



UPPSALA  
UNIVERSITET

Uppsala University

Department of Theology

One-year master programme Religion in Peace and Conflict

Magister Thesis, 15 ECTS

Spring Semester 2017

Supervisor: Andreas Önver Cetrez

**Northwest European female conversion to Islam and  
conceptualization of prejudices, discrimination and “Otherness”**

Nika Sturm

nika.sturm.8583@student.uu.se

## **Abstract**

This paper aims at depicting the current setting of female converts in Northwest Europe, as well as key areas of prejudices and discrimination faced by the researched group. Based on secondary research, this paper draws upon qualitative and quantitative data gathered through structured literature review process, and looking into post-WW2 publications. The female converts to Islam are identified as a small part in the terms of population, but with a strong influential potential in the terms of interfaith linking. Converts are facing prejudices from both their ex-religious and the new religious community. The key areas for further research in this field are identified, based on the gaps in current research. The rise in conversion to Islam, especially after September 11, resulted in re-shaping and re-defining Islam in Europe, and as an outcome of those processes new questions are being raised, such as the concepts of Euro-Islam, as well as the role converts could play in the society.

## **Keywords:**

European Muslims, female converts, Islam, Northwest Europe, prejudice

## **Table of Contents**

1	INTRODUCTION .....	4
1.1.	Introduction .....	4
1.2.	Aims and objectives .....	6
1.3.	Research questions .....	6
1.4.	Definitions of terms.....	7
1.5.	Delimitations .....	8
1.6.	Background study – why Northwest Europe?.....	9
2.	METHOD AND MATERIAL .....	11
2.1.	Method .....	11
2.2.	Ethical issues .....	13
2.3.	Research material .....	14
3.	ANALYSIS AND RESULTS .....	19
3.1.	The rise of conversion to Islam – European context.....	19
3.2.	The number of converts in Northwest Europe .....	20
3.3.	The “typical” female convert in Northwest Europe .....	24
3.4.	Key reasons behind the conversion to Islam in Northwest Europe.....	26
3.5.	Prejudices / Stereotypes: exploring “Otherness” and marginalisation.....	30
3.6.	Conclusion.....	37
3.7.	Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.....	38
4.	DISCUSSION.....	39
4.1.	Reflection on methods.....	39
	REFERENCES .....	42

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Introduction

When in 2013, Cambridge University produced a study of British women who had embraced Islam, it was downloaded more than 150,000 times<sup>1</sup>, which definitely shows that this topic triggers curiosity and justifies further research. On the other hand, the resources dealing with this subject in the majority of European countries are very limited or even non-existent. Poston<sup>2</sup> refers to religious conversion as “by no means a neglected topic among the various fields of the social sciences” and then adds that “very little research appears to have been conducted concerning conversion to non-Christian religious traditions”<sup>3</sup>. Fourteen years after Poston’s book was published, major progress in exploring this field was still missing; in 2006, van Nieuwkerk wrote that “despite the importance of conversion and gender to Islam, these topics have hardly been studied<sup>4</sup>.” In 2011, Jawad<sup>5</sup> reconfirms an increasing interest in the converts to Islam in Western Europe, but notes that no comprehensive study on that theme has been undertaken in Britain. In the years which followed Jawad’s book, some new publications saw the light of day in Britain. Up until today, in the majority of Northwest European countries, there are very few books or reports dedicated to this matter.

Unveiling the myth of conversion and openly discussing prejudices and discrimination, which often follow post-conversion phase, still seem to be a form of taboo.

In the realms of online and social media, the exposure to public opinions becomes more transparent than ever. Now and then the online newspapers publish brief interviews with converts, or short life stories peeking into their pre- and post-conversion experiences. We are then exposed to anonymous comments of readers following the online articles about the personal stories of converts, and those comments vary between admiration and support (by

---

<sup>1</sup> Why some Brits choose Islamic prayer over partying. (2016, February 12). Retrieved April 17, 2017, from <http://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2016/02/conversion-islam>

<sup>2</sup> Poston, Larry. (1992:145) *Islamic Da‘wah In the West. Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam*. 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Poston, Larry. (1992:154) *Islamic Da‘wah In the West. Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam*. 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Van Nieuwkerk, K. (2006:2). *Women embracing Islam: gender and conversion in the West*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

<sup>5</sup> Jawad, H. A. (2011:1). *Towards Building a British Islam: New Muslims' Perspectives*. London: Continuum.

the new-Muslim community) or shock, despise and alienation (mostly by the ex-community). Sometimes those online comments are edited, deleted or sanctioned due to hate speech.

There are also websites (or online communities) where converts share their personal stories, mostly reflecting on their experiences and describing pre- and post-conversion experiences, concerns, or life in general. For the most part, the objectives of those stories are to encourage those who are considering taking the same path, or educating non-Muslims about Islam. In addition to the websites hosting the personal converts' stories, there are numerous conversion-related videos on YouTube as well. Many books used as a reference below also contain narratives of the female converts to Islam, reflecting upon the conversion itself, but also depicting motives of their post-conversion existence.

Criticism of conversion is often euphemistic when public, and rigid when anonymous – just like discrimination. We pretend that prejudices and discrimination do not exist to maintain the dreams and utopia of the so called “European values”. Those fundamental values are respect for human dignity and human rights, democracy, equality, freedom and the rule of law. To which extent these values still and really exist in our society is a matter of perception and will not be discussed in this paper. Those who choose the path which is not in line (or are considered not to be in line) with the “free and liberal” European values become alienated. But not in a transparent way, at least not in the Northwest Europe.

My life experience in different countries and observations from those places inspired this study – some of the societies were completely indifferent to converts, some were openly against them, while some of the societies tend to pretend that they are democratic, while they discriminate converts in subtle ways. And, as this study will show, it is not only the ex-religious, European, Western or white society that is discriminating people who found their new belief.

Moving from personal interest to a general one, the importance of studying converts as a subgroup within European community lies in their significant role in the society. Van Nieuwkerk<sup>6</sup> observes that “converts often function as cultural and political mediators between the state and Muslim communities.” Throughout the literature review, I have not managed to find a valid source of information which would negate the (potential) role of converts in the Western society. In regard to prejudices, most resources compiled during the

---

<sup>6</sup> Van Nieuwkerk, K. (2006:5). *Women embracing Islam: gender and conversion in the West*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

literature review acknowledge that prejudices do exist, if that matter is discussed as a part of analysis. By looking into converts-related resources and providing a brief summary of the studies which have been conducted up to date, a better understanding of this group should be generated. By identifying the key challenges female converts are facing (such as prejudices and discrimination areas), future studies proposals will be suggested. Exploring these fields in more detail could assist in overcoming the issues of prejudices, which would eventually in the long term lead to social change.

The starting point of the study will be recent historical context of female conversion in Northwest Europe, building a profile of a “typical” female Western convert, the motives and the contexts behind the conversion, moving towards the aim of exploring prejudices, discrimination and sense of “Otherness” among the researched group. Since there has not been much research on topics of otherness, prejudices and discrimination among this subgroup of population, exploring this field could deliver some new empirical findings. The word limitation of this paper will not allow me to explore it in detail, but the most common ones will be presented in a brief format.

## **1.2. Aims and objectives**

This paper has two aims: to explore the current overview of Northwest European female conversion to Islam and to present the key prejudices and discrimination areas faced in the post-conversion period.

To accomplish both aims listed above, my objective is delivering a structured literature review. The specific steps within structured literature review will be described in the methods section.

## **1.3. Research questions**

- Depicting the female conversion to Islam in Northwest European context – how many converts are there in Europe, what is their background and why do they convert to Islam?
- In terms of feeling of marginalisation, what are the most common prejudices faced by female converts to Islam in Northwest Europe?

This question will be looking into prejudices, discrimination and “Otherness” which follows the post-conversion process. Upon completing literature review, the key prejudices and discrimination areas should be identified and described briefly.

#### 1.4. Definitions of terms

**Converts/conversion.** If looking into Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, one of the meanings given to conversion is “the act or process of changing from one religion, belief, political party, etc. to another”. However, the complexity of the term cannot be grasped in one simple definition and it varies depending on the discipline or the theoretical approach.

The study of the psychology of religious conversion has a history of almost a century and a half. In 1881, G. Stanley Hall delivered a series of lectures at Harvard University<sup>7</sup>. While the early classical paradigms and theories of conversion observed the process of religious converting in the light of Christianity, in the contemporary paradigm of conversion, it is viewed as “the active search for meaning in which converts explore the religious landscape by converting and de-converting from various religious groups”. It seems like the key word here is “active” – conversion is not a one-way, passive or a sudden occurrence, but rather a complex process of searching for purpose which should be observed through different perspectives and interdisciplinary paradigm.

**Reverts.** Some believe that the terms “converts” and “reverts” are interchangeable and a matter of preference. The background of term “revert” is rooted in Islamic belief that every child is born Muslim, and that “the individuals among other faiths who choose to *revert* to Islam, they actually *reverted* to their religion of birth (...)”.<sup>8</sup> The term revert seems to be favoured by some because it reflects “a returning to the natural state of *fitra*”<sup>9</sup>. In further text, I will be using the term “convert” for the sake of clarity, however, the term “revert” will be present where originally used by the quoted author.

**Muslim.** Cambridge dictionary offers a simple definition of “Muslim”: “a person who follows the religion of Islam<sup>10</sup>” This term is strongly related to the definition of convert/revert in the context of this paper. In further text, the reference to the term “Muslim” includes all

---

<sup>7</sup> Miller, Lisa (ed). (2013:8). Oxford handbook of psychology and spirituality. Oxford University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Yousef, A. S. (2014). Islam within Judaism and Christianity a voice from the past. London: Authorhouse.

<sup>9</sup> Fitra is an Arabic concept which denotes a pure and God-given state of being

<sup>10</sup> Dictionary, Muslim. "Muslim Meaning In The Cambridge English Dictionary". Dictionary.cambridge.org. N.p., 2017. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

sects of Islam and, if not specified otherwise, both new Muslims (converts) and born-Muslims. The terms “new Muslims” and “converts”/“reverts” are often used interchangeably.

### **1.5. Delimitations**

It is important to mention that the review will solely focus at the publications referring to the post-WWII period, which will be further elaborated in the chapter on recent history of conversion to Islam in Northwest Europe. By Northwest Europe, I am referring to the geographic and not ethnographic definition. “Geographically, north-western Europe usually consists of Ireland, Great Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, northern Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland. Luxembourg, northern France, southern Germany, and Switzerland are also usually considered part of the grouping<sup>11</sup>.” In the chapter looking about recent history of conversion to Islam in Europe, further explanations in relation to why this region has been chosen will be provided.

The primary relevant sources are selected in relation to the quality parameters (the coverage of the questions which this study aims to answer). Quality parameters or inclusion criteria are: women of Western or Northern European background who converted to Islam. Due to the limited number of resources some of these studies are not solely dedicated to female converts in Northwest Europe. In such cases, I filtered the information to the extent to which it was possible.

Last but not least, one of the delimitations is approach taken to religious conversion. This is an inductive study which is not taking any theoretical approaches. One of the reasons is that that most of the studies and observations on religious conversion do not necessarily have to be applicable to this context. As pointed out by Poston<sup>12</sup>, the foregoing studies were “conducted from a Christian perspective and in a Christian environment”. She furthermore names a couple of authors who did research related to non-Christian traditions (Nock in 1933, Levtzion and Bulliet, both in 1979), but notes that all those authors approach this subject from a historical viewpoint. A brief view on the publications dates and contexts reveals that those researches were conducted before the rise of conversion to Islam in Northwest Europe.

---

<sup>11</sup> Northwestern Europe. (n.d.). Retrieved April 14, 2017, from [https://infogalactic.com/info/Northwestern\\_Europe](https://infogalactic.com/info/Northwestern_Europe)

<sup>12</sup> Poston, L. (1992:154). *Islamic Da‘wah in the West: Muslim missionary activity and the dynamics of conversion to Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press



Therefore I felt that an inductive approach could contribute to the objectivity in exploring this field.

### **1.6. Background study – why Northwest Europe?**

Here I would also like to clarify why Northern Europe has been chosen as the area of interest for this research. Northwest Europe had different encounters with Islam compared to southern, eastern or southeast Europe. Compared to southern or (south)eastern Europe, the West had its first encounters with Islam quite late. Nielsen and Otterbeck<sup>13</sup> note three different phases of established Muslim communities in Europe: the period of Islamic Spain and Muslim rule in Sicily and southern Italy, the spread of Mongol armies on the territories which afterwards became Russian empire, and the third phase being the Ottoman expansion into the Balkans and central Europe. Nielsen's and Otterbeck's book deals with what they call "a relatively new, fourth phase, namely the establishment of Muslim communities in Western Europe." A general time frame for this phase is defined by the period of post-Second World War immigration.

In my opinion, attitudes and perceptions of conversion to Islam differ if Western and Southern or Eastern Europe are compared. In other words, southern and (south)eastern Europe had more contact with Islam than the North or the West in the past, in addition to the fact that those contacts happened early in the history of Islam. As previously mentioned, Islam penetrated early in its expansions the regions of the Iberian peninsula, Sicily or the land which is today Russia – numerous centuries before Northern or Western European countries experienced immigration. In addition to the different historical contexts of those encounters, another major difference lies in the nature of those contacts – while the south(eastern) Europe was introduced to Islam through the invasion of Arab and Mongol tribes, the encounters of the West were quite the opposite, through the immigration for the purposes of work. Interestingly, according to A Pew Research Center survey<sup>14</sup> conducted in spring 2016, negative views on Muslims in eastern or southern Europe prevail, compared to Northern or Western Europe. The results of the research also showed that "the majority of respondents in the UK, Germany, France, Sweden and the Netherlands gave Muslims a favourable rating". It was not clarified whether those favourable versus negative views are seen as a result of

---

<sup>13</sup> Nielsen, J. S., & Otterbeck, J. (2016:1,2). Muslims in Western Europe. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Hackett, C. (2016, July 19). 5 facts about the Muslim population in Europe. Retrieved April 14, 2017, from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/19/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/>

Muslim's share in Europe's population or previously mentioned historical context of different (peaceful and non-peaceful) encounters.

As mentioned, the fourth phase of establishing Muslim communities in Western Europe began after the Second World War. El Hareir and Mbaye<sup>15</sup> notice that Islam spread in Europe by means of Muslim labourers who came to rebuild the war-damaged continent. "With the passage of time, the number of these emigres has begun to increase due to a variety of reasons, including the higher birth rate, family reunification, and the conversion to Islam of non-Muslims, particularly in Europe". Again, it is not specified how many converts/reverts are there in Europe, but El Hareir & Mbaye see conversion as one of the factors which contributed to the increased number of Muslim population in Europe, as opposed to the authors of European origin who mostly claim that the contribution of converts in Islam's growth in Europe is not one of the key factors.

In Sweden those were Turkish-speaking Tartars who came from Finland and Estonia and established the first Islamic congregation in 1948<sup>16</sup> ; in Belgium, "the really massive implantation of Islam" was a result of the large-scale recruitment of foreign labour carried out by the Belgian authorities in the 1960s as part of its migration policy at that time"<sup>17</sup> , in England and Wales the consistent growth of the Muslim population is present since 1950s, initiated by immigration<sup>18</sup> etc.

According to "Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West", the conversion rates were low until the 1980s. This might imply that recruiting Muslim labour and establishing Muslim communities had certain impact on increasing conversion rates. As it will be shown in further text, contacts with Muslims have influence on the conversion.

Someone may say – why researching converts if they are not a key factor in the growth of Islam? The answer is simple - converts are making "a disproportionate contribution to the indigenization of Islamic practice, thought and discourse in the West<sup>19</sup>."

---

<sup>15</sup> El Hareir, I., & Mbaye, R. (2011:885). The spread of Islam throughout the world. Paris: Unesco Publishing

<sup>16</sup> Roald, Anna Sofie. (2004:233). New Muslims in the European context: the experience of Scandinavian converts. Leiden: Brill.

<sup>17</sup> Torrekens, Corinne. (2015). Islam in Belgium: From Formal Recognition to Public Contestation. In "After Integration – Islam, Conviviality and Contentious Politics in Europe. Edited by Marian Burchardt and Ines Michalowski

<sup>18</sup> Gilliat-Ray, Sophie (2010:117). Muslims in Britain. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Zebiri, K. (2008). British Muslim converts: choosing alternative lives. Oxford: Oneworld Publ.

## 2. METHOD AND MATERIAL

### 2.1. Method

This chapter will clarify why a structured literature review was employed as a method to approach the analysis of female conversion to Islam in Northwest Europe. In order to clarify the method which was employed, a comparison to traditional and systematic literature review will be given. A coding scheme, developed inductively, is briefly described. Some of the ethical concerns will also be presented.

When describing philosophical assumptions, Creswell<sup>20</sup> mentions that there are four philosophical assumptions: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. In regard to methodology, he writes that “the procedures of qualitative research, or its methodology, are characterized as inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analysing the data. The logic that the qualitative researcher follows is inductive, from the ground up, rather than handed down entirely from a theory or from the perspectives of the inquirer.”

There is no theoretical framework since this project work is taking an inductive approach. Inductive processes generate theories and therefore there is no hypothesis to be tested. That also means that this study does not take any premises or presuppositions. Throughout the literature review process, which is a frame of data and information generation in this study, I expect the new findings to emerge.

The reasons for performing a structured literature review are:

- to briefly summarize the existing research concerning post-WW2 female conversion to Islam in Northwest Europe and identify the answers sought
- to identify gaps in current research and propose questions for further research

Applying secondary research (in this case structured literature review) as a method will enable me to reveal the gaps in the available resources, as well as to propose questions for further research. The structured literature review will include secondary sources. Those include books, journal articles, reports, reference books, blogs and newspaper articles.

---

<sup>20</sup> Creswell, J. W. (2013:22). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

A structured literature review will be used to present an overview of current situation of female converts in Northwest Europe. The structured literature review will briefly present the recent key publications in the field, and then look into those and additional resources to answer the research questions. While literature review is normally seen as one part of a thesis and looks into summarizing information regarding a particular topic, systematic literature review strives to synthesize all relevant issues on a specific topic. On the other hand, the traditional literature review tends to summarize what is known on a topic, “providing details on the studies that are considered without explaining the criteria used to identify and include those studies or why certain studies are described and discussed while others are not<sup>21</sup>.” This study does not include some of the steps of the systematic literature review, such as including all relevant publications, or exploring the reasons behind inconsistencies in literature exist, nor providing implications for practice and policy. The key commonality between systematic literature review and the structured literature review employed in this paper is answering questions rather than addressing topic areas, which is typical for the traditional approach.

Systematic literature review can take several years to complete and can include several authors. It is therefore clear why fully systematic approach could not have been taken in this study, however, wherever possible, I tried to integrate aspects of systematic literature approach into this structured literature review. Those aspects included identifying the question, defining inclusion and exclusion criteria (keywords), searching and selecting relevant studies, extracting the data which answers the proposed questions and presenting results. The aspects (or steps) which were not included (due to the limitations like time frame, resources and extensiveness of this study) are assessing the quality of evidence and assessing the risk of bias in studies, which is more typical for the life sciences than social sciences.

Approach to synthesis of literature will be interpretative, which “seek to broaden our understanding of a particular intervention or phenomenon. Each study holds the potential to add one or more additional insights and to contribute to the overall picture<sup>22</sup>.” It is important to mention that the focus is on the parts of the studies or content which provides answers or reflections related to this paper’s aims, and not on general summarizing of those studies.

---

<sup>21</sup> Gough, D., Oliver, S., & Thomas, J. (2017:4). An introduction to systematic reviews. Los Angeles: SAGE.

<sup>22</sup> Booth, A. (2016:21). Systematic approaches to a successful literature review. London: SAGE Publishing.

When categories are developed inductively from the data, the use of constant comparative method is encouraged<sup>23</sup>. In constant comparison, joint coding and analysis are present. While conducting the literature review, the coding was evolving through the content analysis.

Several steps were taken throughout the literature searching process to identify the most relevant publications and resources for this study. This included scoping search, conducting regular search, bibliography search and even revising the parameters of search (trying different keyword searches to insure the most relevant studies are found and used). To increase the objectivity and minimize bias, the literature review process included pieces of work which take different approaches to these matters, and were written by non-Muslims, Muslims and new Muslims (converts).

## **2.2. Ethical issues**

Ethical issues and dilemmas arise from both religious research in overall and using secondary data as a method. Strausberg & Engel<sup>24</sup> recognize at least three different ways in which ethical dilemmas/ issues arise in religious study research:

1. When researcher or the subjects are acting in violation to ethical or legal standards
2. Ethical issues which are not overt wrongs but rather shortfalls from standards of excellence (for example subjects are mostly but not fully informed)
3. Genuine ethical dilemmas about which it is possible to arrive at a more than one ethically justified position

Since this study did not involve any participants, some of the “traps” of principles of ethical research could be skipped – for example the informed consent and the procedures related to it. However, this by no means implies that there are no ethical challenges in conducting this sort of a research. In this context, the ethical challenges are mostly about re-using data and incorporating someone else’s ideas.

One of the concerns related to secondary research are the permissions for borrowed material used in qualitative research. <sup>25</sup> Those include figures and tables that are direct reprints (if

---

<sup>23</sup> Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967:101). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine.

<sup>24</sup> Stausberg, M., & Engler, S. (Eds.). (2014:82). *The Routledge handbook of research methods in the study of religion*. London: Routledge.

<sup>25</sup> Creswell. J. W. (2015:53) “30 Essential Skills for the Qualitative Researcher”. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

there is more than 3), numeric data that are reproduced in their exact form from another source (and not reanalysed / reconfigured), long quotations (400+words), as well as test and scale items, questionnaires and vignettes. Since this paper does not contain materials which would require getting the permissions according to the criteria listed above, ethical concerns are, at least in that sense, minimized.

As previously mentioned, I could not obtain permissions to use whole personal stories and testimonies available online because of the unresponsiveness of the authors of those stories, or because I could not retrieve their contact details. To avoid ethical issues which might have been raised by using personal stories without obtaining such permissions, I decided to approach the stories as collective resources from which I could gather additional answers to the questions which will be raised in further text. In other words, those stories are not going to be observed as personal and individual testimonies, but approached from the angle of collective and summarized reflections.

I am aware how sensitive this topic is and how challenging it is to employ objectivity while remaining completely considerate when analysing religion-related matters, especially within a group which is often stigmatized for their choice.

### **2.3. Research material**

As a part of literature review process, the sources containing information relevant to my research questions were identified. Some of the resources which will be included in my secondary research are:

**“Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West”**, edited by Dutch professor and anthropologist Karin van Nieuwkerk. The book, published in 2006<sup>26</sup>, offers female converts-related empirical and comparative materials from the Western world. The book contains ten essays exploring female conversion. The essays fitting the context of my research are “The shaping of a Scandinavian Islam” by Roald, “Symbolizing Distance – Conversion to Islam in Germany and the United States” by Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, “Gender,

---

<sup>26</sup> Nieuwkerk, K. (Ed.). (2006). *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Conversion and Islam” by Karin van Nieuwkerk (referring to Dutch converts). “Female Conversion to Islam” by Haifaa Jawad, and “Feminism and conversion” by Margot Badran. Those essays were selected based on the partial match of my research objectives (since my key focus is Western Europe, cases regarding the United States or South Africa will not be analysed; however, this does not mean that the findings from the USA, South Africa or, for example, Eastern Europe, are not applicable in the Western European context. Some of the finding overlap, while some can be used as hypotheses or guidance in the areas where similar researches have not been conducted).

“**Conversion To Islam**” by Ali Kose (2010)<sup>27</sup> summarizes experiences of 50 male and 20 female native British converts to Islam. The primary source of information were interviews, but the author used other (written) sources as well. Among the other topics explored in his book, Kose is looking into the patterns of conversion and the reasons underlying conversion, which is one of the subjects I am aiming to explore as a part of portraying a “typical” female convert in Western Europe. Furthermore, Kose explored post-conversion period relevant to my second question of discrimination, prejudices and “Otherness” faced by the new Muslims in post-conversion period.

“**New Muslims in the European Context - the Experience of Scandinavian Converts**” was written by Anne Roald (2004)<sup>28</sup>. Roald is herself a Scandinavian convert to Islam. Roald conducted both qualitative and quantitative investigations on Scandinavian Muslim converts. In comparison to Kose’s study, the majority of participants were women (84% of the respondents to the questionnaires and 72% respondents to the questionnaire were women). Due to the fact that the majority of the participants were women, I am expecting to find more about female conversion. The questions were aiming to explore personal background, reasons for conversion and developments after conversion<sup>29</sup>. Just like with Kose’s work, I am expecting to learn more about post-conversion experiences. It is important to mention that Roald does not solely focus on Scandinavia but also explores trends in conversion in European context.

---

<sup>27</sup> Köse, A. (1996). *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts*. London: Routledge.

<sup>28</sup> Roald, A. S. (2004). *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts*. Leiden: Brill.

<sup>29</sup> Roald, A. S. (2004:15). *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts*. Leiden: Brill.

**“Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to Islam”** (2006) by Mansson McGinty<sup>30</sup> is a study based on in-depth interviews with Swedish and American female converts to Islam. McGinty’s interest lies mostly in their identities and lives as Muslims. It is important to note that this is an anthropological study which is approaching phenomenologically the experience of converts, rather than taking a religious perspective on this matter. As previously mentioned, I will not describe stories collected by other researchers for ethical reasons, but this study is valuable for my research in relation to Mansson’s general findings and interpretations.

Professor Yasir Suleiman, who is a director of the Centre of Islamic Studies at Cambridge, produced **“Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain - Female Perspectives”** in 2013<sup>31</sup>. The endeavour was to describe the experience of female converts and different aspects of conversion to Islam in Britain. As described in this 129-page report review, “it also outlines the social, emotional and sometimes economic costs of conversion, and the context and reasons for women converting to Islam in a society with pervasive negative stereotypes about the faith.<sup>32</sup>” This report gained a lot of attention and publicity.

**“A Minority Within a Minority: a Report on converts to Islam in the United Kingdom”** was written by Kevin Brice from Swansea University on behalf of Faith Matters (<http://faith-matters.org>)<sup>33</sup>. Just like Anne Roald, Kevin Brice is himself a convert to Islam. This forty pages report is particularly of interest as it delivers some demographical and statistical data regarding the converts in the United Kingdom, but also looks into post-conversion challenges. It seems like this sort of study is not available yet in any other European country. This study was published in 2010.

**“Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe”** (2014) by Esra Özyürek<sup>34</sup> focuses “on the experiences of indigenous Europeans” (in particular Germans) and seeks “to understand the complex set of prejudices and exclusionary

---

<sup>30</sup> McGinty, A. M. (2006). *Becoming Muslim Western Women's Conversions to Islam*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

<sup>31</sup> Suleiman, Y. (2013). *Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain. Female Perspectives (Rep.)*. University of Cambridge.

<sup>32</sup> Female conversion to Islam in Britain examined in unique research project. Retrieved April 9, 2017 from: <http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/female-conversion-to-islam-in-britain-examined-in-unique-research-project>

<sup>33</sup> Brice, K. (2010). *A Minority within a Minority: A Report on Converts to Islam in the United Kingdom*. Swansea University, on behalf of Faith Matters. Retrieved from: <http://faith-matters.org/images/stories/fm-reports/a-minority-within-a-minority-a-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Özyürek, E. (2014). *Being German, becoming Muslim: race, religion, and conversion in the new Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.



practices that are called Islamophobia<sup>35</sup>”. Özyürek spent three and a half years studying German converts to Islam, which resulted in sixty-six converts and fourteen born-Muslims being interviewed. Reflections upon inclusion and exclusion, and integration and non-integration, should provide further insight into German conversion and post-conversion prejudices, as well as a solid base for further comparisons in European context.

**“Why women are accepting Islam<sup>36</sup>”** was compiled by Muhammad Haneef Shahid and edited by Abdul Ahad in 2002. This compilation contains numerous narratives by female converts to Islam, coming from different parts of the world. I am planning to look into the parts fitting the frame and subject of this research project. This book was chosen because it is taking strong pro-conversion perspective, and in that sense contributing to approaching the questions raised from various angles.

**“Muslims in Western Europe”** by Jonas Otterbeck and Jørgen Nielsen<sup>37</sup> looks into history of European Muslims and development of Muslim communities in different countries. In addition to being crucial support to understanding the historical background of conversion to Islam in Europe, Otterbeck and Nielsen refer to conversion and converts numerous times and provide figures regarding the estimated numbers of converts in different countries. The fourth edition was published in 2016.

**“Europe as a Multiple Modernity: Multiplicity of Religious Identities and Belonging”** (2014) by Sremac and Topic<sup>38</sup> presents the analysis of fifteen case studies, where some particular chapters could be very relevant to this study. An example is “The religious and national identity of Muslim converts in Britain” by Moosavi, where Moosavi tackles issues of prejudice and discrimination against convert through the case studies, but also more general topics like identity. In addition to Moosavi’s case studies, Ploom’s chapter on Estonian female converts to Islam could be of interest as a reference point rather than a part of this study (since this study is focused solely at Western and Northern Europe).

When answering the research questions, other books, journal articles, reports and newspapers articles will be consulted.

---

<sup>35</sup> Özyürek, E. (2014:3). Being German, becoming Muslim: race, religion, and conversion in the new Europe. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>36</sup> Shāhid, M. H., & Ahad, A. (2002). Why women are accepting Islam. Riyadh: Darussalam.

<sup>37</sup> Nielsen, J. S., & Otterbeck, J. (2004). Muslims in Western Europe. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>38</sup> Sremac, S., & Topic, M. (2014). Europe as a Multiple Modernity: Multiplicity of Religious Identities and Belonging. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publ.

Some further reflections on this matter will be a part of discussions chapter.

### 3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The following chapter will explore the number of converts in Northwest Europe, moving towards depicting a “typical” convert in the area, and discovering the key reasons behind conversion. The discussion will continue with description of key prejudices and discrimination faced by female converts. The analysis and results are synthesized because of the structured literature review. The inductive approach, which was conducted prior to analysis, helped me identify key themes within the area of interest, which were afterwards grouped into categories presented below. As an introduction to analysis of these questions, a short overview of the rise of conversion to Islam in Northwest European context will be presented. This will serve as a background explanation to help the readers understand the settings of those conversions occurring in the past couple of decades.

#### 3.1. The rise of conversion to Islam – European context

This overview of conversion to Islam in Europe will be looking in the past few decades, in other words, post- Second World War period. In my opinion, the motivation, contexts and circumstances defining the conversion processes before 1945 were different compared to those which are occurring in the past couple of decades. Therefore, I will only look into the past six decades, with a particular focus at post- September 11th conversion growth.

Jawad<sup>39</sup> points out that “conversion to Islam among Western Europeans is neither new nor unheard of”; however, she points the difference to past conversion, which was mostly among few (often) notable people; nowadays and in recent years, “conversion has been taking place at an accelerating pace among people from a variety of social, political, educational and ethnic backgrounds, thus making the phenomenon highly important and significant for all parties concerned”. Mohamed Ali-Adraoui<sup>40</sup> sees the continuation of tradition of erudition “throughout the second half of the 20th century, via embodied by “hip” young Westerners who travelled in Central Asia or in Afghanistan and became affiliated with the Sufi mystical tradition.” There is an obvious distinction in nature of conversion during the colonial era and in postcolonial times. Within postcolonial conversion, one might differentiate between the context to which Ali-Adraoui refers to (traveling and converting through familiarity with

---

<sup>39</sup> Jawad, H. A. (2011:21). *Towards building a British Islam: new Muslims' perspectives*. London: Continuum

<sup>40</sup> Pascual, J. (2015, September 02). *A Close-Up Look At French Converts To Islam*. Retrieved April 30, 2017, from <https://www.worldcrunch.com/culture-society/a-close-up-look-at-french-converts-to-islam>

mystic movement of Sufism) and post-September 11 context/ phase. The rise in conversion to Islam, which started occurring after 11/09 is not motivated by traveling or introduction to Sufism, but extensive and aggressive media campaign which came as an aftermath of those events. One cannot help but see an irony in the fact that anti-Muslim propaganda resulted in more people converting to Islam. Why did this happen?

As pointed out by Yasir Suleiman<sup>41</sup> “only post 9/11 that an embryonic British Islamic identity has been emerging and may appear more pronounced amongst the children of converts”.

According to Moosavi<sup>42</sup>, the increased number of converts in post- September 11 is sometimes seen as “partly related to the increased exposure that Islam has had since 9/11, which occasionally leads to people adopting Islamic teachings”. Zebiri<sup>43</sup> sees a higher rate of conversion which followed September 11 as “that these events give rise to a curiosity resulting in higher sales of books on Islam and more enquiries at mosques and Islamic organizations.” It seems like the majority of the researchers in the field of conversion to Islam acknowledge the growth in conversion following September 11 and that the major reason behind it lies in increased media exposure. Once again the power of media has been demonstrated, and shown that even negative connotations can bring the same level of attention like the positive one.

### **3.2. The number of converts in Northwest Europe**

McGinty<sup>44</sup> points out that “the presence of Islam in the West is palpable, being the fastest growing religion in both Europe and the United States”. In her article published one year later, she adds that “it is the second largest religion in France and the third in Britain, Germany, and North America<sup>45</sup>.”

In spite of not being the key factor in Islam’s growth (the key factors still being fertility rate and young age of Muslim population), the number of converts to Islam in the West seems to

---

<sup>41</sup> Suleiman, Y. (2013:9). Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain. *Female Perspectives* (Rep.). University of Cambridge.

<sup>42</sup> In Sremac, S., & Topic, M. (2014:298). Europe as a multiple modernity: multiplicity of religious identities and belonging. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publ.

<sup>43</sup> Zebiri, Kate. (2014) *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*. New York: Oneworld Publications.

<sup>44</sup> McGinty, A. M. (2006:4). *Becoming Muslim: Western women's conversions to Islam*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>45</sup> McGinty, A. M. (2007). Women's studies international forum: Formation of alternative femininities through islam: Feminist approaches among Muslim converts in Sweden. Elsevier. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2007.09.004

be growing. We do not know the exact number of converts to Islam in Europe (and logically no exact numbers of female converts in Western Europe). According to Ahmed<sup>46</sup>, “the exact numbers tend to be somewhat unreliable since immigrants and converts sometimes do not wish to declare their identity or register and are therefore difficult to enumerate.”

When analysing this matter, Karin van Nieuwkerk<sup>47</sup> says that, “at this point we must simply state that we do not know exactly, since for most countries no statistics are available or the statistics do not distinguish between second-generation-born Muslims and native converts” but “what is clear, though, is that gender issues are focal in the discussions of conversion to Islam, whether statistically, ideologically or symbolically.” Of what we are certain is that the number of female converts does outnumber male converts to Islam<sup>48</sup>. In most (Northwest) European countries, converts make up between 1% and 5% of the Muslim population<sup>49</sup>.

In further text, I will present estimated figures provided by various sources, with an objective to synthesise the results and to see if those figures are consistent.

There are some estimations that “each Western European country has around 10,000 converts<sup>50</sup>”, but figures, which circulate in the books, articles and reports, certainly vary and it is not uncommon to see drastic differences in presented estimations.

Some examples of estimated number of converts include:

- from between 10.000-40.000<sup>51</sup> in **the UK** to 100.000 converts in the UK<sup>52</sup>, depending on a source
- approximately 100.000 converts to Islam in **Germany**<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Ahmed, A. S. (2014). *Islam Today*. London: I.B.Tauris. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uu/detail.action?docID=676554>

<sup>47</sup> Van Nieuwkerk, K. (2006:2). *Women embracing Islam: gender and conversion in the West*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

<sup>48</sup> Several authors and researchers confirm this, such as Roald in 2004, van Nieuwkerk in 2009; Jawad in 2011 etc.

<sup>49</sup> Schuurman, B., Grol, P., & Flower, S. (2016). *Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction*. *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies*. doi:10.19165/2016.2.03

<sup>50</sup> Tottoli, R. (2015:263). *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

<sup>51</sup> Hewer, C. (2006). *Understanding Islam: the first ten steps*. London: SCM.

<sup>52</sup> Brice, Kevin. *A Minority Within a Minority: a Report on converts to Islam in the United Kingdom*. Swansea University, on behalf of Faith Matters. Retrieved from: <http://faith-matters.org/images/stories/fm-reports/a-minority-within-a-minority-a-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Baile, M. W. (2011:56). *Beyond the clash of civilizations: a new cultural synthesis for Muslims in the west*. Bloomington, IN: IUniverse Inc.

- a few tens of thousands in **France**<sup>54</sup> to almost 110.000 <sup>55</sup>, depending on a source
- approximately 10.000 converts to Islam in **Switzerland**<sup>56</sup>
- around 6000 native converts in **Sweden**<sup>57</sup>
- the estimations for **Denmark** vary between 2000-3000 <sup>58</sup> and 5000 – 6000 <sup>59</sup>, depending on a source
- 3000 converts in the **Netherlands** <sup>60</sup> and **Norway**<sup>61</sup>
- between 6000 and 30.000 converts of Belgian or other European origin in **Belgium**<sup>62</sup>

The Muslim population (and therefore the number of converts) in Luxembourg is still small<sup>63</sup>.

Based on this, it makes sense to conclude that there are approximately 10,000 converts per Northwest European country (on average) and that the figures vary based on historical, cultural and economic reasons. Karagiannis' estimation<sup>64</sup> is that there “must be probably 200,000–350,000 converts in the European Union, making up less than two percent of its Muslim population”.

Paradoxically, in spite of converts being a growing phenomenon in Northwest Europe, we do not know the estimated figures published by reliable sources. The data presented above is gathered from various books, journal articles, reports, available censuses and even newspapers articles where some sort of investigative journalism drive comes in force in absence of the official data. The censuses to cover religious affiliation are outdated across the

---

<sup>54</sup> Torrekens, C., & Jacobs, D. (2015:189). Muslims' religiosity and views on religion in six Western European countries: does national context matter? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*

<sup>55</sup> Nielsen, J. S., & Otterbeck, J. (2016:11). *Muslims in Western Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>56</sup> Marbach, Patrick (21 June 2010). “Les Suisses se tournent vers l'islam par amour”. 20 minutes Romandie SA. Retrieved April 30, 2017 from: <http://www.20min.ch/ro/news/suisse/story/14388429>

<sup>57</sup> A.M. McGinty. (2006:20). *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to Islam*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>58</sup> Krogh, Kasper & Termansen, Jesper. (2006). “Angående Muhammed: 2.500 danskere er konverteret til islam,” *Berlingske Tidende* and Jensen, T., & Østergaard, K. (2007). *Nye muslimer i Danmark: møder og omvendelser (New Muslims in Denmark: Meetings and conversions)*. Højbjerg: Univers.

<sup>59</sup> “An increasing number of Danes are converting to Islam”. 21 February 2010. Retrieved from: Euro-islam.info. *Euro-Islam: News and Analysis on Islam in Europe and North America*.

<sup>60</sup> Nielsen, J. S., & Otterbeck, J. (2016:68). *Muslims in Western Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>61</sup> Berglund, N. (n.d.). More Norwegians convert to Islam. Retrieved April 30, 2017, from <http://www.newsenglish.no/2015/06/08/more-norwegians-convert-to-islam/>

<sup>62</sup> Aksöyek, A. (2000). *Sociographie de la population turque et d'origine turque: Quarante ans de présence en Belgique (1960–2000): Dynamiques, problèmes, perspectives*. Brussels: Centre de Relations Européennes

<sup>63</sup> Nielsen, J. S., Akgönül, S., Alibašić, A., Maréchal, B., Moe, C., & Jeldtoft, N. (2009:378). *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*. Volume 7. Leiden: Brill.

<sup>64</sup> Emmanuel Karagiannis (2012:100) *European Converts to Islam: Mechanisms of Radicalization, Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 13:1, 99-113, DOI: 10.1080/21567689.2012.659495

old continent, or do not exist. There are several explanations behind the lack of reliable figures when it comes to converts. Nieuwkerk<sup>65</sup> observes that “most mosques and Islamic centres all over Britain (and by extension Europe and America) do not issue certificates of conversion, nor do they record the number of persons who convert to Islam.” Jawad<sup>66</sup> confirms that there are no reliable figures as to the number of converts in Western Europe, and adds that “most European states do not usually inquire about religious affiliation in their national censuses, and mosques in most individual European countries do not keep formal records on the number of people who convert to Islam.”

Indeed the situation seems to be similar in the majority of Western and Northern European countries: while some governments simply do not keep track of religious affiliation (like France, Britain<sup>67</sup> or Denmark<sup>68</sup>), some do offer certain figures based on the numbers of belonging to Catholic or Protestant Church, but no insights into the number of converts (Germany). It is clear that no sufficient attention is paid to measuring religious affiliation from both governmental and the side of religious groups. It is questionable if the religious groups would be willing to provide quantitative data, even if they had it. Stauberg and Engler<sup>69</sup> look into this matter when discussing methods, and point out that “scholars of religious groups – in particular of marginal ones – often neglect to provide elementary quantitative data, which would be very useful for other and later scholars.”

The figures above also show certain level of discrepancy and some of the sources contradict between themselves to a high level. Very often those estimations are given without a reference to the sources of those records, nor explain how those calculations and estimations were made. It is interesting that some religious group conduct unofficial researches on other religious groups, in order to prove that the other group is not as big as they claim to be.

To summarize, converts are not a numerous group with a significant contribution to Muslim population in Northwest Europe, at least not in the majority of Northwest European countries. Female converts outnumber male converts in all Northwest European countries. The ratios

---

<sup>65</sup> Van Nieuwkerk, K. (2006:153). *Women embracing Islam: gender and conversion in the West*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

<sup>66</sup> Jawad, H. A. (2011:21). *Towards building a British Islam: new Muslims' perspectives*. London: Continuum.

<sup>67</sup> Kose, Ali. (2010). *Conversion to Islam – A Study of Native British Converts*. Routledge.

<sup>68</sup> Jacobsen, Brian Arly. (2015:173) *Islam and Muslims in Denmark*. In “After Integration – Islam, Conviviality and Contentious Politics in Europe. Edited by Marian Burchardt and Ines Michalowski

<sup>69</sup> Stauberg, M., & Engler, S. (2014). *The Routledge handbook of research methods in the study of religion*. London: Routledge.

differ, depending on a source - Jawad writes that it is 1:2 in Britain and 1:4 in America<sup>70</sup>. When it comes to the region studied in this paper, the largest communities of converts are in the UK, Germany and France. The figures vary depending on a source and my concern is that figures could be decreased or increased based on personal interests (for example, in cases when those researches were supported by specific religious community). There is also a possibility that some of the converts have not decided to announce their religious conversion publicly, which can have an impact on those figures. Some of the figures might also be outdated, due to the outdated or old research.

### **3.3. The “typical” female convert in Northwest Europe**

In spite of complexity and numerous issues which come with any form of generalization, this section will aim at depicting a “typical” female convert to Islam. Generalization in any form is not rewarding and is definitely challenging, but portraying a “typical” convert is a small contribution to better understanding of this group. The objective is to build a profile of an average convert based on the information which is already provided by various researchers in this field. This depiction will look into finding out the average age at which conversion to Islam occurs, the “profile” of the convert and the key reasons behind the conversion and the social settings in which conversion occurs. Upon exploring those aspects of conversion, a clearer picture of female conversion in the West should be presented.

In regard to building a profile of the “typical” convert, van Nieuwkerk<sup>71</sup> refers to the research conducted by Poston in 1992, which “includes a sample of 72 American and European converts to Islam and tries to present a profile of the “typical” convert to Islam. The material in the present volume, however, shows that it is difficult to assume any typicality among converts. They are a far too heterogeneous group”, concludes Nieuwkerk. On the other hand, some of Poston’s findings certainly do show similarities to the more recent research in the field, as it will be described below.

A specific answer to this question within the context of the UK female converts is to be found in the study by multi-faith group Faith Matters. Kevin Brice from Swansea University in Wales, together with an inter-faith group called “Faith Matters” conducted a survey, which

---

<sup>70</sup> Jawad, H. A. (2011:4). *Towards building a British Islam: new Muslims' perspectives*. London: Continuum.

<sup>71</sup> Van Nieuwkerk, K. (2006:3). *Women embracing Islam: gender and conversion in the West*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.



was a part of his report on converts to Islam in the United Kingdom. The survey, published in 2010, revealed that nearly two thirds of the converts were women, more than 70% were white and the average age at conversion was 27.5<sup>72</sup>. In March 2013, another report, looking solely into female conversion, resulted as a collaborative research project established between the Centre of Islamic Studies from Cambridge University and The New Muslims Project, based at Leicestershire<sup>73</sup>. Professor Suleiman, the leader of the “Narratives” project and author of “Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Female Perspectives” report, did not specify any typicality in female conversion, but rather looked into similarities which are common for this group, mostly into challenges and issues they are facing.

If compared to the previous research and data, Ali Köse notes that “the majority of the research on conversion agrees that it is most likely to occur during adolescence<sup>74</sup>”, but sees the average conversion age as 29.7.

Zebiri<sup>75</sup> believes that the average age of conversion is decreasing, as her sample on British converts showed an average age of 23.5. Concerning female-male ratio, she adds that there is “a preponderance of women, with some suggesting a ratio of 2:1 in Britain”. As we could see in the chapter on number of converts, the same ratio was suggested by Jawad.

Most of the findings correlate with Poston’s attempt to describe a typical Western convert to Islam: “an individual in his or her late twenties or early thirties<sup>76</sup>”

Jawad<sup>77</sup> briefly says that the majority of converts are “white, young and unmarried” and “some of those women come from middle-class backgrounds”.

According to “Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West<sup>78</sup>”, in 1996 Köse<sup>79</sup> conducted one of the first in-depth studies of modern Western converts and reported that “of his British

---

<sup>72</sup> Brice, Kevin. A Minority Within a Minority: a Report on converts to Islam in the United Kingdom. Swansea University, on behalf of Faith Matters. Retrieved from: <http://faith-matters.org/images/stories/fm-reports/a-minority-within-a-minority-a-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk.pdf>

<sup>73</sup> Suleiman, Y. (2013). Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain. Female Perspectives (Rep.). University of Cambridge.

<sup>74</sup> Köse, A. (2010: 46, 47). Conversion to Islam a study of native British converts. London: Routledge.

<sup>75</sup> Zebiri, K. (2008). British Muslim converts: choosing alternative lives. Oxford: Oneworld Publications

<sup>76</sup> Poston, L. (1992:179). Islamic Da`wah in the West. Cary: Oxford University Press.

<sup>77</sup> Jawad, H. A. (2011:4). Towards building a British Islam: new Muslims' perspectives. London: Continuum.

<sup>78</sup> Tottoli, R. (Ed.). (2015). Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

<sup>79</sup> Kose, Ali (1996:80). Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts. Kegan Paul International

subjects, 55 percent came from middle- or upper-middle class families, 60 percent had at least a bachelor's degree, and 20 percent had graduate degrees".

In overall, and based on the research which has been conducted so far, a typical female convert of Western or Northern European origin will convert between the age of 23 and 30, will be educated to a degree level, most probably come from middle- or upper-middle class, and in most cases not have a problematic childhood (as it will be shown in the chapter dedicated to the motivation for conversion). Therefore, certain typicality can be identified, but in overall the information is still very limited.

### **3.4. Key reasons behind the conversion to Islam in Northwest Europe**

The following chapter will be looking into describing the key reasons behind female conversion to Islam in Northwest Europe, based on the studies which were published in the post- WWII period and contrasted to the historical views and findings.

Walters and Monaghan<sup>80</sup> recognize that the reasons behind the conversion of native Europeans to Islam are varied, "ranging from personal traumatic experiences to political curiosity and rebellion." As a commonality they note that "the majority of native European converts have been respectful and law-abiding citizens who fully participate in social and economic life." Those findings about the reasons behind conversion refer to the European converts' community in overall, and not to female converts to Islam in particular.

When looking into the roots and causes of conversion, most of the researchers try to find the answers through observing psycho-social aspects of conversion, in particular through looking at childhood and/or lifespan development. Köse<sup>81</sup>, compared the group of converts to Islam he interviewed and its characteristics to conversion biographies of other groups who have been studied in a similar way; an interesting finding was that "in general the converts to Islam drew a normal or happy (but rarely very happy) picture of their childhood, although there were extreme cases which were described as 'horrible'." According to Köse, 44% reported a happy childhood, 26% moderate, 30% an unhappy childhood. These findings contradict the previous studies which Köse referred to and which were conducted during the 60s, 70s and

---

<sup>80</sup> Monaghan, R., Ramirez, J. M., & Walters, T. K. (2013:41, 42). *Radicalization, Terrorism, and Conflict*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

<sup>81</sup> Köse, A. (2010: 46, 47). *Conversion to Islam a study of native British converts*. London: Routledge.

the 80s, and were looking into other groups of converts (born-again Christians, the repentant Jews, the Hare Krishna devotees, the Bahai converts, Meher Baba cult...<sup>82</sup>) Referring to the authors of those studies, Kose points out that most of those groups of converts described their childhoods as unhappy. Based on Kose's summaries and quotations given by the authors of those studies, one can conclude that particular traumatic events from the childhood were somewhat related to the conversion itself. This is not explicitly stated and it is certainly more implied than taken as a granted conclusion.

Zabiri<sup>83</sup> sees two main possible reasons for preponderance of women converts as “the marriage factor” and “the fact that women are more likely to be involved in organized religion generally than are men”. Roald<sup>84</sup> believes that personal encounters are more important for conversion to Islam than to other religions. Furthermore, she looks into the claims of the converts and spots “an intellectual refusal of their own society's values or beliefs” as one of the main findings. The so called ‘refusal of own society’ and unhappiness with it are very often mentioned in the converts' narratives available online. Many converts state that this unhappiness and emptiness led them towards searching for ‘values’ and ‘meanings’. Some refer to “voids” in Western society and feeling that “there was something missing”. Some admit to leading very liberal lifestyles and believe that Islam saved them, while others say that they were leading more or less ‘calm’ life before conversion so nothing really changed<sup>85</sup>.

When it comes to Christian women, Sookhdeo<sup>86</sup> sees marriage to Muslim man as the main reason behind the conversion to Islam. She even uses the term “Diana syndrome<sup>87</sup>” to a number of women attracted to Muslim men because of their vulnerability, seeking happiness and seeking family and community to care for them. I personally disagree with Sookhdeo's view (in spite of her 30 years' experience of engagement with Christian women married to Muslim men), as I believe this could be a biased generalization which then leaves no good argumentation for male conversion and to a certain extent defines converts as “vulnerable” and “easy to exploit”, as quoted by Sookhdeo. The intention here is not to neglect the connection between marriage and female conversion, however it should be explored

---

<sup>82</sup> Köse, A. (2010: 32). Conversion to Islam a study of native British converts. London: Routledge.

<sup>83</sup> Zebiri, K. (2008). British Muslim converts: choosing alternative lives. Oxford: Oneworld Publications

<sup>84</sup> Roald, A. S. (2004). New Muslims in the European context: the experience of Scandinavian converts. Leiden: Brill.

<sup>85</sup> These are summarized ideas collected by reading numerous conversion stories available on different online portals

<sup>86</sup> Sookhdeo, R. (2012). Why Christian Women Convert to Islam. Isaac Publishing

<sup>87</sup> According to Sookhdeo, those women are typified by Princess Diana

thoroughly. At this stage it can certainly be mentioned that marriage is one of the reasons behind the conversion of Western women. This statement is, to a certain extent, supported by some of the participants in Kose's research, where "marrying a spouse in the new faith seems to have been the primary motivation for their conversion<sup>88</sup>", as well as Jawad<sup>89</sup>'s findings that "a large number of Western women who convert to Islam do so on the basis of personal connections such as marriage with Muslim men." On the other hand, Roald's findings in relation to exploring the relationship between love/marriage and conversion <sup>90</sup> are that female converts "feel belittled by the insinuation that they cannot decide for themselves".

Conversion by marriage is classified as noninstrumental relational conversion, according to Allievi typology of conversion itineraries to Islam<sup>91</sup>. This typology of conversion also includes conversions induced by different sorts of relationships to Muslims, either through family, marriage, meeting immigrants or traveling. Rational conversions are induced by intellectual, political or mystically oriented paths. In my opinion, the lines between rational and relational conversion can sometimes be blurred, and most of the converts will see the conversion as a rational one. A different theory, seeing conversion as "an inner" or "outer" process, will be proposed at the end of this chapter.

Ozyurek<sup>92</sup> sees conversion as a result of "healthy integration and co-existence" and recognizes that, based on her personal research and findings by other researches, "almost all conversions to Islam are initiated by a deep and meaningful relationship with a Muslim. This person may be a neighbour, a school friend, a colleague or a partner." Van Nieuwkerk<sup>93</sup> believes that "meeting Muslims in daily life is probably more important for present-day conversions (than Da'wah) and that "finding a Muslim partner triggers interest in Islam that eventually can lead to conversion." Several resources<sup>94</sup> mention cases of religious conversion

---

<sup>88</sup> Köse, A. (2010: 114). *Conversion to Islam a study of native British converts*. London: Routledge.

<sup>89</sup> Haifaa Jawad. (2006:156), "Female Conversion to Islam: The Sufi Paradigm" in Karin van Nieuwkerk, 2006. *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*. University of Texas Press: Austin

<sup>90</sup> Roald, A. S. (2004:98). *New Muslims in the European context: the experience of Scandinavian converts*. Leiden: Brill.

<sup>91</sup> In Van Nieuwkerk, (2006:3). *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*.

<sup>92</sup> Feroz, E. (n.d.). Interview with Esra Ozyurek. Germany and Islam: "Muslims are already German" - Qantara.de. Retrieved May 06, 2017, from <https://en.qantara.de/content/germany-and-islam-muslims-are-already-german>

<sup>93</sup> Karin van Nieuwkerk in Rambo, L. R. (Ed.). (2014:670). *The Oxford handbook of religious conversion*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>94</sup> For example Kose (2010) and Sookhdeo (2012)

for the sake of marrying a Muslim<sup>95</sup>. This motive of Muslims being “intermediators” between the converts and Islam is commonly found in various reports and research within this field; however, when looking into the converts’ stories available online (including the personal narratives on the websites and testimonies which were integrated into newspapers’ articles), many do acknowledge the role of partner and/or friends in getting familiar with Islam, however very few mention it as the reason which had impact on the conversion itself. The majority of stories quickly move towards the descriptions of beauty of Islam as the cause behind the conversion. The majority of both European and American converts’ stories reflect the similarities in structure. The potential reason behind not acknowledging the role of partnership in conversion might be related to Roald’s findings stated above. I am also inclined to believe, based on the readings so far, that the authors who are converts or Muslims themselves show more tendency to look into the pureness and beauty of religion as the main cause of conversion, while other researchers/authors focus more on social context of conversion, for example relations to other people, the role of partner, or past experiences.

Throughout my secondary research and analysing literature that is available I figured out that's another distinction can be made based on the difference between those who were religious before conversion and those who were not religious before conversion. The trigger for those who were religious before conversion to Islam was identifying questions that could not, according to them, be answered by in this case, Christianity, or simply feeling that there is something that is missing and looking into other religions that could provide answers to those questions. What is mentioned many times in the online stories of converts is the motive of trinity, which did not make sense to some and led them towards Islam. The trigger for those who were not religious was curiosity, inspiration by media depictions of Islam, or even reading about Islam to convince someone to leave Islam and then ending up converting to it. The last motive is found in several female converts’ stories available online, and the common pattern is a Western woman meeting a Muslim man, being curious how such a smart and charming individual can believe in something like Islam, so she starts reading about it to beat his arguments for being a Muslim. Eventually she discovers the beauty of Islam and converts, often becoming more religious than her Muslim husband.

---

<sup>95</sup> However, Islam does not require “women of the Book”, which are Christian and Jewish women, to convert to be able to marry a Muslim man. On the other hand, it is not permissible for Muslim women to marry a man who is not a Muslim.

To conclude, the female converts to Islam in Northwest Europe are a diverse group whose motives to convert vary. What is common for the majority of the conversions to Islam is the encounter with Muslims in one form or another, at least in the initial stages (or pre-conversion phase). According to Roald<sup>96</sup>, it is 91% of new Muslim in the present investigation had those encounters. Based on the available readings within this field, my theory is that the motives to convert can roughly be divided into two groups – “inner” and “outer” factors, in other words, inner being spiritual factors which originated as a genuine need for deeper meanings of faith, and the outer ones which were initiated by factors like the environment or the encounters with individuals or cultures.

### **3.5. Prejudices / Stereotypes: exploring “Otherness” and marginalisation**

“Following their conversion, most indigenous European women find themselves marginalized – a position they never anticipated for themselves.” –writes Özyürek<sup>97</sup> As further text will show, conversion brings a lot of changes in the social context. This chapter aims at identifying the key prejudices faced by female converts to Islam. A brief reflections will be presented along the results of the study.

McGinty<sup>98</sup>, when summarizing her converts-related research impressions in academic and non-academic contexts, says: “overall, Islam has become a charged and widely discussed subject that generates a lot of emotions; everyone seems to have an opinion about it.” Therefore, it is understandable that media plays a significant role in influencing the public opinions, by presenting the converts in one way or another.

In the article “Biography and Choice: Female Converts to Islam in the Netherlands” from 2008, Karen van Nieuwkerk identifies three key presuppositions which make female conversion to Islam illogical in the eyes of the West<sup>99</sup>: “as a long history of distorted images” of Islam in the West, “public opinion as well as relatives and friends of converts suspect the converts’ rationality and freedom of choice” and “the fact that women opt for Islam is

---

<sup>96</sup> Roald, A. (2004:99). *New Muslims in the European context*. Leiden: Brill.

<sup>97</sup> Özyürek, E. (2015:67). *Being German, becoming Muslim: race, religion, and conversion in the new Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>98</sup> McGinty, A. M. (2006:4). *Becoming Muslim: Western women's conversions to Islam*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>99</sup> Karin van Nieuwkerk. (2008: 431, 432). *Biography and Choice: Female Converts to Islam in the Netherlands, Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 19:4, 431-447

deemed illogical and contrary to their own interests as women”. By simple comparison of these three reasons which define conversion to Islam as illogical from the Western perspective, subjectivity and the power of public opinion can easily be identified. “Opinion” seems to be the key word when it comes to connotations of Islam in the Western setting.

The prejudice that Muslim women have no rights is probably the most common and widely spread Islam-related prejudice in the West. Khan et al<sup>100</sup> mention that today many Muslim men and women are engaging in what they call “a gender jihad”, which is “a struggle for reclaiming women’s rights guaranteed by Islam” and “reclaiming Islam’s spirit of justice for all”. The majority of female converts to Islam are aware of this prejudice and the women rights are often mentioned in case studies in the books, as well as online narratives. Often the online narratives and testimonies of converts mention how Islam is praising women and giving them rights, and how kindly the Prophet Mohammed treated his wives.

The fieldwork conducted by Ramahi and Suleiman, which explores the relationships between female converts to Islam in Britain and their friends and families, was conducted in 2013. One of the aims was testing the assumption that the women who converted would be in one way or another “othered” by the people who are closest to them, turned to be correct. “Strangeness was introduced into the relationship on the level of spirituality. Islam’s visibility became a measure of distance between the converts and their intimates. Friends and family expressed having no understanding for the conversion but often felt challenged or angered by it<sup>101</sup>.” Jensen<sup>102</sup>, who analysed converts to Islam in Denmark, writes that, according to converts, broken family relations in most cases are initiated by the family. She observes that “conversion to Islam is interpreted as leaving Danish identity behind”, and this is a very common question raised in relation to the “new identity” of converts to Islam. This interpretation certainly is a prejudice, because changing religious affiliation does not necessarily imply that an individual chose to break the relationships with its pre-conversion culture. On the other hand, converting to Islam does imply dissociating from some activities which are prohibited in Islam (such as eating pork, drinking alcohol, partying etc.)

---

<sup>100</sup> Khan, S. (2016). *The battle for British Islam: reclaiming Muslim identity from extremism*. London: Saqi Books.

<sup>101</sup> Ramahi, D.A. & Suleiman, Y. *Cont Islam* (2017). doi:10.1007/s11562-016-0376-0

<sup>102</sup> Tina Gudrun Jensen (2008:398) *To Be ‘Danish’, Becoming ‘Muslim’: Contestations of National Identity?*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34:3, 389-409, DOI: 10.1080/13691830701880210

In regard to prejudices the new converts to Islam face among their families, friends and colleagues, knowledge of the faith keeps an important place. Suleiman<sup>103</sup> notes that “converts may also be expected to be experts on Islam and address and counter any prejudice that is presented to them.” This often happens while the faith-related knowledge is still elementary and converts are expected to “become spokespeople for every global event which involves Muslims”. Furthermore, Suleiman points out that, should a new convert fail to adequately respond, “they are often considered to be naive fools who have been duped.” Paradoxically, by thinking that a new convert can clarify and counter prejudices presented to them, those prejudices simply multiply and increase the gap between “us” and “them”. In my opinion, some of the converts might not feel comfortable participating in religion-related research, as they are often expected to defend their decision to convert.

Joseph and Nagmabadi<sup>104</sup> indicate that, in addition to hijab, which has become a “Muslim identifier” and therefore often a reason for being targeted, women who convert to Islam face additional pressures, such as rejection by family members, severed relations because of intolerance, and even reported the cases of parents of converts who attempted to gain custody of their grandchildren. Joseph and Nagmabadi also note that in other cases “family and friends may express tolerance towards their relatives converting to Islam, but treat them as if they have become disloyal citizens.” Similar approach to these motives is found in “Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century: “in many female testimonies, the family is reasonably accepting of their conversion until they take on hijab, at which point the attitude changes” and “women who convert to Islam sometimes find themselves on the receiving end of a particular type of hostility – they are accused of having betrayed the cause of feminism, for which the women in the West fought so hard<sup>105</sup>.” The key words here are “hijab” and “betrayal”, both rooted in distancing of oneself from what is considered to be Western European values, where hijab is seen as a sign of female submission and conversion as a separation from inherited values, traditions and moreover, Euroculture. Interestingly, it seems like the environment decides to tolerate (or ignore) the (inner) change and even accept it, as long as that change is not visible and transparent. This inner change eventually takes a

---

<sup>103</sup> Suleiman, Y. (2013:25). *Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain. Female Perspectives (Rep.)*. University of Cambridge.

<sup>104</sup> Joseph, S. (Ed.). (2005:185). *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures: Family, Law and Politics*. Leiden: Brill.

<sup>105</sup> Zebiri, Kate – *Orientalist Themes in Contemporary British Islamophobia*. In Esposito, J. L., & Kalin, I. (Eds.). (2011:182). *Islamophobia: the challenge of pluralism in the 21st century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



manifestation in physical change – hijab, which brings a full spectrum of connotations and because of those connotations and interpretations becomes one of the key prejudice/discrimination areas. Those connotations raise mostly from the fact that hijab is not a simple piece of cloth – its powerful symbolism, depending on interpretation, varies from liberation to oppression. The Islamic interpretation is very simple and understood as an order from God (Allah) that the believers should “cast down their glances and guard their private parts<sup>106</sup>” and the core of the order lies in modesty, decency and protection. By reading through the stories and interviews with converts which are available online, I came to a conclusion that the majority of converts who chose to wear it will define it as “liberating” or even “empowering”, but on the other hand, the majority does not begin wearing it immediately upon conversion – it seems to be a gradual process until “full-time hijab”, as one of the converts named it, is introduced. This is mostly because of fearing the reaction of family, friends, colleagues in the work environment, but also the reactions of random people in public. Van Nieuwkerk<sup>107</sup> collected around 15 hijab stories and 15 niqab<sup>108</sup> stories and a few of those see veiling as liberating because the focus moves from physical appearance to woman’s intellect. However, it seems like hijab contains the opposite connotations in many Western societies, entailing both causes of prejudices and discrimination. While the key prejudices are built about the thought that those women are oppressed (and forced to wear hijab), to multi-layered discrimination present in different forms. “For women converts, the hijab brings not only outside rejection and hostility but also strong family opposition. This might jeopardize family ties, which are already under strain as a result of their conversion.” - writes Jawad<sup>109</sup>. Jawad also reports that some educated British and other European women chose not to wear hijab to avoid obstacles towards upward social mobility.

Some of the European converts to Islam report more violent forms of discrimination, mostly triggered by the fact they wear hijab. Those testimonies are easily found online and contain disturbing descriptions of harassment, from very offensive verbal attacks and cursing to physical harassments.

One prejudice which does not exclusively apply to female converts to Islam, but most probably the majority of converts to Islam in spite of their gender or background, are the

---

<sup>106</sup> Quran, Chapter 24- An Nur, Verses 30-31; Retrieved May 5, 2017 from: <https://quran.com/24/31>

<sup>107</sup> Van Nieuwkerk, Karin. (2006:105, 106). *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*. University of Texas Press: Austin

<sup>108</sup> a cloth that covers the face as a part of sartorial hijab

<sup>109</sup> Jawad, H. A. (2011:3). *Towards building a British Islam: new Muslims' perspectives*. London: Continuum.

(mis)conceptions of Jihad and Western views on Islam based on a stereotype of it as an inherently violent religion. After two years of conducting extensive interviews, Dutch investigative journalists Groen and Kranenberg wrote<sup>110</sup>: “In the Muslim community, stories of converts abound. Entire websites are filled with them, and Salafist mosques even notice an increase in natives, especially women, and they publish the most beautiful conversion stories on websites or in a book.” While it is almost completely contradictory to put “Salafist mosques” and “beautiful conversion stories” in the same sentence, I believe that the authors did not want to generalize and imply the connection between Salafism and converts. In my opinion, the aim was to refer to the findings that “although many Europeans would stereotypically associate jihadi terrorists as Arabs or South Asians, white and black European converts have actually participated in most terrorist plots and actual attacks that have taken place on European soil since 9/11<sup>111</sup>”. Karagiannis adds that some government-issued reports “also shed light on the increasing role of converts in terrorist plots and attacks”. It is clearly that this prejudice (as any form of generalization in this context is unethical and discriminatory) is based on such reports and a certain number of converts who did participate in terrorist attacks. When trying to explain the relation between conversion and participation in such acts, I thought of Roald’s model or as she defines it “stages of conversion”, where the first stage is “falling in love” or “being more royal than the king<sup>112</sup>”. This “emotional obsessiveness” with the new religion might be so powerful to influence some individuals lacking stability and support to participate in the terrorist attacks. In my personal opinion, this could be avoided by providing support and understanding within the community, instead of prejudicing and discriminating new converts. In overall, more emphasis should be put into understanding and re-building the relations taking into account the new circumstances and choices made. This applies on all levels - within family, friends, work-environment and societal levels.

Are the prejudices, which female converts to Islam face, limited to their ex-religious communities, in this context the Christian majority, family members, friends, acquaintances and so on? No. Zebiri<sup>113</sup> points out that “converts are sometimes dismayed to discover that

---

<sup>110</sup> Groen, J., & Kranenberg, A. (2012). *Women warriors for Allah: an Islamist network in the Netherlands*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>111</sup> Emmanuel Karagiannis (2012:103) *European Converts to Islam: Mechanisms of Radicalization, Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 13:1, 99-113, DOI: 10.1080/21567689.2012.659495

<sup>112</sup> Roald, A. (2004:283). *New Muslims in the European context*. Leiden: Brill.

<sup>113</sup> Zebiri, K. (2008). *British Muslim converts: choosing alternative lives*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications

they have to cope with prejudice not only from British society but also from born Muslims. Based on the responses from her interviewees, she mentions some, such as:

- “Real” Muslims versus “second-class” Muslims, which are converts
- Being presumed ignorant
- Different sorts of accusations, such as being “spies” or not being “real” Muslims
- “the wrong colour skin, the wrong gender, the wrong job, the wrong background, the wrong history”

The question of “real Muslims” is also raised by Suleiman, in regard to finding suitable partners for marriage: “both converts and their children can face prejudice from heritage Muslims who may regard them as *not Muslim enough for marriage*”<sup>114</sup>. Cultural prejudice, racism and issues over virginity<sup>115</sup> are also mentioned in Suleiman’s report. Those can also be aspects of discrimination area by the new community of converts to Islam. “The wrong colour skin”, as defined by Zebiri, or “Whiteness” by Moosavi, where Moosavi sees the paradox of being both privileged and discriminated<sup>116</sup> as a white convert to Islam. “These types of insults (racist insults) go hand in hand with the infrequent but hurtful instances when converts are told they are ‘traitors’ for converting to Islam. They are imagined as abandoning the nation and joining ‘the enemy’ by those who view Muslims as Other.” – explains Moosavi. Some of them reported being called “white Paki” or Arab. While Moosavi report refers to both male and female converts to Islam and aims at overviewing the general prejudice within the context of race, Patel<sup>117</sup> offers quite a different view; in her opinion, “white converts are often viewed by the white majority with confusion and sympathy”, but also that “white converts are considered by other whites as oppressed and confused – especially female converts.”

Jensen <sup>118</sup> observes that “while converts, on the one hand, are inclined to embody the public image of themselves as ‘other’, on the other hand they experience difference and make

---

<sup>114</sup> Suleiman, Y. (2013:44). Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain. Female Perspectives (Rep.). University of Cambridge.

<sup>115</sup> Suleiman, Y. (2013:50). Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain. Female Perspectives (Rep.). University of Cambridge.

<sup>116</sup> Moosavi, L. (2015:43). The Racialization of Muslim Converts in Britain and Their Experiences of Islamophobia. *Critical Sociology*, 41-56. doi:10.1177/0896920513504601

<sup>117</sup> Patel, T. G. (2016:114). *Race and society*. Sage Publications Ltd.

<sup>118</sup> Tina Gudrun Jensen (2008:400) To Be ‘Danish’, Becoming ‘Muslim’: Contestations of National Identity?, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34:3, 389-409, DOI: 10.1080/13691830701880210

distinctions in their actual interactions with immigrants of Muslim background.” Again, just like with prejudices, “othering” seems to be multi-layered and shown by both sides. In regard to racism, my opinion is that both sides expose discriminatory behavior based on what is deeply rooted in their prejudice-based visions: that only “Pakistanis” or “Arabs” are Muslims, that only those from Asia or Africa can be Muslims, that “European” who is a Muslim wants to be one of “them” and cannot be white/European anymore; on the other hand, “Europeans” equals “white” which is “immoral”, lacking values, and can never be a real, pure, modest “believer”. So these prejudices equalize race and religion, implying then that the race and religion equal to culture and all the denominations accompanying it.

Last but not least, many converts complain of a general lack of support<sup>119</sup>. According to Jeldtoft and Nielsen<sup>120</sup>, converts often describe themselves as “different” and talk about “the lack of settings and social networks for converts, perceiving themselves as a separate group.” This is probably one of the reasons behind numerous online communities run by or dedicated to converts to Islam. In addition to Da’wah, those online communities also serve the purpose of supporting other converts, sharing experience, guidance and encouragement. In my opinion, converts oscillate between their ex-religious and their new community. There is a tendency to keep good relations with both communities, but that can be difficult. A temporary solution is to build own community of people who can sympathize and who face similar challenges.

Analysing prejudices, discrimination and “Otherness” towards female converts to Islam in Northwest Europe through conducting literature review brought some new findings. This research illuminated that prejudices and discrimination occur not only in the context of ex-religious community (friends, family and co-workers), but within the new community as well. The suggestion is to put more efforts in re-integrating converts into the society instead of “othering” their community or those individuals. The results of this study indicate that more impact should be put into exploring cultural transformations occurring in the post-conversion period. It is also important to understand that converting to Islam, at least in Northwest European context, does not necessarily imply rejecting the national identity. In other words, national identity and religious identity do not exclude each other. Several

---

<sup>119</sup> Zebiri, K. (2008). *British Muslim converts: choosing alternative lives*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications

<sup>120</sup> Jeldtoft, Nadia, and Jørgen S Nielsen. (2012:55) *Methods And Contexts In The Study Of Muslim Minorities*. Routledge

authors (Roald, Özyürek<sup>121</sup>) encourage the idea of embracing both identities at the same time and integrating what they see as their German or Scandinavian or any other values into their understanding of Islam as well. It is yet to see whether this is possible and if so, to which extent it is possible to reconcile these two.

### 3.6. Conclusion

The final remarks of the analysis part are the responses to the research questions.

1. Depicting the female conversion to Islam in Northwest European context – how many converts are there in Europe, what is their background and what are the common reasons behind the conversion to Islam?

The number of converts to Islam in Europe varies depending on the country and there are no uniform or exact figures which can be presented. On average there are 10.000 per Northwest European country, but the figures oscillate from less than a few hundreds to 100.000 in the countries which have the largest converts' population (which are the UK, Germany and France). No exact numbers of female converts are presented in any of the available written resources (including books, encyclopaedia, reports and online media texts), but most of the researchers agree that female converts to Islam outnumber male converts. The “typical” female convert finds her new faith between the adolescence period and the age of 30. She is often educated to a degree level and comes from (upper) middle class. While there is certain uniformity and generalization in this conclusion, it is obviously not a rule which applies to all (I have personally seen various online stories of female converts who became Muslims when they were underage or even in their late 70s). If the findings on average conversion age are correct, they can correlate to average marriage age in Europe, which, depending on a source, varies between 25 and 30. The relation between marriage and conversion is mentioned by numerous sources presented in this paper. What is certain is that some form of interaction with Muslims has impact on the conversion in the majority of cases. The most common reasons for conversion can briefly be summarized as: questioning one's own religion and seeking answers elsewhere, unhappiness with the society they live in and looking for the ways to overcome this void and interaction with Muslims in different forms.

---

<sup>121</sup> Özyürek, E. (2014:24). *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

2. In terms of feeling of marginalisation, what are the most common prejudices faced by female converts to Islam in Northwest Europe?

Several prejudices were identified throughout the research, starting from hijab being an external marker of one's faith, to the questions like women rights, oppressiveness, linking to terrorism and misconceptions of jihad, underestimating converts' intelligence and common sense, underestimating their knowledge, alienation coming from the family members, friends or in the work environment. Those are the most common prejudices faced by female converts to Islam in the context of Western society. However, converts face bigotry from the side of their new community, which sometimes marks them as not being "real" Muslims or judging them for being White or having "history". One of the interesting findings was that converts are sometimes seen as "spies" by both some of the Westerners and some of the members of their new Muslim community. Instead of marginalizing this growing group of individuals, the efforts should be put into re-integration and making their voices heard.

### **3.7. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research**

There were some unavoidable limitations. Statistical (or data) limitation is one of the limitations which should be mentioned here. In relation to it, there is a lack of available / reliable data when it the number of converts in Northwest Europe. The figures gathered throughout the research process oscillate significantly and in relation to the recommendations for future research, there is certainly space for improvement of knowledge in this aspect. There is also the risk of collecting some outdated and inaccurate data when conducting a secondary research. I tried to overcome this limitation by using academic library resources whenever possible, and limiting other online resources (such as newspapers articles or websites) – only if there was no scholarly journals or books looking into that specific matter.

This limitation is a recommendation for future research - by being more informed where the communities of converts are, the societies could put more effort into understanding these groups and encouraging them to actively participate in interfaith dialogue and activities. "Well educated converts to Islam take an active role in educating the mainstream public about Islam and putting a new face on it" – writes Özyürek. It is yet to be explored how these roles are evolving and what the potentials are in the future.

In spite of not analysing the relation between converts and media in this paper, the link is evident. Media played an indirect role in increased conversion and media plays a role in perception of conversion and influence on public opinion. One of the areas to enhance the

understanding of converts in the context of Northwest Europe is to understand the way media can help in combating prejudice and discrimination and assist in bridging the gap of “Otherness”.

Another potential suggestion for further research is considering a different angle when conducting research concerning the converts to Islam in Northwest Europe. The differences in the conversion process to Islam versus other religions should be taken into account. Some authors have already started acknowledging the terminology like “Euro-Islam”, “German Islam” or “Scandinavian Islam” when referring to converts and adjusted paths of Europeans who remain European but seek to integrate their new faith into the society they live in, and after all, belong to.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

This chapter will present some of the findings and experiences which rose during the research process, and which refer to researching converts/reverts as a group of interest.

### **4.1. Reflection on methods**

This study employed structured literature review, which built upon the traditional research review, and attempted to enhance it by including some of the aspects of systematic literature review. While the structured literature review was rewarding in finding the answers to the research questions raised above, some of the limitations are still present.

My initial plan was to analyse personal stories of converts and deliver conclusions based on inductive reasoning and collecting the personal narratives of female converts to Islam. Through the analysis of personal stories, I intended to identify the key similarities and motives. This analysis would have allowed me to filter and present the most common prejudices assigned to the female converts to Islam. Unfortunately, finding and motivating the potential participants to enrol in this study was more complex than I thought. I contacted several online communities dedicated to Da‘wah and online converts’ communities. When asked to use the stories that were already available online, the administrators referred me to get the permissions from the authors (converts/reverts). Since it was impossible to track and find the contact details of the converts by their first names, one of the communities offered to

contact them on my behalf. The converts who were responsive and willing to participate unfortunately did not fit the frame of this research (were not from Western or Northern Europe). Some potential participants initially agreed to take part in this research, but then withdrew or simply did not respond when I followed up. Some of the online communities did not respond at all, and one of the communities referred me to the reputable academic in this field as a person who could help. In overall, I contacted 10-15 different online communities/websites.

I eventually gave up insisting and realised that some of the reasons behind poor (almost non-existent) response rate and lack of interest in participating could be because of:

- My “negative” focus – instead of focusing at the beauty of conversion and positive stories, I was asking about prejudices, negative experiences, judgement, sense of alienation – “otherness”. Evoking those thoughts and memories is apparently not pleasant at all.
- Bad experience converts have/had with this type of researches, which was also pointed out by other researchers and authors

Several authors reported difficulties in availability and accessibility of female participants. Kose believes that “his research covers less female subjects than it should because females were not easy to contact compared to males”. Mansson McGinty, in regard to her fieldwork in Sweden, points out some problems which were faced: “due to mistrust and negative reactions to an article written by another social scientist in which some converts felt misrepresented, strong voices within “the convert community” persuaded female converts not to participate in any research, mine included.” She furthermore states that one woman told her that she and the other women that did participate in her study were seen as betrayers. Eventually she made acquaintance mostly by recommendation of converts themselves. This experience can imply that limited studies which were conducted might be a consequence of the community’s limited responsiveness towards the researchers who are not Muslims or converts themselves. Moosavi reports that “on some occasions there was a sense of reluctance to participate amongst some converts which he sensed was either because a) they were bored with participating in research or b) they were suspicious of whether there was a political agenda behind the research<sup>122</sup>”.

---

<sup>122</sup> Moosavi, L. (2015). The Racialization of Muslim Converts in Britain and Their Experiences of Islamophobia. In *Critical Sociology*, 41(1), 41-56. doi:10.1177/0896920513504601



Developing participatory models of research could certainly contribute to limiting the chances of repeated misinterpretation of participants. In relation to this matter, Roald makes a distinction between an “insider” and an “outsider”: “as an insider I acquired knowledge which would perhaps never have been accessible to a non-Muslim researcher. Moreover, as an insider I have the same interest as other insiders, and my quest for knowledge often coincides with that of the research objects”. Roald believes that there is a difference in the knowledge obtained in studies on Muslims, depending on that whether the researcher is a Muslim or not. While I second that the accessibility of certain information indeed correlates with the insider-outsider model, I disagree with the statement that the differences in obtained knowledge lies in the researcher’s religious affiliation. This is simply because the religious affiliation does not necessarily imply the knowledge and the competence of the researcher.

An informed approach striving for objectivity and participation, where ideally the research is about exchanging ideas instead of interrogation, would certainly enrich our findings in this field. I also strongly believe that certain communities are more difficult to approach than the others – and this is mostly because they feel either discriminated, “othered” or rejected by the community, and those feelings outweigh the need for “raising their voices” or “telling their stories”.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, A. S. (2014). *Islam Today*. London: I.B.Tauris. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uu/detail.action?docID=676554>
- Aksöyek, A. (2000). *Sociographie de la population turque et d'origine turque: Quarante ans de présence en Belgique (1960–2000): Dynamiques, problèmes, perspectives*. Brussels: Centre de relations européennes
- An increasing number of Danes are converting to Islam*. 21 February 2010. Retrieved April 30 from: <http://www.euro-islam.info/2010/02/21/an-increasing-number-of-danes-are-converting-to-islam/>
- Baile, M. W. (2011). *Beyond the Clash of Civilizations: A New Cultural Synthesis for Muslims in the West*. Bloomington, IN: IUUniverse Inc.
- Berglund, N. (2015, June 8). *More Norwegians convert to Islam*. Retrieved April 40, 2017, from <http://www.newsinenglish.no/2015/06/08/more-norwegians-convert-to-islam/>
- Booth, A. (2016). *Systematic Approaches to a Successful Literature Review*. London: SAGE Publishing.
- Brice, K. (2010). *A Minority within a Minority: A Report on Converts to Islam in the United Kingdom*. Swansea University, on behalf of Faith Matters. Retrieved from: <http://faith-matters.org/images/stories/fm-reports/a-minority-within-a-minority-a-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk.pdf>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2015). *30 Essential Skills for the Qualitative Researcher*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- El Hareir, I., & M'Baye, R. (2011). *The Spread of Islam throughout the World*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

*Female conversion to Islam in Britain examined in unique research project*. Retrieved April 9, 2017. from: <http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/female-conversion-to-islam-in-britain-examined-in-unique-research-project>

Feroz, E. (2016, July 22). Interview with Esra Ozyurek. *Germany and Islam: "Muslims are already German"* - Qantara.de. Retrieved May 06, 2017, from <https://en.qantara.de/content/germany-and-islam-muslims-are-already-german>

Gilliat-Ray, S. (2010). *Muslims in Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine.

Gough, D., Oliver, S., & Thomas, J. (2017). *An Introduction to Systematic Reviews*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Groen, J., & Kranenberg, A. (2012). *Women warriors for Allah: An Islamist network in the Netherlands*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hackett, C. (2016, July 19). *5 facts about the Muslim population in Europe*. Retrieved April 14, 2017, from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/19/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/>

Hewer, C. (2006). *Understanding Islam: The First Ten Steps*. London: SCM Press.

Jacobsen, B. A. (2015). Islam and Muslims in Denmark. In M. Burchardt & I. Michalowski (Eds.), *After Integration – Islam, Conviviality and Contentious Politics in Europe* (pp 171-186). Springer.

Jawad, H. A. (2011). *Towards Building a British Islam: New Muslims' Perspectives*. London: Continuum.

Jeldtoft N. & Nielsen J. S. (Eds.).(2012). *Methods and Contexts in the Study of Muslim Minorities*. Routledge.

Jensen, T. G. (2008). *To Be 'Danish', Becoming 'Muslim': Contestations of National Identity?* *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34:3, 389-409,

DOI:10.1080/13691830701880210 Retrieved from

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691830701880210>

Joseph, S. (Ed.). (2005). *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures: Family, Law and Politics*. Leiden: Brill.

Karagiannis, E. (2012). *European Converts to Islam: Mechanisms of Radicalization, Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 13:1, 99-113, DOI: 10.1080/21567689.2012.659495

Khan, S. (2016). *The Battle for British Islam: Reclaiming Muslim Identity from Extremism*. London: Saqi Books.

Köse, A. (1996). *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts*. London: Routledge.

Krogh, K. & Termansen, J. (2006). *Angående Muhammed: 2.500 danskere er konverteret til islam*. Berlingske Tidende

Marbach, P. (2010, June 21). *Les Suisses se tournent vers l'islam par amour*. 20 minutes Romandie SA. Retrieved April 30, 2017 from:  
<http://www.20min.ch/ro/news/suisse/story/14388429>

McGinty, A. M. (2006). *Becoming Muslim Western Women's Conversions to Islam*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

McGinty, A. M. (2007). *Formation of Alternative Femininities through Islam: Feminist Approaches among Muslim Converts in Sweden*. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 30, 474-485. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2007.09.004>

Miller, L. (Ed). (2013). *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality*. Oxford University Press.

Moosavi, L. (2015). The Racialization of Muslim Converts in Britain and Their Experiences of Islamophobia. In *Critical Sociology*, 41(1), 41-56. doi:10.1177/0896920513504601

Nielsen, J. S., & Otterbeck, J. (2004). *Muslims in Western Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Nieuwkerk, K. (2008). Biography and Choice: Female Converts to Islam in the Netherlands. In *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 19:4, 431-447

Nieuwkerk, K. (2014). "Conversion" to Islam and the construction of a pious self. In Rambo, L. R. & Fahradian C. E. (Eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nieuwkerk, K. (Ed.). (2006). *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Østergaard, K. & Jensen, T. G. (2007). *Nye muslimer i Danmark: møder og omvendelser (New Muslims in Denmark: Meetings and conversions)*. Højbjerg: Univers.

Özyürek, E. (2014). *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Pascual, J. (2015, September 02). *A Close-Up Look At French Converts To Islam*. Retrieved April 30, 2017, from <https://www.worldcrunch.com/culture-society/a-close-up-look-at-french-converts-to-islam>

Patel, T. G. (2016). *Race and Society*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Poston, L. (1992). *Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

*Quran*, Chapter 24- An Nur, Verses 30-31; Retrieved May 5, 2017 from: <https://quran.com/24/31>

Ramahi, D.A. & Suleiman, Y. (2017). Intimate strangers: perspectives on female converts to Islam in Britain. In *Contemporary Islam*, 11:1, pp 21–39. doi:10.1007/s11562-016-0376-0

Roald, A. S. (2001). *Women in Islam: the Western experience*. London; New York: Routledge.

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

Scharbrodt, O., Akgönül, S., Alibašić, A., Nielsen, J. S., Račius, E. (Eds.), (2015). *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*. Volume 7. Leiden: Brill.

Schuurman, B., Grol, P., & Flower, S. (2016). *Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction*. In *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies*. The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 3 (2016). doi:10.19165/2016.2.03

Sookhdeo, R. (2012). *Why Christian Women Convert to Islam*. McLean, United States: Isaac Publishing

Sremac, S., & Topic, M. (2014). *Europe as a Multiple Modernity: Multiplicity of Religious Identities and Belonging*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publ.

Stausberg, M., & Engler, S. (Eds.). (2014). *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*. London: Routledge.

Suleiman, Y. (2013). *Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain. Female Perspectives* (Rep.). University of Cambridge.

Torrekens, C. (2015). *Islam in Belgium: From Formal Recognition to Public Contestation*. In M. Burchardt & I. Michalowski (Eds.), *After Integration – Islam, Conviviality and Contentious Politics in Europe* (pp 153-169).Springer.

Torrekens, C., & Jacobs, D. (2015). *Muslims' religiosity and views on religion in six Western European countries: does national context matter?* In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Volume 42:2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1103032>

Tottoli, R. (Ed.). (2015). *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Walters, T. K. Monaghan, R. & Ramirez, J. M. (Eds.), (2013). *Radicalization, Terrorism, and Conflict*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Why some Brits choose Islamic prayer over partying. (2016, February 12). Retrieved April 17, 2017, from <http://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2016/02/conversion-islam>

Yousef, A. S. (2014). *Islam within Judaism and Christianity, A Voice From the Past: Shedding Light on the Unity Between the Torah, Gospel and Quran Scriptures*. London: AuthorHouse.

Zebiri, K. (2008). *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*. New York: Oneworld Publications.

Zebiri, K. (2011). *Orientalist Themes in Contemporary British Islamophobia*. In: Esposito, John L. and Kalin, Ibrahim, (eds.), *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century*. New York: Oxford University Press.