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Bonne Martinot and Mehmet Ozalp

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CONVERSION TO ISLAM: REVIEW OF RESEARCH CONDUCTED BETWEEN 2000-2020 ON WESTERN AND AUSTRALIAN CONVERTS TO ISLAM

Bonne Martinot* and Mehmet Ozalp**

Abstract: This article is a systematic literature review of research conducted in the last two decades (2000-2020) on conversion and converts to Islam in Western societies and Australia. The review highlights findings of this body of literature in six key points: there are important nuances of difference of conversions to Islam from country to country; conversion to Islam is a gradual process; converts to Islam do not entirely replace their existing identity with an Islamic one; converts are alienated by their friends and family leading to deep loneliness and isolation; converts to Islam feel denied meaningful roles in the Muslim community; and converts to Islam experience a subtle form of Islamophobia. These findings and insights at the same time reveal gaps in knowledge and offer a roadmap in charting new research. This review highlights six important areas of research and gaps in knowledge: research needs to include equally men and women converts; interplay between Islam influencing converts' identity and converts influencing the way Islam is understood in Western societies; the lack of Muslim converts' voice in research involving Muslims in the west; no study investigates how converts successfully integrate within their respective Muslim community; the theory of conversion to Islam is not fully developed; and research on Aboriginal converts to Islam needs to be investigated without the constraints of a security lens.

Keywords: *Muslim converts, conversion to Islam, converts to Islam, reverts, Australian converts to Islam, Aboriginal Muslims*

INTRODUCTION

In Australian society, Muslims are traditionally presented as the immigrant other or foreign outsider. Despite having a presence in Australia for more than a century through trade and migration, political and public Australian discourses view Islam as a faith incompatible with Australian values and Muslims, even if they are citizens, as foreign and unassimilable. This

* Bonne Martinot is a research officer in Islamic studies. She is a graduate of the Master of Islamic Studies from Charles Sturt University.

** Mehmet Ozalp is an associate professor of Islamic studies. He is the director of the Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation at Charles Sturt University. He is an executive member of Public and Contextual Theology, a research centre at Charles Sturt University.

is an extension of the general Orientalist framework found in Western discourse and partly relates to the origins and development of the Australian identity.

Despite this representation, Australian census statistics show a steady growth of Islam in Australia.¹ Notwithstanding the fact a large portion of the growth of Islam is by birth, significant numbers of Australians have also converted due to exposure to Islam and Muslims through social interactions and relations.

While born Muslims face the challenge of mastering society's double-edged sword of proving their 'Australianness,' Australians converting to Islam also face major challenges. An investigation into the experience of Australian converts to Islam is needed, as is research exploring the challenges they face as they navigate their new identity while remaining distinctly Australian.

Such focus also correlates to the emergence of a Western Muslim identity, and in it, Western-born converts to Islam are forming a distinct community within a community. Despite the need for new research, little data exists about the challenges faced by Australian-born converts to Islam. A study is essential as Muslims have a different hierarchy of needs depending on their background and cultural circumstances, which ultimately intertwine with their location.

This article conducts a systematic review of academic research and literature available on converts to Islam in Western societies pre- and post-9/11, as well as Australia-based research. Academic research on conversion to Islam began with an attempt to determine factors for conversion and in doing so it challenged the traditionally defined conversion theories developed from studies involving conversion to Christianity. The research focus in recent years has shifted from reasons for why conversion happens to how it happens, with specific attention given to how converts experience their lives post-conversion.² Minor studies have focused on Australian converts to Islam but none have explored the challenges faced by them in-depth. Research generally focuses on set locations, genders, ancestry or is based on years-old data. Much of the current literature documenting the experiences of Western converts to Islam has been conducted in the UK, Europe and North America, and focuses heavily on the construction of identity, nationalism and belonging.

EARLY RESEARCH INTO CONVERSION TO ISLAM

Ali Kose's notable pioneering research *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (1996) is still referenced in many academic publications today.³ The study's aim was to determine the nature of conversion to Islam and describe the processes and

1 "Census Data Reveals 'No Religion' is Rising Fast," Australian Bureau of Statistics, Media release 074/2017 <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mediareleasesbyReleaseDate/7E65A144540551D7CA258148000E2B85>

2 Oishee Alam, "Islam is a Blackfella Religion, Whatchya Trying to Prove?" Race in the Lives of White Muslim Converts in Australia," *La Trobe Journal* 89 (2012): 125, <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/La-Trobe-Journal-89-Oishee-Alam.pdf>.

3 Ali Kose, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1996).

predispositions that make conversion possible. Participants were asked about a range of topics including childhood and adolescence, pre-conversion period and conversion process, the consequences of conversion as well as questions on identity change. Notably, Kose identified that models and methods used in previous research that applied to Christian conversion may not be applicable to those who convert to Islam. In addition, he highlighted that conversion is a complex multifaceted experience and may involve a gradual process over time.

One year prior, American academic Carol Anway published *Daughters of Another Path* (1995), triggered by her daughter's conversion to Islam and a desire to know more about other convert women to Islam and help other families coping with implications of conversion.⁴ Her book contains chapters of her findings with excerpts from her participants' responses. She provides an insight of a non-Muslim parent by chronologically outlining her reactions to her daughter's conversion journey. With this family focus, Anway strives to emphasise that people need to decide how to handle their feelings and how it will affect oneself and ultimately their loved ones. Anway acknowledges the convert often strives to reconcile with the family alone; however, the situation requires mutual time and effort. While Anway points out participants reported an improvement in family relationships, despite inevitable frictions and issues, these are always subjective assessments. Anway's research was later featured as a chapter in *Muslims on the Americanization Path?*⁵

RESEARCH AND LITERATURE POST 2000

The early 2000s saw two notable works from the UK and Europe including Anne Sofie Roald's *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts* (2004).⁶ Roald insinuates the experience of conversion does not differ from country to country, such as Europe to the US or Australia. She also suggests there would be a similarity of experience between converts and second generation Muslim immigrations in the way their interaction between the Muslim community and wider society overlaps. Like Kose, Roald echoes that traditional methods of understanding conversion, such as Lewis Rambo's stages of conversion⁷ would be more applicable to Christians. Roald identifies that Islam and Muslims are not static, although they may be perceived to be, and culture plays a part in how Islamic expression is shaped. As time passes and converts increase their Islamic knowledge, they remain products of their Scandinavian socialisation. The conversion journey is an ongoing process; ultimately, a Scandinavian Muslim identity will emerge.

Karin van Nieuwkerk's *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* (2006) is the outcome of a conference in 2003, with the two main topics based around

4 Carol L. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path: Experiences of American Women Choosing Islam* (Lee's Summit: Yana Publications, 1995).

5 Carol L. Anway, "American Women Choosing Islam," in *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

6 Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

7 Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

conversion process and women converts.⁸ Nieuwkerk points out that female conversion to Islam creates severe tension because gender has been pivotal in the construction of otherness between Islam and the West, yet there is a need to investigate why women are attracted to Islam. Nieuwkerk mentions that converts to Islam play an important role in society and often function as cultural mediators between communities, as well as being engaged in developing Islamic discourses,⁹ and these observations reflect those made by Roald.

In the same year, Anna Mansson McGinty's *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversion to Islam* (2006) approaches Islamic identity formation in a convert to Islam from cognitive and cultural phenomenon perspectives through an anthropological lens.¹⁰ McGinty interviews women from Sweden and the United States, and her findings demonstrate that the conversion experience differs based on country of origin, countering Roald's contention that it is a universal experience. In addition, McGinty identifies an ongoing process of meaning making, and those meanings are shifting and transitional. Islam becomes meaningful through cognitive recognition and that cognitive framework is not necessarily totally replaced by a new one; rather, it is an exploration of something unknown.¹¹ As McGinty focuses on the female gender, like Nieuwkerk, she notes the dichotomy between West and Islam, us and them, as well as the scepticism of how a Western woman could and for that matter should convert to Islam. McGinty's findings reflect that converts take a slow, gradual transformation that includes personal research and trying to navigate a new and different worldview.

Kate Zebiri's *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (2007) appears numerous times throughout research conducted since 2007.¹² Zebiri's aim was to identify important trends within converts with two central themes: identity change and converts as critics of Western society.¹³ Zebiri identifies that participants have to overcome challenges with their loved ones as well as from the Muslim community. Zebiri also aligns with other researchers' findings in that converts take time and research before deciding to convert to Islam and people develop and mature in their journey as a Muslim. The study found converts can act as mediators between Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

Patrick D. Bowen's *Conversion to Islam in the United States: A Case Study in Denver, Colorado* (2009) was undertaken in an American context.¹⁴ Bowen echoes McGinty that the environment for converts in the US differs from Europe, causing a corresponding difference in the conversion experience based on the historical and socio relationship with religion.

⁸ Karin van Nieuwkerk, ed, *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* (Austin: University of Texas Press 2006).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ Anna Mansson McGinty, *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversion to Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 181-182.

¹² Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2007).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁴ Patrick D. Bowen, "Conversion to Islam in the United States: A Case Study in Denver, Colorado," *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 1, no.1 (2009), <http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjjournal/vol1/iss1/4>.

However, he uses Rambo's *Stages of Conversion* as a theoretical framework to examine the process of conversion while comparing his findings to Anway and Kose. Bowen is critical of research being confined to specific genders or ancestry and noted he ensured there was a diverse range in his study, despite inevitably being limited to location. Bowen identifies several factors that reflect findings from previous research, such as participants having already started or tried Islamic practises and that family situations were difficult to navigate, and also pointed out that conversion sometimes resulted in the breakdown of relationships as well as the end of friendships with non-Muslims.

In the same year, Brian Coleman's (2009) unpublished thesis *Post-Conversion Experiences of African American Male Sunni Muslims: Community Integration and Masculinity in Twenty-First Century Philadelphia* investigated the ways the conversion process impacted social connections and participants' self-perception as men as well as perceived racism or Islamophobia.¹⁵ This work deserves mention as, unlike previous research, it targets a community that has long been marginalised and discriminated against due to race. So, while Bowen's research indicated themes and concerns all converts face, such as family issues and periods of adjustment, Coleman's research introduced a phenomenon of decoupling one's race. It suggested conversion to Islam fostered a feeling wholeness that is a source of strength as, due to their racial identity and ancestry, the participants had long experienced marginalisation in a society that upholds their racial identity as little value.¹⁶ This extra layer is not present in research conducted in Europe. Coleman also identifies that studies need to be ongoing to enable better understanding regarding the complex changes that happen to a convert in their lives.

In addition to spanning research over time to understand the evolution of the conversion process, studies that examine the entire cycle of conversion hold valuable insight. Mona Alyedreessy's *British Muslim Converts: An Investigation of Conversion and de-Conversion processes to and from Islam* (2016) is one such study.¹⁷ By including participants from all religious and cultural backgrounds, Alyedreessy indirectly reveals the extra baggage of converts not explored or mentioned in previous studies. Some converts to Islam prefer to remain in secret until they are psychologically, financially, physically and emotionally able and willing to face the seemingly inevitable difficulties and social implications of conversion. That is, making their decision to convert a conscious and well-thought-out decision. In addition, some choose to come out in stages over a period as they find ways to deal with issues.¹⁸ Another important topic raised was, in eyes of their parents, some converts had committed apostasy by converting to Islam. The conclusion of the research argued it is important for converts to have education and guidance from Western Muslim scholars.

15 Brian L. Coleman, "Post-Conversion Experiences of African-American Male Sunni Muslims: Community Integration and Masculinity in Twenty-First Century Philadelphia," *Publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations* 54 (2009).

16 *Ibid.*, 157.

17 Mona Alyedreessy, "British Converts: An Investigation of Conversion and Deconversion Processes to and from Islam" (PhD diss., Kingston University, 2016).

18 *Ibid.*, 17.

Studies acknowledge that converts make a conscious decision to commit to a religion that requires a comprehensive change in identity, which includes a visible change in behaviour, dress, diet as well as language. Some research with specific focus on female converts demonstrates this as well as shared common themes despite the differences in location and time. Cheryl Mahmoud's *From Shahada to Akhirah: British Female Muslim Reverts* (2014) concludes that women perform their new roles as Muslims through a variety of linguistic and socio-cultural processes.¹⁹

Venessa E. Vroon's *Sisters in Islam. Women's Conversion and the Politics of Belonging: A Dutch Case Study* (2014) found participants need to be flexible towards their non-Muslim families as well as in learning how to practise Islam and incorporate it into their lives.²⁰ Vroon specifically notes that participants avoided theological debates with Muslims and were challenged when attempting to find their way among what they viewed as Muslims' multiple interpretations of Islam.²¹ There is a strong need to have positive contact with other Muslims, as Mahmoud and Vroom reported participants speaking about an overwhelming sense of loneliness. Ramahi and Suleiman's *Intimate Strangers: Perspectives on Female Converts to Islam in Britain* (2017) found that many family members of a female convert maintained selective negative knowledge about Islam and Muslims.²² They determined from their findings that family acceptance was subjective and, with further analysis of participants' contexts, acceptance of the conversion and Islam into their homes was considered forced upon the family members and not of their choice. Further, prolonged indifference to engage with their Muslim family member was often out of wilful disregard and an act of defiance to acknowledge their conversion. Neither study detailed whether converts were able to seek positive and meaningful support from the Muslim community while navigating family challenges or acceptance in their need for flexibility.

Research in Denmark conducted by Janna Hansen and David Herbert (2018) echoed the findings in the UK and Holland: that converts felt they no longer belonged to their families and a sense of estrangement became a permanent part of their identity.²³ Hansen and Herbert explored a different angle that no other study touched – they concluded that social media was an integral part of converts dealing with challenges by modelling their ideal selves online, reflecting they could be both Danish and Muslim. In addition, they reported how participants became hypersensitive to their behaviours, such as stopping smoking in public and smiling more because they felt the need to portray Islam in a positive light in all aspects.

19 Cheryl Mahmoud, "From Shahada to Akhirah: British Female Muslim Reverts" (PhD diss., The University of Sheffield, 2014).

20 V. E. Vroon, "Sisters in Islam. Women's Conversion and the Politics of Belonging: A Dutch Case Study" (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2014).

21 Ibid., 20.

22 D. A Ramahi and Y. Suleiman, "Intimate Strangers: Perspectives on Female Converts to Islam in Britain," *Contemporary Islam* 11, no. 21 (2017), doi: 10.1007/s11562-016-0376-0.

23 David Herbert and Janna Hansen, "You are no Longer my Flesh and Blood: Social Media and the Negotiation of a Hostile Media Frame by Danish Converts to Islam," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 31, no. 1 (2018).

Challenges involving dress come up in later studies. Geraldine Mossiere's *Islamic Dress as Identity Politics Among Converts in the West* (2018) explores how French and Québécois women navigate the application of Islamic dress code and displaying their Islamic identity.²⁴ It is a complex dynamic of trying to adhere to Islamic standards through their own understanding and interpretation of Islam combined with their Western heritage and personal styles. Mossiere points out that women sometimes feel they must negotiate their interpretation to their Muslim-born partners or partner's family, or sometimes they may reproduce commonly held stereotypes about Muslim women and their dress codes. This demonstrates that conversion to Islam requires one to shape relationships and social boundaries through negotiation and adjustment in private and public spheres.

Literature published in the last decade demonstrates that Islamophobia has become a new layer of prejudice in a convert's life. Specifically, Rehielah N. Ali's *Gender, Faith and Locality: Muslim Women in Scotland* (2013) explores participants from all ethnic backgrounds and highlights the ambiguity in law in cases of Islamophobia if the reporting victim was a white Muslim.²⁵ Victims had difficulty being taken seriously when reporting offences to the police. This is reflected in findings in the following section of notable researchers into white converts and observation of how conversion to Islam challenges the notion of Otherness as well as the common understanding of Muslim and white being mutually exclusive.

NOTABLE UK RESEARCHERS

While there are many significant studies and researchers who conducted notable research on Western converts to Islam, two researchers, M.A. Kevin Brice and Leon Moosavi, stand out as significant contributors to the field of study.

Brice is based in the UK and published several academic works spanning almost a decade focused mainly on white British converts to Islam. Despite being limited to one ancestry, his publications note the type of prevalent challenges and issues faced by converts and those that changed over time. *An English Muslim in Search of an Identity* (2008) found the 'white British' convert community is not easily identifiable and it was difficult for converts to participate in studies.²⁶ Many areas and aspects of life, from food and drink to the attitudes of extramarital relations, as well as gambling and bank interest, were subject to conflict. Brice notes that converts felt denied meaningful roles in the Muslim community and were expected to assimilate to the Muslim community's dominant culture. Converts felt they needed to adopt a new appearance, change their name or make an overt statement to not only be visible but

²⁴ Geraldine Mossiere, "Islamic Dress as Identity Politics Among Converts in the West," in *Handbook of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Lives*, ed. M. Woodward and R. Lukens-Bull (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2019), doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-73653-2_75-3.

²⁵ Rehielah Noreen Ali, "Gender, Faith and Locality: Muslim Women in Scotland" (PhD diss., Newcastle University, 2013).

²⁶ M. A. Kevin Brice, "An English Muslim in Search of an Identity," in *Approaches to Englishness: Differences, Diversity and Identities*, ed. C. Hart (Kingswinford: Midrash Publishing, 2008) .

also recognised as a Muslim by both the Muslim community and wider society. In *A Minority within a Minority: A Report on Converts to Islam in the United Kingdom* (2011), Brice examines the way converts are portrayed in the media, lack of support networks for converts, feelings of isolation and rejection by born Muslims and the pressure put on them to comply with cultural norms of born Muslims.²⁷ Most participants felt converts can and should act as a bridge between Muslims and non-Muslims. Finally, *Becoming Muslim, Becoming British, Becoming White: White British Muslims Challenging Received Binaries* (2017) determines in depth what categories white Muslims fall into and statistics representing them.²⁸ Brice stresses, while ‘white’ and ‘Muslim’ are presented as mutually exclusive groups, he makes no attempts to explore the white British Muslim. They are rarely, if ever, mentioned and if so, only briefly to acknowledge their existence.

British academic Leon Moosavi also looked at the lives of white British converts with a specific focus of race and culture. He examined how converts fare being Muslim through several his works, such as *British Muslim Converts Performing ‘Authentic Muslimness’* (2012), *White Privilege in the Lives of Muslim Converts in Britain* (2014) and *The Racialization of Muslim Converts in Britain and their Experience of Islamophobia* (2015).²⁹ While outlining the sociological explanation of performance and acceptance that shapes society in *British Muslim Converts Performing ‘Authentic Muslimness’*, Moosavi points out that even in minor instances, such as using Islamic phrases, converts can face distress or discomfort if they are viewed as inauthentic.³⁰ Muslim converts navigate a resocialisation process, expected to strive to be as authentic as possible by Muslims but in some cases are under expectation by non-Muslims to subdue this – a double-edged sword. Similar to other academic works into converts, Moosavi contends that converts are not passive or coerced to performance in a Muslim identity; rather, their participation is important to their sense of selfhood as a Muslim as essentially converts, like all, are social beings who care about how they are viewed.³¹ Following on from this, in *White Privilege in the Lives of Muslim Converts in Britain* (2014) Moosavi investigates how the whiteness of converts to Islam affects their post-conversion experiences. Moosavi highlights the potential racism faced by converts who are not white as well as the racial complexes systematised in the colonial era, which still inform perceptions of white people as noble and black people as worthless.³² Converts

²⁷ M.A. Kevin Brice, *A Minority within a Minority: A Report on Converts to Islam in the United Kingdom* (UK: Swansea University on behalf of Faith Matters, 2010).

²⁸ M. A. Kevin Brice, “Becoming Muslim, Becoming British, Becoming White: White British Muslims Challenging Received Binaries of West versus Islam and White versus Muslim,” in *Muslims in the UK and Europe*, ed. Paul Anderson and Julian Hargreaves (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2017).

²⁹ Leon Moosavi, “British Muslim Converts Performing Authentic Muslimness,” *Performing Islam* 1, no. 1 (2012); Leon Moosavi, “White Privilege in the Lives of Muslim Converts in Britain,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 11 (2015), doi: 10.1080/01419870.2014.952751; Leon Moosavi, “The Racialization of Muslim Converts in Britain and their Experiences of Islamophobia,” *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2015), doi: 10.1177/0896920513504601.

³⁰ Moosavi, “British Muslim Converts Performing Authentic Muslimness,” 107.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 122, 126.

³² Moosavi, “White Privilege in the Lives of Muslim Converts in Britain,” 4.

suddenly find themselves no longer invisible, but racially visible and begin to feel out of place for being white and Muslim.

In *The Racialization of Muslim Converts in Britain and their Experience of Islamophobia* (2015), Moosavi contributes towards understanding how Islamophobia manifests in the lives of Muslim converts in Britain. Moosavi underscores the need to recognise several layers of Islamophobia, which requires identifying the more common and everyday forms it takes.³³ His research identified some of the consequences of Islamophobia, including low self-esteem, depression, suspicion as well as converts choosing to isolate themselves. This last point is crucial as converts to Islam often feel disconnected and isolated without choosing to take this additional step. Converts to Islam are in a vulnerable position and prone to be more susceptible to subtle Islamophobia, because of their regular interactions with non-Muslims, particularly if their home life is a hostile environment to Islam. Moosavi also identifies that Islamophobia is facilitated by a process of racialising Muslims that is ingrained with societies' understanding, whether conscious or not, that Islam is a non-white religion and Muslims are considered as outsiders or 'the other.' The re-racialisation of a white convert demonstrates this mentality through the inability to comprehend the idea of 'white' Muslims.³⁴

RESEARCH ON AUSTRALIAN CONVERTS TO ISLAM

Research on converts to Islam in Australia only become prominent in the last ten years. There are no studies quantifying the scale of conversion to Islam and almost always voices of Australian Muslim converts are non-existent. Various reports and researches over the years conducted in conjunction with government departments or educational institutes, such as *Understanding Muslim Identities: From Perceived Relative Exclusion to Inclusion* (2008),³⁵ *Muslim Voices: Hope and Aspirations of Muslim Australians* (2009)³⁶ and *Australian Muslims: A Demographic, Social and Economic Profile of Muslims in Australia* (2015)³⁷ do not explore adequate representations of converts to Islam.

Prominent academic material into the conversion to Islam in Australia is notably similar to research conducted elsewhere and hampered by gender, ancestry and location, even if it has an Australian focus. Peta Stephenson's *Islam Dreaming* (2010) included an investigation into the historical relationship between various groups of Muslims through trade and migration and Indigenous peoples, as well as present day converts to Islam.³⁸ Stephenson's

³³ Moosavi, "The Racialization of Muslim Converts in Britain," 53.

³⁴ Ibid., 52, 53.

³⁵ Samina Yasmeen, *Understanding Muslim Identities: From Perceived Relative Exclusion to Inclusion* (Canberra: Office of Multicultural Interests and Dept of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008).

³⁶ Shahram Akbarzadeh, Gary D. Bouma and Rachel Woodlock, *Muslim Voices: Hope and Aspirations of Muslim Australians* (Victoria: Centre for Muslim Minorities and Islam Policy Studies, Monash University, 2009).

³⁷ Riaz Hassan, *Australian Muslims: A demographic, Social and Economic Profile of Muslims in Australia* (Adelaide, South Australia: International Centre for Muslim and Non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia, 2015).

³⁸ Peta Stephenson, *Islam Dreaming: Indigenous Muslims in Australia* (Kensington: NewSouth Publishing 2010).

later articles, *Indigenous Australia's Pilgrimage to Islam* (2011) and *Syncretic Spirituality: Islam in Indigenous Australia* (2013), furthered the discussion on the former and the unique relationship Islam and Indigenous people have.³⁹ Stephenson asserts many people see parallels between Islam and traditional Aboriginal beliefs, and Islam provides spiritual enrichment and for some, it provides a counter to the scars of colonisation and Christianisation of Indigenous people. This, then, demonstrates not only the differing conversion experience between countries, but also for socio-economic groups who have historically been marginalised.

Further exploration of Indigenous converts to Islam highlights a troubling discourse from wider society stating that conversion of Indigenous people leads to extremism. Being Indigenous and Muslim brings together elements of two minority groups resulting in imagery and social exclusion that have traditionally been forced onto the fringe of white Australian society. Indigenous people, like Muslims, have been represented as hostile⁴⁰ and becoming Muslim only exasperates this. Helena Onnudottir, Adam Possamai and Bryan Turner, in *Islam: A religious Vehicle for Aboriginal Self-Empowerment in Australia?* (2010), question whether the pursuit of religion emphasises a quest for equality.⁴¹ Becoming Muslim could emancipate Indigenous people from the local context, allowing them to connect with a global identity.⁴² Onnudottir, Possamai and Turner outline the media's negative depiction of Islam and provide evidence of negative media attention of Indigenous people who converted to Islam. In the same year, David Edward Lawson's thesis, *Indigenous Australians and Islam: Spiritual, Cultural and Political Alliances* (2010), examined Indigenous participants who came into contact with Islam while incarcerated or involved in the criminal justice system.⁴³ Lawson noted a theme revolving around identity, resistance and self-empowerment and a critique of Australian nationalism driven by Indigenous inequality.⁴⁴

Onnudottir, Possamai and Turner with Michael Kennedy in *Australian Aboriginal Muslims in Prison* (2013) focused on questioning media statements that alluded to Indigenous converts being radicalised, highlighting that Indigenous Muslims live under intensified criticism of media and state.⁴⁵ Following this, John Paget's *Aboriginal Conversion to Islam in Prison: A Substantial Security Threat or Another Moral Panic* (2015) also focuses attention on the government and media responses, particularly around the element of 'moral panic' where

³⁹ Peta Stephenson, "Indigenous Australia's Pilgrimage to Islam," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 32, no. 3 (2011), doi: 10.1080/07256868.2011.565737; Peta Stephenson, "Syncretic Spirituality: Islam in Indigenous Australia." *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 24, no. 4 (2013), doi: 10.1080/09596410.2013.816015.

⁴⁰ Stephenson, *Islam Dreaming*, 279.

⁴¹ Helena Onnudottir, Adam Possamai and Bryan Turner, "Islam: A Religious Vehicle for Aboriginal Self-Empowerment in Australia?" *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 1 (2010).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴³ David Edward Lawson, "Indigenous Australians and Islam: Spiritual, Cultural, and Political Alliances" (PhD diss., Queensland University of Technology, 2010).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁴⁵ Helena Onnudottir, Adam Possamai, Bryan Turner and Michael Kennedy, "Australian Aboriginal Muslims in Prison," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 34 no. 3 (2013), doi: 10.1080/07256868.2013.787403.

there is an unjustified fear of the combination of Islam with Indigenousness.⁴⁶ Like previous research, Paget finds no relationship between prison conversion to terrorism and iterates such a commentary is merely opinion, lacking evidence and depth of understanding.⁴⁷ Challenging this discourse further highlights that the conversion experience is different for people, although, as pointed out by Onnudottir, it is simplistic to adopt the argument that oppression automatically results in a new religious identity.⁴⁸

The idea of moral panic and conversion to Islam is not new discourse. A decade earlier, Lentini's article '*Rogue Reverts'? Muslim Converts, Panics and Australian Citizenship* investigated press coverage of two white Australian converts to Islam, David Hicks and Peter Roche, analysing the frequency of words in headlines and articles.⁴⁹ Lentini makes crucial points regarding discourses around conversion, notably the act of converting questions one's loyalty to a country. Becoming a Muslim allows a person to transcend the confines of national borders, to be a part of the global Muslim community, but when drawing on converts' personal history and alleging that converts reject their societies, it can be illustrated the relationship between the convert and broader society is one where active mistrust replaces active trust between citizens.⁵⁰ While Lentini identifies the Australian media did not construct the two converts as moral panics, the article demonstrates that media framing of converts to Islam in association with security concerns can have substantial impacts on how wider society perceives them.⁵¹

Lentini identifies that targets of moral panic are usually marginal or disempowered groups. It, then, comes as no surprise that the wider society maintained a discourse of Indigenous converts to Islam being of a criminal background and questioning a potential for radicalisation, as it maintains a systematic pattern of marginalisation. While it has been pointed out in previous studies that particular countries can affect the experience of conversion to Islam, it is evident that colonial history and institutionalised power structures over marginalised groups also play a role. Subsequent discourse does not seem to afford Indigenous people the acknowledgement that converting to Islam is a rational, cognitive decision made by a person, as much as a spiritual experience and an encounter with God as observed by Stephenson.⁵²

One of the most detailed works on challenges faced by white Australian converts is Oishee Alam's *Facing Race: White Australian Converts to Islam* (2018). Alam analyses the effects of racialisation on white converts in a context where Islam is racialized as non-white and

⁴⁶ John Paget, "Aboriginal Conversions to Islam in Prison: A Substantial Security Threat or Another Moral Panic?" in *Muslim Identity Formation in Religiously Diverse Societies*, ed. Derya Iner and Salih Yucel (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 300.

⁴⁸ Onnudottir, Possamai and Turner, "Islam," 68.

⁴⁹ Pete Lentini, "'Rogue Reverts'? Muslim Converts, Panics and Australian Citizenship," in *Political Islam and Human Security*, ed. Fethi Mansouri and Shahram Akbarzadeh (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006).

⁵⁰ Ibid., 97.

⁵¹ Ibid., 86.

⁵² Stephenson, *Islam Dreaming*, 19.

pitted opposition to Australian nation⁵³. It draws evidence that white converts shift from an invisible racial positioning through their conversion to Islam⁵⁴ as whiteness is not racialized but constructed and lived by white people as a neutral identity.⁵⁵ Alam explores topics such as reflections on cultures and belonging, and reflection on Muslim constructions of converts and the West, as well as the idea of an Australian Islam. As well as seeking to add new insights to the relationship between race and religion, people indicated they felt as if they are in an in-between space of white and Muslim identities and in between two communities, existing in a dual paradigm⁵⁶. It becomes evident now that one's background and ancestry have a role within the convert's experience to Islam.

Research on converts in the Australian context also focuses on gender, such as Karen Turner's *Contracts with Clauses: The Secret Politics of being and becoming Muslim*.⁵⁷ Turner's research identifies that women fall between public and private demands of social categories, requiring them to negotiate this by leading secret lives and sometimes needing a secret or private space to navigate themselves and what is required of their new identity and relations. Turner points out that mosque lessons are pedagogical and prescriptive on categorical definitions of a Muslim woman. Making new rules and regulations can be overwhelming while navigating cultural expressions and reconciling differences in teaching and interpretations. More importantly, conversion highlights the tensions and disjuncture, and the similarities and points of connection, between the convert's former worldview and the newly adopted;⁵⁸ thus, the worldview could provide possible challenges to overcome.

Rachel Woodlock's *Praying Where they Don't Belong: Female Muslim Converts and Access to Mosques in Melbourne* (2010) focuses on women hindered in accessing and enjoying mosques, but also highlights that converts can feel pressured to choose between their 'Australianness' and Muslim identity as if an inherent conflict exists between the two.⁵⁹ It reported that converts may be encouraged to adopt Arabic names, wear Middle Eastern or Asian clothing, and follow non-Australian prescriptions for gender relations under the guise of being 'Islamic' rather than following norms of various cultures.⁶⁰ Like Ali in Scotland, Woodlock also found Muslims are not able to be active in mosques and convert women's needs are specifically ignored.

Ebony King's *Pathways to Allah: Female Conversion to Islam in Australia* (2017) focuses on exploring the beliefs, motivations and experiences of six Australian and New Zealand born

⁵³ Oishee Alam, *Facing Race: White Australian Converts to Islam* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2018), 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁵ Alam, "Islam is a Blackfella Religion," 127.

⁵⁶ Alam, *Facing Race*, 6.

⁵⁷ Karen Turner "Contracts with Clauses: The Secret Politics of Being and Becoming Muslim," in *Challenging Identities*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh, (Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2010).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁵⁹ Rachel Woodlock, "Praying Where they Don't Belong: Female Muslim Converts and Access to Mosques in Melbourne," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30, no. 2 (2010).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 276-277.

women.⁶¹ King notes the perceived incompatibility of Western values and Islam means conversion brings shock and confusion⁶² and points out that prior to conversion, women felt obstacles relating to the social world more so than internal aspects. King draws on the works of Kose, Nieuerk, Turner and Woodlock to demonstrate that conversion to Islam is a process that occurs over time, is dynamic, multifaceted and complex, and differs from person to person according to specific contexts and power relations of the individuals and groups involved.⁶³ King mentions reasons for conversion, such as participants always believing in God or having dissatisfaction in the ‘deficiency’ of Western or secular values,⁶⁴ but also appreciating the teaching and spiritual principles of Islam. King also demonstrates how women take on board their understandings of Islam and apply it to the context of their lives, through a conscious decision-making process based on reasoning and investigation (known as *ijtihad*), although born Muslims argue *ijtihad* can only be performed by qualified scholars.

Notably, much exploration has taken place into conversion for females. Mitchell and Rane identify an uneven focus on gender, thus exploring the experience of Australian male converts in their *Faith, Identity and Ideology: Experiences of Australian Male Converts to Islam* (2018) to obtain a male perspective for a more comprehensive understanding.⁶⁵ Mitchell and Rane found the males were diverse when it came to the specific interpretations of Islam they identified with⁶⁶ as well as constructing individual interpretations, which provides evidence that converts to Islam have a continuous engagement and development of their understandings of Islam post conversion. Mitchell and Rane draw on King’s findings that their participants also go through a process of *ijtihad* as do their female counterparts. It also reflected findings of other research that conversion impacts relationships, either negatively or, at times, positively. Mitchell and Rane point out, despite the potential for marginalisation from Muslim and non-Muslim communities, a convert’s grounding in Muslim and non-Muslim worlds makes them uniquely qualified to facilitate intercultural communication and contribute to greater levels of social cohesion.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, as articles such as Younis & Hassan’s *Changing Identities: A Case Study of Western Muslim Converts Whose Conversion Revised Their Relationship to Their National Identity* (2017)⁶⁸ underscore, research on Australian converts is built on exploring the impact conversion has on the individual’s social identity configurations and the production of ‘Western Islam’ challenges the narratives of the national identity and traditional migrant narratives of the Muslim identity. This reflects how Islam in Australia is also presented as

⁶¹ Ebony King, “Pathways to Allah: Female Conversion to Islam in Australia,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28, no. 4 (2017), doi: 10.1080/09596410.2017.1324004.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 453.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 455.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 460.

⁶⁵ Paul Mitchell and Halim Rane, “Faith, Identity and Ideology,” in *How Muslim Communities and Western Societies see Each Other*, ed. J. Ali and A. Ata (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 223.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁶⁸ Tarek Younis and Ghayda Hassan, “Changing Identities: A Case Study of Western Muslim Converts Whose Conversion Revised Their Relationship to Their National Identity,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2017): 31, doi: 10.1080/13602004.2017.1294377.

manifest from the immigrant other and Western Muslim identity is constructed from heritage Muslims.

CONCERNS OVER MISREPRESENTATION OF CONVERT PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

The majority of studies noted it was difficult to gather participants, with converts often feeling mistrust and fearing misrepresentation. It is important to consider how academic works contribute to this perception. One of the most recent works from the UK, Declan Henry's *Voices of Modern Islam: What it Means to be Muslim Today* (2018), provides evidence that authors can insert their own perception of the overall experience regardless of lack of explicit mention from participants.⁶⁹ Without providing evidence of data and methodology of data collection, readers are led to believe the majority of converts to Islam are male, while females tend mainly to convert as a result of marriage. In addition, Henry reduces female converts to Islam as some of those who are radicalised into becoming jihadi terrorists,⁷⁰ again without providing solid statistical evidence and despite none of his interviews expanding on this topic. Converts to Islam are faced with scrutiny, which can be exasperated by their ancestry, gender and location in this multifaceted experience, and despite almost two decades of research into their motivations and experiences, this example demonstrates that misrepresentation continues even in most recent works.

Another research conducted by Juliette Galonnier could be interpreted as a somewhat contemptuous critique of the convert community. In her work, *When White Devils Join the Deen* (2015),⁷¹ she participated in a group that caters to a specific population of converts – those who do not feel comfortable in conventional Muslim spaces – and mentions a certain sense of entitlement to criticise a newly embraced community. This is despite previous studies and findings in Europe indicating new Muslims' need for specific guidance and support. It also does not acknowledge, like her later work – *Conversion to Islam as Religious and Racial Crossing* (2018) – demonstrated, that converts are confronted with family members who have outrightly rejected them, resulting in isolation and struggles to integrate into the Muslim community.⁷² Although Galonniers' research holds important insights in converts' experience on feeling of mistrust and basic challenges, such as learning Arabic, the title *When White Devils Join the Deen* is misleading and runs the risk of misrepresenting converts to Islam. There was no explicit understanding from participants, let alone the Muslim community viewing converts this way; rather, the researcher appears to be inserting a clever word play on societies' perceptions.

⁶⁹ Declan Henry, *Voices of Modern Islam: What it Means to be Muslim Today* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁷¹ Juliette Galonnier, "When 'White Devils' Join the Deen. White Americans Converts to Islam and the Experience of Non-Normative Whiteness," *Sciences Po 2015- 1* (2015), <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01422847>.

⁷² Juliette Galonnier, "Conversion to Islam as Religious and Racial Crossing," *The Immanent Frame*, June 5, 2018, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2018/06/05/conversion-to-islam-as-religious-and-racial-crossing/>.

CONCLUSIONS ON GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE

The literature covered in this article offer valuable insights into converts to Islam and provide an excellent basis for conducting further research and examination into the challenges faced by converts. Studies on conversion to Islam approach the subject from anthropological, sociological and sometimes political perspectives and even from understanding researchers' own experiences.

Literature on conversion and converts to Islam prior to 9/11 is scarce and only come from the US and UK. The majority of studies conducted in this field were published in the last two decades (2000-2020). The findings of research conducted in this period can be summed up in six key points.

First, although there are commonalities between the experiences of converts and process of conversion in Western societies, the social and historical contexts produce important nuances of difference from country to country.

Second, conversion to Islam is generally not an impulsive decision. Converts take a slow, gradual transformation, conducting personal research as they navigate a new and different faith and worldview. People develop and mature in their journey as a Muslim. In most cases, participants already started to practice or try certain Islamic rituals and practises.

Third, converts to Islam do not entirely replace their existing identity with an Islamic one; rather, Islam adds a new layer of identity and provides a new perspective, enabling converts to reposition their identity. They attain a modified worldview and how they interpret life and themselves. Being a convert with a hybrid identity puts them in a unique position within the Muslim community. They often see themselves as mediators between Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

Fourth, despite vast approaches to the topic, converts experience a deep sense of being a better person, but also deep loneliness and isolation arise as distinct challenges. Those themes vary, but are not limited to, challenges within family life and relationships, in learning to participate in a new community, being subjected to a new layer of prejudice to seeking help such as understanding Islam correctly or garnering enough support. Most research documenting family situations were difficult to navigate and also pointed out that conversion sometimes resulted in the relationship breakdowns, as well as the end of friendships with non-Muslims.

Fifth, converts to Islam feel denied meaningful roles in the Muslim community and feel they are expected to assimilate to the Muslim community's dominant culture. This feeling of non-acceptance in compounded by converts finding it hard to negotiate their way through the multiple interpretations to Islam to which they are inevitably exposed.

Sixth, converts to Islam are in a vulnerable position and exposed to a subtle form of Islamophobia due to their regular interactions with non-Muslims, particularly if their home life is a hostile environment to Islam. While born Muslims can isolate themselves and limit

Islamophobic experiences, converts to Islam are constantly exposed to contemptuous views of Islam and Muslims.

These valuable findings and insights at the same time reveal gaps in knowledge and offer a roadmap in charting new research. In this systematic review and analysis of literature, six important areas of research can be highlighted.

First, research to date mainly focuses on women converts to Islam and generally attempts to highlight regression in the social status of these women compared to non-Muslim women in respective societies. The expectation is that women's experience of conversion is different to that of men, but in the absence of equal emphasis in research, there will be incomplete understanding of similarities and differences between the conversion process and experiences of men and women converts.

Second, there is interplay between Islam influencing converts' identity and converts influencing the way Islam is understood in Western societies; that is, the influence is two-way. Muslim converts to Islam are actively engaged with Islam and Muslims while at the same time play a key role in the development of Islam. More specifically, it would be interesting to know if Australian born converts feel challenged by two strong identities that have been juxtaposed by political, public and religious discourse or if this is instigated by the focus of academic researchers. While research has traditionally been split between ancestry, gender and location, there are compelling reasons to investigate Australian born converts as a whole.

Third, tied with the second point above, there is a lack of Muslim converts' voices within the Muslim community or when research is conducted on Muslims in Western societies. There is no information on whether the, now sizable, Muslim converts' views are similar or different compared to born Muslims or Muslims with a recent migrant background. This absence further marginalises converts and deprives them of the important role and influence they can play within Muslim communities and wider society.

Fourth, no study investigates how converts integrate within their respective Muslim community. While studies to date highlight challenges associated with being a Muslim and interacting with other Muslims, no study traces successful integration of converts to Muslim communities while they maintain their existing identity.

Fifth, since Kose's research in 1996, no study was conducted on the unique conversion process of converts to Islam. It is important to test the hypothesis of double conversion – a convert to Islam goes through a second conversion experience where they fully commit to an Islamic way of life. A theory of Islamic conversion in Western societies could be developed.

Sixth, specifically in Australia, research is limited to radicalisation and Aboriginal conversion. Research conducted to date does not seem to afford Indigenous people the acknowledgement that converting to Islam is a rational, cognitive decision made by a person, as much as a spiritual and deeply emotional experience. The process and factors involved in

the conversion of Indigenous people to Islam need to be investigated without the constraints of a security lens.

Western and Australian conversion to Islam are expected to evolve as the Muslim identity and their understanding of Islam in the West evolve in tandem over time. With the growing populations of Muslim minorities in Western societies and steady increase in Western converts to Islam, there is more scope on research in this field.

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