



ISLAM: CONVERSION

A guide to the process of converting to Islam, why some people choose to convert, what they experience – good and bad – and whether they are likely to become extremists.



“ Conversion to Islam is the process whereby a non-Muslim takes on a new religious identity, adopts new beliefs and practices, learns to live as a Muslim and gradually becomes accepted as one by others. ”

KEY POINTS

- A convert testifies three times that there is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger, normally in front of witnesses.
- However, the conversion process is best seen as a journey and not a single event.
- In European countries, converts generally make up between one and five per cent of the Muslim population, but in the United States the figure rises to nearly twenty-five per cent.
- Many different types of people convert to Islam in the West, with most converts being in their twenties.
- Individuals are motivated to convert for many reasons: some relate to personal transformation and identity, others to external social and political factors. Theological explanations are often given, and many converts consider themselves destined or called by God to turn to Islam.
- Conversion involves learning, not just the tenets and practices of Islam, but also about how to live as a Muslim.
- The conversion process may include stages of zealotry, disappointment, acceptance and secularisation.
- Like other Muslims, converts experience Islamophobia. But they may also be criticised by other Muslims for not being Muslim enough or for not adopting cultural as well as religious practices.
- Conversion and radicalisation are not the same. The vast majority of converts to Islam in the West are not radicalised into Islamist extremism.
- However, among Muslims convicted of terrorism offences or identified as foreign fighters in the US and UK, converts are overrepresented.

WHAT IS CONVERSION TO ISLAM?

'Conversion' generally refers to the process whereby a person adopts a new religious identity or ideological position. It involves a change of heart and mind, and is social as well as individual. It may well lead to someone taking on new behaviours and beliefs, and mixing with different people. This will have consequences for how that person is seen by others, particularly family members, friends and workmates. The idea of converting or 'turning' from one way of life – often focused on material ends – to another more moral or spiritual path is central.

everything from scratch, a process that will involve exchanging some past behaviours, beliefs and relationships for new ones. In order to distinguish the two, it is not uncommon to refer to newcomers as converts and born-Muslims as reverts.

Converts, whatever their new religion or ideology, are generally people who have made a conscious personal decision to change, although some of their family members and friends may believe they have been coerced. In the early centuries of Islam,

First, conversion was a simple and straightforward process with no official registration, the pronouncement of the *shahadah* (testifying that there is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger, normally in front of two witnesses) being the sole formal requirement.

Second, where intermarriage between Muslim and non-Muslim occurred, the children would be brought up as Muslims; and third, conversion to Islam was considered a one-way process, as leaving Islam had serious civil and legal consequences.

(Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*, p.32)

A common metaphor for this process is the 'journey', with converts frequently narrating or writing their conversion journeys as a way of explaining their actions and encouraging others to follow their lead.

Islam does not formally recognise the idea of conversion, but focuses instead on the concepts of submission (*aslama*) and reversion. According to Islamic teaching, all people are born Muslim: as such, it is not possible for someone to 'convert' to Islam, but is instead a question of 'reverting' to one's true identity and submitting fully to Allah. Nevertheless, the experience of reversion is not the same for those who are new to Islam as it is for those who grew up in Muslim families, and who return to Islam after having lapsed. Returners have prior knowledge and experience on which to build, as well as family and community ties. But newcomers must learn

however, conversion was often a collective rather than individual process. Following defeat in war, opponents were given a choice to submit to Islam or, as non-Muslims, to pay a tax (*jizyah*). The territorial expansion of Islam led to new populations, over time, becoming Islamized. There were economic, political and social benefits to conversion, and it was in many ways easier than remaining a non-Muslim minority.

These factors still hold for new Muslims today, despite differences in time and context, and the contemporary focus on individual conversion. The process of repeating the *shahadah* three times is essential, and often takes place publicly, in a mosque in front of other Muslims. However, the testimonies of converts show that this is part of a longer process of religious learning, socialization and relationship negotiation.

WHO CONVERTS?

A MINORITY WITHIN A MINORITY

Conversion to Islam is a global phenomenon, but the focus here is on those who convert in the West, where Islam is a minority religion. Western converts form a minority within a minority, and experience multiple forms of disadvantage and discrimination.

There are differences of race, class and gender among converts. Furthermore, the minority Muslim populations they become part of include a variety of ethnic and sectarian groups, some formed of recent migrants and others with longer histories of settlement.

All of these factors impact upon the opportunities, resources and obstacles experienced by converts, and on how they are seen by others – both Muslim and non-Muslim. White and black converts report different experiences, as do women and men. And minority ethnic communities – with origins in South Asia, Africa or the Middle East – have their own perspectives on the new Muslims in their midst. Every community favours different sects and cultural expressions of Islam – from styles of dress and cuisine, to attitudes to women and how children should be raised. Converts are often judged accordingly.

Even if they have had a religious upbringing, converts in the West engage with Islam in a secular context where religion is generally understood to be a matter of personal choice and just one aspect of an individual's identity. The impact of secularist beliefs and values varies in different Western countries, as do attitudes to Islam and Muslims in politics and the press; faith is often seen as a minority matter of decreasing relevance. Converts may be represented as brainwashed, Muslim women as oppressed, Islam as backward and homophobic.

Data on religious identity differs country by country and, even in those which collect such data as part of regular censuses or surveys, information about conversion is sparse or absent entirely. The number of Muslim converts has to be extrapolated from a variety of diverse sources. What research there is suggests that, in most European countries, converts constitute between one and five per cent of the Muslim population, whereas they represent nearly a quarter of Muslims in the United States. One estimate for the UK suggests up to 100,000 Muslim converts; in the US, converts are said to number over 550,000.

Many converts are aged between 20 and 30, with most studies showing they include more women than men. They are from a variety of religious backgrounds and none, representing a broadly normal cross-section of the population country by country. White people from different social classes convert, as do black Africans and African-Caribbeans – often from Christian backgrounds. A minority of Hindus and Sikhs of South Asian heritage also turn to Islam.

Within Islamist extremist and terrorist circles, converts appear to be overrepresented. One study concluded that, in those countries for which data was available, converts represented a higher percentage among Muslims involved in Islamist violence and fighting abroad than they did among the general Muslim population. Another study compared converts and born-Muslims involved in Islamist terrorism, and found that, in the US since 9/11, converts constituted a 'jihadi underclass'. They were less well educated than born-Muslims, and more likely to be unemployed, to have a criminal record and to have a history of mental health problems. These factors were less pronounced in a similar UK sample.

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CONVERTS, EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION

Conversion and radicalisation are not the same thing. Conversion to Islam is the process whereby a non-Muslim takes on a new religious identity, adopts new beliefs and practices, learns to live as a Muslim and gradually becomes accepted as one by others. Radicalisation involves an individual becoming increasingly exposed to and drawn into extremist beliefs and behaviours, in some cases to the point where they are willing to commit acts of violence or to support others in doing so. A minority of converts to Islam are radicalised or become involved in extremist movements. And a still smaller number go on to participate in acts of terrorism, though when they do so they attract a great deal of media attention.

Just like born-Muslims, converts can be found in both Sunni and Shi'a Islam, and in a variety of sects and movements – from Sufi to Salafi, and Deobandi to Ahmaddiya – with many preferring to say they are 'just Muslim'. There is no evidence that new Muslims end up more ideologically extremist than those who are born into Islam, though many converts are zealous to begin with. The minority who are radicalised into violent extremism are generally no more socially, economically or racially disadvantaged than those who are not. Deprivation may play a part, but it does not sufficiently explain radicalisation.

Some experts suggest that social isolation may be a factor in converts' attraction to extremist movements. They often face misunderstanding and discrimination

from friends and relatives as well as from the media and a wider public. Moreover, despite their

expectations, they are not always welcomed by Muslim communities, and often remain outsiders. For some, loneliness and lack of support may leave them vulnerable to extremist groups eager to recruit new members. As research on minority

religions has shown, those who feel marginalised may well be attracted by the offer of friendship and of membership in a tight-knit group with strong leaders who oppose wider society and its values. Despite this, the majority of converts to Islam are not drawn into Islamist extremism.

Public concern has been expressed that prisons are conducive to both conversion and radicalisation. As yet there is no firm evidence that those who convert whilst in prison are more open to radicalisation than other converts. However, it is recognised that social and emotional vulnerability, the availability of extremist literature and presence of other radicalised prisoners, and insufficient professional intervention may all contribute to offender radicalisation.

Those who convert in prison are often positive about how Islam has helped them make the move away from crime. Nevertheless, they also report that being both a convert and an ex-offender is a double stigma. Help with rehabilitation is a challenge for faith communities, and those who convert inside find it difficult to be accepted on release.

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WHY CONVERT?

The reasons why people convert to Islam vary. In the past, in Muslim-majority countries, social status, economic gain and access to power were often important drivers. In the West today, where Islam is predominantly a religion of migrant minorities and is perceived to be linked with terrorism and conflict, the reasons differ.

For any individual, some motivations are intrinsic or personal to them, whilst others are extrinsic or external. Theological reasons are also offered. Many converts have a sense of being destined to become Muslims.

In one research study, three Dutch women from different backgrounds – one Catholic, one non-religious and a third from an anti-religious left-wing family – offered different reasons for becoming Muslims. One experienced several personal crises, with her mother dying and a period of addiction and depression. She met and married a Muslim, became

part of his family, after which it seemed natural to convert. She valued the healthy lifestyle offered by Islam. For the second woman, Islam – which she too came to through marriage – offered stability and discipline after a restrictive first marriage and a period of risky behaviour. For the third, conversion was a radical break and act of personal rebellion, but was backed up by study and the gradual conviction that Islam was a logical and scientific religion.

Like these women, most of those who convert are compelled by multiple motivations. These are linked together as the individual develops a satisfying narrative of why he or she converted, which may change over time. Ex-converts, for example, may initially have felt it was their destiny to become Muslims and may have taken pleasure in their new identity and disciplined life-style, only to reject it later and to describe themselves as naïve, duped, or just not ready to take such a step.

TYPE OF REASON	EXAMPLES OF REASONS GIVEN FOR CONVERSION
Intrinsic reasons	<p>The belief that Islam:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhances one’s sense of identity • Provides one with a moral community and a sense of belonging • Offers greater certainty about how life should be ordered and what will happen after death • Promotes clear gender roles • Is personally empowering • Helps people to free themselves from dependency or problematic relationships.
Extrinsic reasons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouragement or pressure to become a Muslim on marriage • Political grievances (e.g. about how Muslims are treated in other or how Western society is becoming increasingly corrupt) • The impact of friends • Marginalisation by another religious group
Theological reasons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Islamic tenet that there is only one God • The centrality of the Qur’an • The focus on purity and piety • The regular discipline of prayer and fasting
Destiny-related reasons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It was meant to be.” • “It just felt right.” • “It was part of God’s plan.” • “God willed it.”

LEARNING ISLAM

Serious converts report that it is not simply a question of being a Muslim because one performs the prayers, wears appropriate clothes, keeps the fast and reads the Qur'an. Rather they see themselves as on a journey towards becoming a Muslim, through their gradual internalisation of the tenets and practices, and through other people's recognition of them as Muslim.

An important part of this process is learning about Islam and how to be a Muslim, only part of which occurs before a person publicly recites the *shahadah*. Much of the initial study is done individually, as someone absorbs the Qur'an, books about Islam and online resources, and perhaps watches the everyday Islamic practices of friends and family members.

Some learning may be done with a teacher or mentor, or in a small group at a mosque, home or community centre. Opportunities for group learning vary according to a convert's location and network. For those who marry a Muslim, the wider family is

likely to become their learning environment. These converts will pick up their families' cultural as well as religious norms and practices. Those individuals who convert without the benefit of a local Muslim community may do most of their learning privately and online, whilst those in urban locations with active Muslim communities, mosques and organisations may be able to join classes for new Muslims.

In general, this adult learning process is very different to that experienced by children born into Muslim families who are socialised into Islam by their parents and other family members, and taught to recite the Qur'an by a local teacher or at a nearby madrasah or mosque school. It is a self-conscious process of personal transformation. Some commit to it over many years, recognising the difficulties as well as the rewards; others have an initial period of enthusiasm and are then discouraged by the hard work necessary or by other aspects of trying to live as a Muslim.

LESSONS IN BECOMING A MUSLIM

A model of the learning process was developed by researchers who observed and talked to people in classes for new members run by American Da'wah, a Sunni

Muslim organisation catering chiefly for converts, and by an American evangelical church. They identified three important themes for adult convert learning.

THEME	LESSON CONTENT	LEARNING METAPHORS & METHODS
Time	Conversion was presented as a long-term process; faith, commitment and submission were all seen as important.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversion was explained as "a marathon not a sprint" • "Pace yourselves!"
Belonging	Conversion was presented as communal; collective prayers, mosque attendance, community participation were all stressed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reciting together • Learning religious greetings and vocabulary • Mastering the "do's and don'ts" of being a Muslim
Bodily practice	Teachers spent more time on practices than beliefs, but stressed that they are mutually reinforcing. Homework was devised to turn new practices into routines.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning "to walk the walk" • Positive feedback loops of practice and belief • Learning ritual practices through observation and repetition

From Galonnier and de los Rios, Teaching and Learning to be Religious.

BEING A NEW MUSLIM: THE STAGES

An individual may pass through several stages both before and after conversion. One well known model includes seven stages:

1. Context
2. Crisis
3. Quest
4. Encounter
5. Interaction
6. Commitment
7. Consequences

This is a period of personal and social transformation, sometimes referred to as a 'conversion career'.

One study of western converts to Islam identified four typical post-conversion stages. The first is a period of enthusiasm or 'zealotry', in which new converts fully take on-board the new lifestyle and worldview, commit themselves to Islam and the global Muslim community or ummah, and defend both against criticism. This stage is understood by converts as turning away from the old life (often seen as corrupt, flawed or empty) to the new one with all its novel beliefs, practices and values. Old friends and family may be rejected for new relationships. It is a highly emotional period of separation and quest, and is also referred to as 'falling in love' with all things Islamic.

This may well be the phase in which new Muslims are most likely to be attracted to more extreme versions of Islam. As converts they are as yet relatively uneducated in Islamic theology and practice, and unaware of the types of Islam on offer, or the differences between them. Converts are often negative about what they are leaving and are predisposed to be positive towards whatever is warmly offered to them, without the necessary experience to be discerning. For some, the reassurance and certainty offered by Salafism, and its offer of a 'pure' and 'authentic' form of Islam may be especially attractive.

Most converts move on from this to a short second stage of 'disappointment', in which they experience despondency about their own progress and the difficulties of fulfilling all the new requirements. They tend to be critical of other Muslims, whom they perceive as failing to live up to the ideals of Islam. Being able to share experiences with others is important at this time; some converts may simply drift away.

Moving on from this stage to the next – 'acceptance' – is important, and represents a degree of maturity and a more proactive phase less focused on the expectations of others. It involves accepting other Muslims for what they are and taking responsibility for one's own learning and self-discipline. This is also a time when converts try to find a way of being a good Muslim within their own social and cultural context. It is a period of 'coming back to oneself' without rejecting the new identity and lifestyle. Some may experiment or move from one type of Islam to another, from Salafism to Sufism or Shi'a Islam, or vice versa.

A fourth stage – of 'secularisation' – may not be experienced by all converts. For those who do go through it, it may well be terminal. It is a gradual process marked by a decline in regular religious practice and a loss of conviction about the truth or efficacy of Islam. Converts at this stage may revert to western norms, in which religion is understood as a private and individual matter, rather than a way of life expressed in public through communal ritual, dress and shared Islamic values. They may start to see themselves as weak or bad Muslims, and Islam as just one of a number of possible religions or worldviews. Their criticism of other Muslims extends to Islam itself.

Some converts may continue in this fourth phase, working out a satisfactory way to be 'secularised Muslims'. Some may return to a more disciplined Islamic path, whilst a few may decide to renounce Islam altogether.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES FACED BY CONVERTS

Many of those who convert report positive experiences relating to self-identity, gender identity, living a healthy, disciplined and stable life, providing a moral context for themselves and their children, and being part of a community. Islam has also helped some move away from self-destructive or criminal behaviours.

For most, the path into Islam turns out to be more difficult and lengthy than they expected. Converts report being shunned or misunderstood by family and friends. Women converts are at times abused in public. And problems may also come from other Muslims, who expect converts to conform to higher standards and to cultural as well as Islamic norms

and practices. Many newcomers experience the double disadvantage of Islamophobia and a lack of acceptance by other Muslims. They may be accused of not being Muslim enough, or of not being the right kind of Muslim. Even after many years, it can be hard to shake of the status of being a convert.

Estimates vary widely on how many new Muslims leave Islam in the years following conversion. Some leave Muslim partners or withdraw quietly from Muslim communities. A number of these continue to practise and read the Qur'an privately. They remain Muslim to themselves, though others may denounce them as 'apostates' who have actively rejected Islam.

IN THE WORDS OF BRITISH MUSLIM CONVERTS

THE JOURNEY

"We are on a journey to become true believers."

"It should be easy to come to Islam and hard to leave, but it's actually the other way round."

BEING A MUSLIM

"The easy thing when you are on this journey is to adopt the costume ... Is the hijab wearing you or are you wearing the hijab?"

"More Muslim than the Muslims."

LEARNING ISLAM

"If scholars are saying something and my heart is screaming out this cannot be so, I trust my heart first and then with my head I research ... Treat scholars like plumbers, ask for three quotes (fatwas)."

"I'm so sorry to say this, but we have to be realistic: backward mullahs and strict sects have a lot more to offer their young followers than we do."

"You need to be able to see in another what it is you want to become."

HOW OTHERS SEE YOU

"We are – all too often – seen as freaks who have made an incomprehensible choice that

might be explained away as eccentricity."

"We have stepped away from what was expected of us."

HOW OTHER MUSLIMS SEE YOU

"'She's English, she does it funny' ... I have been Muslim longer than some of the kids in the youth centre have been alive, and they still think that because I am White my experience of Islam is deficient to theirs."

"Now you're Muslim, you have to eat curry."

"Yet a born Muslim who 'eats pork or smokes a spliff' was still considered a Muslim ... A convert who did the same was an apostate."

CONVERSION IN PRISON

"In prison, Islam attracts all kinds."

"Allah takes people and changes their hearts; you see people you would never have expected to embrace Islam convert."

"Islam taught me how to be a citizen ... enabled me to desist from crime and learn to value others."

From Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Female Perspectives (Suleiman 2013) and Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Male Perspectives (Suleiman 2015).

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