appendix 7

Extract from evidence provided by Lateefa

I had just undergone that big lifestyle change of going to university. A big, big change, as I was coming into contact with Islam. I used to drink. That's the first thing I did when I got away from home! I would get very drunk, then I was beginning to realise that I didn't have to be what I was before, I guess. When you start at university, you don't know anybody. You are away from your family! There's nobody to tell you what to do. Sometimes you think 'I wish Mum were here to tell me what to do.

Actually, there was one girl who's a civil engineer, she didn't actually approach me. I approached her. We were all going to the cinema and we were walking along and I started asking her questions. She was wearing hijab so I knew she was a Muslim. I started asking. I think I was trying to catch her out, to see if I could find any gaps in her knowledge, or see if I could prove her wrong! I was interested that I couldn't catch her out. I found I was agreeing with her more than I was agreeing with my father. I asked her a lot: What makes a Muslim? What makes a Muslim different from the others? What do they do that's different? And she told me about saying the shahadah. And I say 'That's it! All you have to do?!' In Christianity there's a whole big ceremony. And with my ex sect, there's an additional ceremony you're supposed to go through, reaching your early teens, called Confirmation.

Nadia, whom I was asking all the questions on the way to the cinema, she didn't really remember the conversation. I reminded her of it about a year later. I said, It was actually THAT conversation that started me thinking about converting. At the time my arguments (to myself) were 'I can't give up alcohol' also I had a boyfriend but I didn't want to finish with him. But that finished anyway. Then I gave up the alcohol-and then I didn't have any more excuses. I wanted to change and it was that conversation that started me thinking about it. I wanted to change because I wanted answers to my questions, and this was before I accepted Islam. I wanted answers to questions like 'Why are we here?' and things like that, and I guess I wanted the same certainty that the Muslims have. I had asked my friend and also taken some booklets about Islam. I was just curious at that time. When I started to learn about facts like the Qur'an, and that it hadn't changed for 1422

years, the science that's contained in it, that is supposed only to have been discovered recently. So it was at that point I decided I wanted to know more about it. I was not going to think about it until I had my exams done. Then I was going to go home and learn. When I got home I couldn't get any books, because of the area I live in, so I learned from the Internet. Most of my investigations I did by myself. No people were pushing me to do it, even my Muslim friends were saying, 'Are you sure this is what you want?'.

I was personally more interested in looking at Islam, however my father insisted that I look at all the other religions. He just wanted to make sure that if I were going to do it, I was 100% sure about it. Which is fair enough. He made me look at Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism- all the other religions but they just didn't make sense to me. Some bits of them might have done but other bits wouldn't. It's like Christianity, some bits make sense but some bits don't. But in Islam it all makes sense.

Appendix 8

Extract from evidence provided by Yussif

The meaning of life at the age of 14 years old was very painful. When I went to bed at night I used to wish not to wake up from my sleep. I did not want there to be another life after death. I wanted to nullify my existence. At the age of 20 I started to think about the meaning of life. I pondered with the idea that maybe God existed. I knew that I was not going to find happiness in all the things that I wanted to do like money and women, or drugs and alcohol. I remember from school studying the Bible. There was a saying that 'It is harder for a rich man to enter heaven than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle'. This brings me back to a very important question, that if I am looking for the meaning of life, the road on the search for truth, the road forks on yes and no, whether the answer - which way does each take? If God existed which road should I take?

My parents encouraged me to go to university, so I went to Sheffield University. I stayed there for one term, and then I left before they kicked me out. After leaving Sheffield University I needed to try and sort out my life. I looked for a job but could not find anything. An employee of my father's gave me a job doing security work at night. This gave me a lot of time on my own. For the first half of that I basically continued drinking. I drank enough to neutralise myself. This was a turning point for me because things started to get serious. I started to think about everything. I became 20 years old and realised that practically a quarter of my life had gone and I had done nothing with my life. I knew nothing about life. I wanted to know why I was alive; I knew death was coming but did not know what the purpose of life was. I needed to know; therefore I started to ask a lot of questions. I had to conquer my soul.

After reading many books on different religions including Islam I decided that I was going to return to University and study as much as possible. I now believed that knowledge was to play an important part in my search to find the true religion. I did as many degrees as I could in Leeds University. In my search for God I read many books. I needed to know if God was an astronaut etc. I used to listen to Bob Marley, very peaceful music. Bob Marley used to speak about peace and love, moral things in his music. I got a moral input from listening to his music. I wanted to check some of the things in the Bible that Bob Marley sang about in his songs. I read it with openness. I thought it was amazing the things they mentioned that were to happen and were happening. After reading 'Revelations', the things in the Bible that Marley sang about inspired me to believe in God. I started to read the Bible a lot more but there were things in the Bible that were not true. I did not believe that Jesus was the son of God as it mentioned in the Bible. I bought a book from a Hari Krishna. I read the book. This encouraged me to read a lot more books so I visited the library and I read as many books as I could. These books that I was reading were religiously based

because I now knew that God existed. So I needed to discover which religion to follow so I started reading and buying different religious books.

After reading about all other religions, I discovered a religion called Islam. I went to the library and got an English translation of the Qur'an. I was in so much of a rush to get knowledge I had read lots of small books on different religions. While reading and understanding about other religions I had decided that there was only one God. I did not understand the religions that stated that God was a man. I was getting confused when I looked at the Buddhist religion; a lot of it did not make sense. In Christianity and Hinduism there was no mention of one God. The justice I read in the Qur'an and that there is only one God. The words of the Qur'an were not written by any man. It was the words of God speaking directly to me. It was one and a half years of searching after the initial attraction, that I accepted Islam.

Appendix 9

Extract from evidence provided by Nabilah

I had met my husband through college. I use to feel offended when my father used to speak so harshly about the religion of Islam because he did not want to accept the possibilities that I would be thinking about Islam. The prospect that I would marry a Muslim was too much for him.

The investigation started when my husband used to bring home books from the mosque. I used to find that people outside Islam would question why a man is allowed to have more than one wife and women can have only one husband. Women outside Islam find it very difficult to understand this; they have asked me so many times.

I liked the idea of fasting, that enabled me to feel what other starving people are going through all over the world. I disliked people not accepting me for what I am. They want me to be what they want me to be. I have to please myself, not other people. My husband explained to me about some of the facts, but mainly I learnt by reading books and attending circles.

It was the differences between Christianity and Islam. In some parts they were the same and then they branch off. The information that I received from my husband was hard to accept at first. I had to study and find out for myself. I was curious about Islam because when I married my husband I was not a Muslim, but I had to defend him when people were saying bad things about him or the religion of Islam.

I spent a number of years studying Islam; I wanted to know why people spoke badly of Islam. Fasting fascinated me. I used to think that if we could feel the pain of those starving children every day of our lives forever. I thought it was humble of the people who fasted. At the time they were fasting they could understand what the starving children were going through, it made them more understanding and more sympathetic.

I wanted to accept shahadah when I understood what the meaning of it was and why I was saying it. I took my shahadah in Ireland; I had been married four years before I decided to take the shahadah.

I took my shahadah willing, knowingly understanding it after four years. My family thought that my husband was forcing me into Islam, he was making me do all the changes. But we have been married for ten years. He has never pressurised me at all into any decisions that I have made. I feel if he had pressurised me I probably would have turned away from Islam, I do not like being pressurised into anything, I have to something on my own, for myself, because I want to do it.

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