Islamophobia and Conversion to Islam in Britain: Bridging the Gap?

Abstract
Despite the general post-2001 suspicion and fear of Muslims, Britain is seeing an increase in numbers of converts to Islam. Many converts state a wish to act as mediator between Muslims and Britons, but whilst they may influence the opinions of those in their immediate circle, they are arguably unlikely to have an impact on Islamophobic sentiments in society at large. It is evident from media coverage of British converts to Islam that they are perceived to have turned their back on British culture in favour of a new faith and identity. This is because both Islamophobia and emic understandings of the conversion process support the view that an individual has to be either British or Muslim, thus impairing any attempts at mediation. Media coverage also illustrates that Islamophobia works to question the reliability of converts in three ways: firstly by associating converts with radical Islam and terrorism; secondly by labelling female converts ‘backward’ for willingly embracing a religion which oppresses women; and thirdly by claiming that most converts embrace Islam in order to marry a Muslim and that their decision is thus not a rational preference for the religion. Because converts to Islam are thus robbed of their British identity and reliability in the eyes of the general public, their attempts to defend Islam and their personal choices are easily dismissed.

Keywords
Islam; conversion; Islamophobia; Britain; media

In the current environment of general suspicion or even fear of Islam and Muslims, Britain is nonetheless seeing an increase in conversion to Islam, both by white Britons¹ and by members of other minority groups. The total number of converts has been estimated at 100,000, with as many as 5,000 conversions per year (Brice 2010: II). Islamophobia does not only affect lifelong Muslims; converts to Islam are also object of suspicion. They are frequently represented by the media as even more of a security threat than lifelong Muslims, and arguably as more of a threat to British culture (Brice 2010). Many British Muslim converts report that they are

¹ 55% of converts in 2001 were white British according to Brice 2010.
concerned about Islamophobia in everyday life, and that their conversions were met with significant opposition from family and friends (Moosavi 2011; Suleiman 2013).

The majority of converts feel it is their duty to act as a ‘bridge’ between Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain (Brice 2010). This might be a reasonable aspiration for each converts immediate social circle, but does conversion to Islam in Britain have the potential to bridge the gap between Islam and the West in society at large? In the course of this essay I will argue that although converts may influence those close to them, it is unlikely that they will have much effect on society in general. Islamophobia and emic understandings of the conversion process foster the view that one is either British or Muslim, thus impairing mediation. I will argue that Islamophobia works in several ways that directly call the reliability of converts into question, thus obstructing their efforts. What is perceived as their choice to turn their back on the West by embracing Islam takes away much of their power to influence, as their credibility in the eyes of many non-Muslims has diminished.

The British media is full of negative and often alarmist reports about Islam and Muslims, worldwide and at home (Allen 2007). Although there are examples of balanced news stories, the general impression seems to be that the 2.7 million Muslims in Britain represent a threat to British customs and values, and to national security (Allen 2007; 2011 Census; Brice 2010). Islamophobia, or fear of or suspicion of Islam and Muslims, has become widespread in the West particularly in the context of the War on Terror (Field 2007). Islam is seen as the fundamentalist enemy of Western civilisation, as antithetical to democratic values (Shryock 2010). It is not a matter of national racial purity, like anti-Semitism or racism more generally, but of protecting the values and culture of Europe (Bunzl 2005). In the Western imagination, argues Werbner (2005), Islam is everything that opposes Western pluralist society and the democratic ethic. Islam is perceived as an outdated, fundamentalist and aggressive ideology, oppressive of women, homosexuals and unbelievers, and opposed to sexual liberty and the free consumption of goods. In post-modern society the individual is liberated from many of the structural constrains of the past. Islam has become the symbol of the structural constraints the West has at last escaped, and therein lies its threat in the Western imagination (Werbener 2005).
The us/them dichotomy inherent in Islamophobia is illustrated by a certain aspect of media coverage of converts to Islam in Britain. Although converts are of both genders and of various ethnicities, the focus is very often on well-educated, white British women (Suleiman 2013). In a feature on female British converts in The Guardian all interviewees were white, except for one, who was Anglo-Indian (Mistiaen 2013). African-Caribbean converts, who make up one of the largest groups of converts to Islam in Britain, are barely ever mentioned (Suleiman 2013). This is arguably because African-Caribbeans are already seen as ‘other’ to the white majority; they have not gone from being one of ‘us’ to being Muslim ‘other’. They thus do not represent as large a threat to British values as do white British converts.

Given this focus on the opposition between the West and Islam it is difficult for converts to be accepted as both British and Muslim, both by the white British majority and by lifelong Muslims. Such acceptance is invaluable if converts wish to promote greater understanding between the groups, as the claim of one of ‘us’ will be trusted more than that of an outsider. Converts go from being one of the British majority, form being one of ‘us’, to potentially being ‘other’ in the eyes of both Britons and Muslims; they become a minority within a minority (Brice 2010; Moosavi 2012).

The Islamophobic assumption that there is no potential for mediation between ‘us’ (Britain) and ‘them’ (Islam) is reinforced by the way conversion is perceived, both by white Britons and Muslims. As has been pointed out by several anthropologists, the understanding of religious conversion as change ‘from and to’, implying a break with the previous tradition, is highly culturally contingent, and a product of Christian culture (Anderson 2003). We can thus assume that whilst conversion to Islam in Britain is actually a more syncretic process, observers understand it as a complete shift in religious belief, and to a great extent as a shift in identity. This is the case both for the non-Muslim majority and the Muslim minority, as Christianity and Islam share the same monotheistic paradigm.

Muslim converts meet conflicting expectations from their non-Muslim friends, family and society at large, and from the lifelong Muslim community with which they try to associate.Whilst non-Muslims expect them to be as British or Western as possible, and are often very shocked and aggrieved to hear about the conversion, heritage Muslims often expect them to adhere to their cultural norms as well as to Koranic Islam (Moosavi 2012; 2011). These conflicting expectations can be taken as
an example of Islamophobia, in that non-Muslims see the conversion of their friend or family member as a shift in not just faith, but as a shift into ‘dangerous other’. It could also be taken as an example of how both groups view the conversion process as a complete move from one faith and identity to another. Most converts, despite the stereotypes inherent in Islamophobia and society’s conception of conversion, feel that they are at the same time British and Muslim (Brice 2010). Yet everyone else tends to wan to put them into just one category.

Acting as mediator between Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain is made difficult not only by Islamophobia and how conversion is seen as a nigh-complete shift in belief and identity, but also by how converts are seen and portrayed. Their decision to embrace Islam often renders them unreliable in the eyes of the white British majority, thus their attempts to bridge the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims can easily be disregarded. The media and the general public can discredit the decisions of British converts to embrace Islam in three ways: firstly by associating converts with radical Islam and terrorism, secondly by labelling female converts ‘backward’ for willingly embracing a religion which oppresses women, and thirdly by claiming that most converts embrace Islam in order to marry a Muslim and that their decision is thus not a rational preference for the religion. These will now be explored in order.

As mentioned in the introduction, the media frequently portrays British converts to Islam as even more of a threat to national security than lifelong Muslims (Brice 2010). Because of the actions of a few individuals, such as 7/7 bomber Germaine Lindsey and his wife ‘the White Widow’ Samantha Lewthwaite, Muslim converts in general have become associated with radicalisation. The headline ‘The Islamification of Britain: record numbers embrace Muslim faith’, gives an alarmist start to an otherwise fairly balanced article in the Independent, somehow implying that the rising number of British converts to Islam is a cause for concern (Taylor and Morrison 2011). The article in the Daily Mail entitled ‘Pair of Islamic converts joined ‘Muslim patrol’ to impose Sharia Law in London confiscated alcohol and threatened to stab non-believers’ is an example of how converts are portrayed in a more thoroughly negative way (Webb 2013).

Converts may be prone to radicalisation due to the difficulty of the conversion process and the struggle to have their new identity accepted by both non-Muslims
and Muslims, claims Moosavi (2013). But the large majority of converts are law-abiding citizens, and prefer a more liberal form of Islam (Brice 2010; Köse 1996). One might argue that there is a greater focus on converts radicalisation as opposed to lifelong Muslims because, in the British imagination, it is somehow worse when a white Briton becomes an Islamic fundamentalist than when a lifelong Muslim develops in the same direction. The lifelong Muslim is already ‘other’, whereas the Briton made a move from being one of ‘us’ to being a ‘dangerous other’ (Suleiman 2013).

An important feature of Islamophobia is generalisation (Shryock 2010). All or most Muslims are associated with ‘outdated’ and ‘backward’ values, and with the extremist opinions and actions of certain groups and individuals. When this logic is extended to include Muslim converts, and they are all associated with individuals such as Lindsey, they are effectively discredited, rendered unreliable. Many Westerners find it hard to find any reason in fundamentalism, thus they might conclude that Muslim extremists must be insane or brainwashed. By extension, there would be no rational or valid reason behind embracing Islam.

The same conclusion arises from the two subsequent themes in the perception of Muslim converts. These are not concerned with radicalisation as security threat, but rather with the protection of Western values. Several media articles seem to seek an answer to the question ‘why would anyone want to convert to Islam?’, implying that such a choice is incomprehensible to non-Muslims (Mistiaen 2013; Taylor and Morrison 2011; Brice 2010). These often take the form of interviews with converts. They are also, curiously, concerned mostly with women, as illustrated by an article on female converts in the Guardian (Mistiaen 2013). This is arguably because women particularly challenge our mental taxonomies regarding modernity and tradition: “Why would a liberated Western woman embrace a backwards faith that oppresses her?” (Suleiman 2013, 1). One comment on the online version of the Guardian article calls female converts “traitors to reason”, and another claims “history is full of people who have collaborated in their own oppression”. Many non-Muslims seem to naturally arrive at the conclusion that that these women are choosing oppression and rejecting feminism; it can hardly be a rational choice, despite the fact that the women interviewed all explain their motivation in terms of a personal religious discovery.
This brings us to the third point. British converts to Islam are of all ages, of both genders, and of different ethnic groups. Converts surveyed by various scholars all seem to claim to have converted because of personal conviction that there is no god but Allah (Köse 1996; Brice 2010; Suleiman 2013). This goes against the popular belief that British converts, particularly women, convert in order to marry a Muslim. This has not been found to be the predominant reason: 55% of converts surveyed by Brice (2010, 18) were married to a Muslim, but that also means that 45% conversions were independent of any wish to marry a Muslim. In the cases where the convert did marry a lifelong Muslim, they do not claim to have converted because of it. As the convert Denise explained, her conversion was independent of her boyfriend being Muslim: “A lot of people ask whether I converted because of him but actually he had nothing to do with it. I was interested in his faith but I went on my own journey to discover more about religion” (Taylor and Morrison 2011).

The fact that many converts are married to a Muslim could be explained in terms of the person providing exposure to the faith. Indeed, many converts have claimed that they were impressed by the conduct of Muslim friends and acquaintances, and that this was an important reason why they began to look into the religion. Several seem to have thought Islam the best and most meaningful alternative to the ‘hedonistic’ and meaningless lifestyle of many non-Muslims around them (Taylor and Morrison 2011). Conversion is prompted by personal interaction is furthermore a reasonable assumption as the way Islam is presented in the media and non-Muslim society in general is not likely to entice an individual to consider conversion, although any kind of publicity could be claimed to be good publicity (Brice 2010).

It is likely that initial interest in Islam is to a large extent triggered by personal interaction with Muslims. This includes friends and colleagues, and is not limited to potential spouses. Yet the general public opinion seems to be that women convert to Islam either because their partner or in-laws forced them, or because they were blinded to the true nature of Islam by love. This might be illustrated by the following comments to the online version of the Guardian article on female converts:

“I wonder how many of these people converted because they were ordered to do so by their husbands as a condition of marriage.”
“I think this less to do with religious values than it is to do with falling in love.”

“If 5,000 convert, how many de-convert? Once marriages breakdown how many remain in the faith?”

Thinking conversion either the result of compulsion or blind love trivialises and discredits the decision to convert. It becomes less of an act of treason to British culture, but this depiction also robs the convert of agency in the eyes of others.

Converts to Islam in Britain are a minority within a minority. They are doubly marginalised, thus losing much of the ability to bridge the gap between the West and Islam they might otherwise have had. They have in common with many second-generation immigrants that they feel at the same time both British and Muslim. Neither group has a strong position within British society. In the case of for instance second-generation Pakistanis this might be as much related to colonial legacy as it is to Islamophobia. Both groups are however too marginalised and too small to seriously challenge, on societal level, the suspicion of Islam that dominates public discourse.

It has been show that converts’ friends and family become more positive to Islam over time (Brice 2010). Yet converts to Islam only represent 0.2% of the British population. They are a small group, and a marginalised group. In order to influence public perception of the opposition between the West and Islam converts would need to be seen as primarily British, and thus as defenders of liberty and reason. The general view of religious conversion as an absolute move ‘from and to’ will generally not allow for this however. Given the way Muslim converts are frequently presented as untrustworthy by the media and public discourse, it is unlikely that Muslim converts can singlehandedly put an end to Islamophobic sentiments in Britain.
Reference list


