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**The Bridge
on the River.
European Converts
to Islam
and the Question
of Reconciliation**

This paper engages European converts to Islam as agents of reconciliation. They belong simultaneously to two different worlds: born into one culture, through conversion they reach out to a different one on the other side of the river. For some it is a simple process of crossing and not looking back, while for others it is rather like standing over the river with either foot on a different bank. Of these, some want to be bridges themselves, holding the two banks together. Others, however, being pushed and pulled from both sides, end up in the murky waters of uncertain belonging. Based on case studies, this presentation will explore the issues of reconciliation from the perspective of identity and belonging.

Why Conversion and Reconciliation?

In its simplest terms religious conversion can be described as a change from one religious belief to another¹ indicating that *change* is indeed both its nature and the very essence lying at the heart of religious conversion. In fact, whether sudden and quick or gradual and protracted, whether complete or only partial, change is the defining feature of a conversion process. Conversion does not necessarily have to be a bridge burning act which differentiates in an ultimate way the crossing from the outside to the inside of the border.

Through conversion a person does not become a Muslim, it is rather the *new* Muslim they become: This, aside from the embryo of the new “me”, involves a reaction from the new “us” going arm in arm with the reaction from the new “them”. The impact of conversion transcends negotiations with both sides and also involves an internal re-evaluation of personal notions that must change with the changed religion. One’s views on personal life, on social interactions, and finally, on politics are not detached or unaffected. Every convert needs to reconcile themselves with(in) the new milieu.

It challenges the convert with questions which, although having been answered in the past, need to be re-answered as the old responses are no longer sufficient or valid. Who am I? What is my place in the world? What does it mean? These rudiments are examined, perhaps even for the first time, and in order to gain a perspective furnishing a comprehensible and ordered picture of the world, often the convert needs to scrutinise things that so far were perhaps too obvious to even be looked at.

1 Harms, E. (1962). Ethical and Psychological Implications of Religious Conversion. *Review of Religious Research*, 3:3, pp. 122-131.

Conversion may, and may not, involve a dramatic turnabout in one's life; it might be a change completely at odds with a previous lifestyle or a logical consequence and development, while the earlier cognitive structure and its components might have been either shaken by the change of religious affiliation or remain an ontological fundament for new religious orientation. Conversion can be an act of rebellion or an act of coming home. It may concern people who have already been on a religious quest or those spiritually indifferent or ignorant, who never experienced religious upbringing or were never interested in faith-related issues. Converts may undergo a number of radical changes in their devotional practices, but also behaviour, lifestyles, the fibre of their social networks and the like. Such realignment sometimes involves repudiation of a sinful past and sometimes an embrace of a glorious future; it is a process that can either be rooted in the individual or triggered by the group influence and hence either internally or externally oriented.

'Us' versus 'Them', Present versus Past

Society consists of groups and groupings, this is a wide known truism. Societal classification of 'us' and 'them' is the most prevalent characteristic of the subjective social order. Consequently, one must consider in what sense the 'us' changes with conversion and how it affects 'them'. Does the convert switch sides and perceive the former 'us' as the present 'them' or is it rather a conceptual increment that includes 'us' in a new group that initially was not there? Another problematisation is the place of the self in the new configuration: Is there still 'me' or was it replaced by a group identity? Is the present 'me' identical with the 'me' of the past? How to reconcile the two?

When an individual meets an individual in a social interaction they do not necessarily behave as two separate persons, rather, the interaction is based on their respective membership in two clearly delineated societal groups, just as happens during encounters of football fans supporting different teams. Converts, who live in a situation of constant identity comparison, strive to retain distinctiveness while maintaining integrity; the establishment of distinctiveness results in attachment to 'ideologized positions',² such as the question of burka bans or Palestine, which in

2 Fishman, J. A. (1968). Nationality-nationalism and Nation-nationism. In J. A. Fishman, J. Das Gupta & C. A. Ferguson (Eds.), *Language Problems of Developing Nations* (p. 45). New York: John Wiley and Sons. Cited in Tajfel, H. (1978) The achievement of group differentiation. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Differentiation Between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 101-140). London: Academic Press.

principle neutral, through their reference to super-ordinate values become endowed with emotional significance. In such situations, clashes seem imminent and unavoidable.

The only right place to start this 'us' and 'them' conceptualisation is the momentous breakthrough that shakes converts' whole ontological and epistemological universe as well as changes to their entire life to the extent that even semantically defines them as a group. Conversion has the potential to transform the whole intellectual, emotional and social life of an individual, and may compel the person to make serious adjustments in their lifestyle (e.g. quit drinking) or even start anew e.g. in the cases of some prison conversions, ending the life of crime and beginning a new career. Personal attachments or a strong liking for practicing believers might be central to a conversion process or might be irrelevant. Time-wise, conversion can be a sudden and brief experience or a prolonged process happening over months or even years. The types and modes of conversion change over time and place, they also change across religions: In terms of scope of enquiry this paper is limited to an analysis of European conversions to Islam.

Perceived either as a process or as a single phenomenon, conversion demarcates the first line that distinguishes the group within society. Conversion is one of these identity markers of which Tajfel³ writes, that force most individuals involved to act in terms of their group membership. Conversion thus is a borderline, a point of junction of dichotomies: God and the world, the eternal and the temporal, the individual and the community of believers; a choice drawn together along unique lines of open borderland specifying one's identity and belonging among inimitable dimensions. Representing a boundary from within and from without, conversion invokes debates on the nature of religious engagement and its potential to infuse conflicts or be a force of reconciliation; it is full of contradictions and paradoxes and questions our knowledge of the self, the society and religion.

Bridging the Divides

The common meaning of a border denominates a separating edge, a frontier that divides elements within from the ones beyond it. Conceptualisation of conversion in terms of boundary crossing requires an analysis of the border in its personal

3 Tajfel, H. (1978). Interindividual Behavior and Intergroup Behavior. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Differentiation Between Groups* (pp. 27-60). London: Academic, p. 39.

and social sense and therefore focuses on soft borders, i.e. highly metaphorical and symbolic lines, whose shape depends to a large degree on a definition of not so tangible phenomena like right and wrong or good and evil. What the anthropologists discovered long ago, political scientists must be reminded of: It is not only the borders of states that are porous and in some cases have vanished altogether, it is also the boundaries between the social milieus that are harder to find and easier to cross – even involuntarily. The more itinerant the self becomes, the more often and freely it moves across the societal spectrum and is constantly redefined in terms of norms, values and social categories, both those ascribed and those acquired. Some are easier to notice and cross than others, the transition can be sudden or gradual; sometimes it also leads through a grey area of a no-man’s-land. Certain borders may be traversed in only one direction, and while some are crossed once in a life time, others are encountered daily. Furthermore, when mapping social boundaries, one needs to remember that the richness and complexity, described by Marx⁴ as “a tapestry of blurred borders” of reality, makes them partial and limited with respect to what they include, exclude, separate and bring together, what they put in conflict with each other and what they reconcile.

But as much as conversion is a metaphorical boundary crossed, it is a boundary created, too. In this respect religion itself is a social border that marks and orders membership in communities as well as a cultural boundary that demarcates a line between different worlds of meanings.⁵ The disappearance of space between various narrative universes in modern pluralist societies does not mean a simultaneous disappearance of borders, to the contrary – they have become central to our understanding of identity and security. Boundaries do not always disappear simply because of an accretion of mobility.⁶ Contrariwise, the migratory and ever-changing nature of modern society is conducive to feelings of insecurity and thus borders are erected for protection. It is very common that for the sake of securing the new identity, the convert is discouraged from maintaining those out-group relations that can be harmful to it and is prompted to remain entirely within the perimeter

4 Marx, G.T. (2005). Some Conceptual Issues in the Study of Borders and Surveillance. In E. Zureik & M. B. Salter (Eds.), *Global Surveillance and Policing: Borders, Security, Identity*. Cullompton: Willian Publishing, p.32.

5 Wilson, T. M. & Donnan, H. (1998). *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.19.

6 Kirby, P. W. (2009). ‘Lost in Space’: An Anthropological Approach to Movement. In P. W. Kirby (Ed.), *Boundless Worlds: Anthropological Approach to Movement*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, p. 16.

of the new religious milieu. Those with relatively short “tenure” tend to be dissuaded from attending Christian services (like christenings, weddings and funerals or other family occasions) or indulging in activities (like dancing) that may bring them back to old habits and ways of life. For those who just entered into the world of Islam, there is a need for strongly emphasized boundaries dividing the old from the new. Fixity and impenetrability of the barrier, which is largely cast in religious terms, is the more pronounced, the more fragile the inner spectrum is. Conversely, the more unwavering, comfortable and established the new identity is, the more interaction and engagement with what there is beyond the border. Nevertheless, even when borders are established and stable (and they tend to be as the time after *shahada* passes), they are still characterised by continuous change and negotiation. If the line itself does not shift, it might still be subject to repeated redefinition.

This paper argues that in order to understand conversion’s peace-building potential, we need to know whether this identity realignment is built on positive (inclusion, acceptance) or negative (exclusion, rejection) foundations. Furthermore, this paper claims that convert identity provides an infallible blueprint for understanding the world and rejection/acceptance as well as inclusion/exclusion dyads are decisive agents in the reconciliation process both inwardly and outwardly directed.

The Four Archetypes

The process of identifying with others, understood as choosing where we want to belong hinges either on inclusion through lack of awareness of differences; as a result of perceived resemblances,⁷ or on exclusion due to a repudiation of dissimilarities. Belonging can progress twofold: either the self is disassociated from the group to which the individual hitherto belonged and the old “us” becomes “them” or the “us” category is enlarged and encompasses the old “them” which vanishes as a distinct signifier. The issue at stake here is thus the reformulation of the “other” taking either the shape of amputation and rejection or, to the contrary, the incorporation of a new aspect to the ideational body. There are two way of responding, either one builds on what they have had up to date, or one tries to cut everything off and constructs one’s new Muslim identity based on differences in contrast to the previous life style. Consequently, the structural feature of belonging refers to the

7 Woodward, K. (1997). Concepts of Identity and Difference in Identity and Difference. In K. Woodward (Ed), Identity and difference. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, p. 14.

degree of inclusiveness or exclusiveness and to the degree of rigidity of the boundaries constructed between them.

If *shahada* (Muslim profession of faith) brings converts together, their identity as European New Muslims (ENM) sets them apart, and constitutes the key to understanding the spectrum of what it means to be Muslim and to delineate the normative space of belonging. Thus, the ideational dimension renders the impartial knowledge about the factors crucial for peacebuilding implications within the context of reconciliation. For these reasons the theoretical framework of this paper is based on the identity-belonging nexus. This theoretical approach develops the understanding of the relationship between the discursive and normative constituents of being an ENM and their role in the relationship between the individual and the group. The dynamic between belonging (inclusion/exclusion) and identity (acceptance/rejection) creates four archetypes of ENM: Ambassador, Bridge, Lost and Castaway.

		BELONGING	
		Inclusion	Exclusion
IDENTITY	Acceptance	Ambassador	Lost
	Rejection	Bridge	Castaway

Figure 1. The Typology of European Converts to Islam.

The Bridge archetype emerges when one’s identity is created on the foundation of rejection and at the same time, instead of limiting the normative spaces of belonging, is opened towards conquering new territories and including new communi-

ties into one's existential sphere. Lost archetype signifies an identity where acceptance of the new incessantly clashes with the exclusion of the old sense of belonging in their social, cultural and behavioural dimensions. The Castaway archetype draws upon the stories of individuals whose lives at the crossroads of personal history and the conducive environment constitute a unique coalescence of rejection and exclusion.⁸ Finally, the Ambassador indicates an identity archetype whereby acceptance and inclusion are instruments for internalising the differences and enhancing the pluralism of ideas countering radicalisation by reducing societal conflicts. This paper focuses solely on the Ambassador archetype, as the epitome of reconciliation agency and peace-building force. Other types will not be discussed but a detailed analysis of the research including its methodology is available elsewhere.⁹

The Sources of Conflict

My research proved that only few converts are able to fully reconcile their past and present and future, and establish a secure place where shared values can intensify both the sense of identity based on acceptance and engagement with the society that synthesises multiple belongings. While some of the converts create the new identity via heterogeneous, symbiotic social contacts which facilitate diverse encounters and open up a space for dialogue and diminish the rejective responses, many treat identity as a protective cocoon aimed at strengthening the fragile chrysalis of the new self during the process of metamorphosis.

Converts are also somewhat 'involuntary' agents of reconciliation and dialogue between various communities:

“When interfacing with the rest of society, you are made to make a comment on things that happened all over the world in regards to your religion. In a way you are forced to become a spokesperson for the occurrences in the world that are related to Islam. You are expected to have an opinion on situations, which is not necessary true in individual conflicts; yet, it is demanded of you to 'must know something' as you are a Muslim. It is not right, as a

8 Bartoszewicz, M.G. and Murer, J. S. and Easton, M., 2013. Europesebekeerlingen tot de islam: risico op radicalisering? *Orde van de Dag*, 62, pp. 69-75.

9 Bartoszewicz, M.G., 2013. Controversies of Conversions: The Potential Terrorist Threat of European Converts to Islam. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 7(3), pp. 17-29.

convert to Islam you should not be expected to make a comment about something when you have only recently made Islam your religion.”¹⁰

Not everyone can cope with these value choices hence some escape them by withdrawal into a space where they are not necessary – avoiding interactions with the outside, or they just get lost in the grey area between, creating their own spaces of unique hybridity. Another possible solution is creating two parallel social realms: for instance when colleagues at work are not aware of the denominational change, there are two separate circles of social interactions.

Failing to take root in any of the groups and in the end belonging nowhere fully, they reaffirm the differences instead of focusing on similarities and are not well equipped to deal with those attributes that are ascribed to them. In practice this means, for instance, a preference for non-religious friends who themselves do not have strong beliefs opting for an easy way to manifest the minority status in a majority context, which is not a difficult task when the other person does not care whether or not you are Muslim. Conversely, the longer the convert stays in the community, the more multi-layered and nuanced his impression is as the freshly converted person is inept at dealing with contrasting expectations and with the ascribed abstract image of a convert attributed to them.

Sometimes, an acceptance of Islam requires a simultaneous exclusion, i.e. cutting ties with the previous social environment, including the family in more dramatic cases. Close interactions with wider society are perceived as dangerous, as they might have a negative influence especially in the case of “young” converts who have just taken their *shahada*. These concerns are expressed not only regarding religious activities (e.g. funerals or weddings taking places in Christian places of worship – there is an admonition not to go as in the first place, it is forbidden under Islam. The converts are allowed to go but only if they behave as in a museum otherwise such act would be considered blasphemy),¹¹ but also cutting social ties is sometimes necessary as old friends may encourage bad habits and practices like going to pubs and clubs or drinking alcohol. Unfortunately, the more that is excluded from the convert’s existential sphere, the more alien those remaining outside the membership bonds become, losing their individuality and becoming simply a collective of non-Muslims, or *kuffar* (infidels).

10 Batool Al-Toma. Interview by author. Tape recording. Leicester, UK. February 20, 2010.

11 Author’s Fieldwork Notes. Research Diary. Glasgow, UK. October 21, 2009.

This is especially pronounced when the in-group's norms, values and beliefs are dramatically different from those endorsed by wider society¹² or, as described by Sam and Virta,¹³ when the individual lives simultaneously in two different cultures, a feature prominent in the lives of majority of European converts. Balancing the two can be successful or can be quite tragic. This is so, particularly because minority/majority status is to a large extent dependent on individual perception and can be changed by a minor detail like a headscarf, for instance. Typically the less you know about the "other" the more prejudiced and stereotyping your stance is, but in the case of converts we face a different situation when the more you know the "other" the more disenchanted you are.

The Uniqueness of Ambassadors

In the midst of deep divisions among European converts to Islam across ideological lines, on which the very principles of what it means to be a Muslim are questioned, the Ambassador archetype represents individuals for whom conversion is based upon acceptance and inclusion, the reconciliation of the old with the new, with all elements working in unison. Ambassadors are not tussled between contending perspectives like the Lost archetype, nor are they temporary and on the move as Bridges tend to be, neither do they shed their old selves in the same way snakes shed their skins and reify or obfuscate the community as in the case of Castaways. Ambassadors offer a registry of solutions to potential conflicts and represent some sense of a middle path between the other archetypes that stand divided on ideas central to the lives of European converts to Islam and the issue of them being a security issue.

A European who is converting to Islam needs to nest elements of a different culture which sometimes are so merged with religion that it can be impossible to tell them apart within the indigenous cultural milieu. Roy observes that some converts

12 Schmäzlze, U. F. (2001). The Importance of Schools and Families for the Identity Formation of Children and Adolescents. *International Journal of Education and Religion*, 106:1, p.30; van Hoof, A. & Raaijmakers, Q. A. W. (2002). The Spatial Integration of Adolescent Identity: Its Relation to Age, Education, and Subjective Well-Being. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 43, p. 201. Cited in Kuusisto, A. (2011). *Growing Up in Affiliation with a Religious Community: A Case Study of Seventh-day Adventist Youth in Finland*. Research on Religious and spiritual Education, vol. 3. Münster: Waxmann Verlag, p.20.

13 Sam, D. L., & Virta, E. (2003). Intergenerational Value Discrepancies in Immigrant and Host-national Families and Their Impact on Psychological Adaptation. *Journal of Adolescence*, 26:2, p. 213.

marry culture with religion, while others try to distil it from any cultural influences emphasizing the universal, acultural nature of Islam and to integrate Islam into their indigenous culture.¹⁴ This is precisely where Ambassadors offer a rich registry of solutions rooted in the practice of reconciliation, e.g. when visiting a married convert couple in Yorkshire I was given a *halal* version of toad in a hole, an ideal example of the continuity and compatibility of the corresponding social and religious identities. More often, however, the earlier identity was given up for the sake of new, cultural-religious construct expressed in dress, dietary habits and even language.

Lucy¹⁵ always wears a headscarf in public and in the first period after conversion she also used to wear a full robe so she looked like a traditional Muslim. She tells me she was often mistaken for an Arab or - a pale Pakistani and told to “go home” by her compatriots unable to comprehend that she has been born in the Lake District. Working in hospitals she quite often hears old ladies who exclaim “*My dear! Isn't her English exceptionally good?*” Lucy only smiles and shakes her head, never bothering to explain that it is indeed the case because English is the only language she speaks. I have the feeling she knows how to pick her battles and understands that the majority of people do not venture beyond their visual impressions. Where other converts I met would start an argument based on their hurt feelings or perceived discrimination, Lucy is placid and distanced. Ambassadors are well prepared and equipped to engage in discussions on the general meaning of identity and transfer the conceptualisation of being a Muslim from the strictly cultural idiom to the more universal religious sphere. Cultural and religious identities are strongly securitised and presented as societal problems often having political repercussions. As Mouritsen observes, “culture concerns the progress and perfectibility of norms, identities and practices in relation to the communal life and political affairs,”¹⁶ and thus for Lucy Islam is not something cultural. When people ask her “*Do you cook curry?*” she responds, “*Well, actually I am British, my husband is British.*”¹⁷

This middle way, a reconciliation of diverse universes, is the most defining feature of the Ambassador archetype. It does not mean syncretism or patch-working an

14 Roy, O. (2004). *Globalised Islam: The Search for the New Ummah*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.167.

15 Interviewees' names are changed due to ethical considerations.

16 Mauritsen, P.(2008). Political Responses to Cultural Conflict. In P. Mouritsen & K. E. Jorgensen (Eds.), *Constituting Communities: Political Solutions to Cultural Conflict*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 4.

17 Lucy. Interview by author. Tape recording, Bradford, UK. October 03, 2010.

eclectic amalgam of different bits and pieces. It is an ability to transcend borders and divisions; holism of diversity based on an acceptance of different approaches and inclusion that brings peace and understanding.

For Ambassadors, lowering the “cultural Muslimness” threshold has necessitated defining which values and traits characterise a Muslim and on the other hand has widened the concept so that certain purely cultural traits do not screen out individuals who do not possess them. Frequently, the message coming from Muslim communities, especially those dominated by one ethnic group, suggest that newcomers must learn to appreciate the common culture and relegate much of their own background to the private realm. Ambassadors explicitly reject the powerful *kultur*-Islam as a gatekeeper and integrator screening out intruders who are impervious to the cultural aspect of the community. In the world where the dominant rhetorical style of Muslim community revolves around “unity in diversity”, still the idea of *Leitkultur* remains unresolved and begs the question, particularly in the European context, what type and degree of cultural sameness is required. The Ambassador archetype follows the ambiguity of social constructivism and points to the discrepancies between the traits the community thinks it has in common and those that are shared in reality as well as the equivocality of empirical differences rejecting the equation presuming binary opposition between two equally essentialised forms of culture.

“I used to think this that Muslims communities should know better [this] sort of thing, but of course they would not. There are certain cultural practices that are based on the religion but that have become warped, and, of course, the classic one for us is Christmas... So of course, because it happened with Christianity, it's a bit older, it is now happening with Islam.”¹⁸

The fact that the Ambassador archetype does not agree with counter-posing the religious and cultural elements of their identity and refuses the latter to be kept at distance in the private realm and thus allowing the convert to stand as the modern, rational, “European Islam” type does not mean that the converts representing this type are barely or not religious at all. To the contrary, the perceived clash between the non-negotiable secularism and the religious highlights ambiguities in terms of the questionable status of the universalism of Islam which often slides towards the

18 Peter. Interview by author. Tape recording, Bradford, UK. October 03, 2010.

stratum of a culture determining the competing discourses of cultural interpretations of beliefs but is carried out in a religious idiom and therefore escapes group essentialism and introduces the idea of us-ness through cultural dialogue.

Ambassadors are deeply religious and their faith has a profound impact on their lives. Describing people who deny that Islam is a way of life, Lucy told me how false and unjust such a statement is. Simultaneously, her account of what “a way of life” means and what is the nature of the change summarizes the Ambassadors’ outlook on their conversion experience and explains why she does not have to cook curry to prove she is fully Muslim: *“I did not believe in God before, that was a big shift for me. But once you put God in place it changes everything. It does not change what I find funny or my personality or my, you know, what makes up me, but it changes my perspective on things so - it does change everything.”*¹⁹

Strict religious observance in the case of the Ambassador archetype does not mean acceptance of a purely cultural imprint, this cliché is visible in many aspects of their lives. Ambassadors do not plunge into Islam wholeheartedly but somewhat artificially, especially in terms of rapid social changes. They do not switch their milieu from non-Islamic to entirely Islamic; instead they try to suffuse their previous environment and lifestyle with an Islamic spirit.

As opposed to the “I am Muslim – deal with it” attitude displayed by the Lost and, to some extent, Bridge archetypes, Ambassadors represent rather “I am who I am” approach. They do not advertise the fact of their religious denomination, conversely they live their religion and thus it becomes apparent through their deeds rather than declarations.

“It was at first I thought...Now we are integrated and we are who we are and that is it. But until you incorporate your full Islamic values with your daily practical routine, you do feel to be leading [double life]... I have got my Muslim hat on today but I have also got my work hat on today. And it did take a while for the two to feel like they were integrated.”²⁰

It is impossible, while an Ambassador archetype insists, to be a private Muslim with private spiritual pursuits; each Muslim must be a member of a wider civic and political culture. Affirming and internalising Islam, in the case of Ambassadors

19 Lucy. Interview by author. Tape recording, Bradford, UK. October 03, 2010.

20 Richard. Interview by author. Tape recording. Hebden Bridge, UK. October 04, 2010.

leads directly to sharing and learning to coexist. Such coexistence is the ability to navigate and transcend in a tolerant, understanding, self-critical approach to one's own traditions or intercultural dialogue. There is nothing like black and white for an Ambassador type, they live in a fullness of colours.

From all perspectives, cultural and religious pluralism as well as recalcitrant identities require the person to examine their own partialities and to enter into dialogue with conflictual issues as constitutive elements of community. The most important factor for Ambassadors is that the core "us" remains the same; conversion changes it only in the sense of enlargement and thus makes it possible to rework a culture nexus based on a politics of identity contestation and deliberative participating, which reopens negotiations, mobilizes reinterpretation and facilitates dialogue and reconciliation. From this perspective becoming and being a Muslim for Ambassadors is more an enrichment than a change in the sense of transforming or adding more instead of taking away.

The ability to retain what is crucial and accept what is inevitable affords Ambassadors a particular strength to keep their integrity. In Lucy's words "*it is not like you are a Muslim in one part and a doctor in another part and [then] British. It is kind of like all complementing one another, so it comes together.*" Lucy told me that creating these false dichotomies is not fair. She asked me if anyone would ever think to tell her to choose whether she is a mother or a daughter. Such a choice is obviously impossible as she is both and cannot possibly prefer one over the other. Divisions therefore seem to be nothing more than following the extreme.

"...because you have become Muslim, any non-Muslim who meets you thinks they can ask you any question under sun...Of course, if you cannot answer their questions, they think they are right because you are obviously, for some bizarre reason, the oracle of all knowledge of Islam. So if you cannot answer their questions then somehow Islam must be wrong. It was a strange thing, but then at the same time, it definitely motivated me to go find out... And of course you learn more and more and more, so of course in some ways it is a good thing."²¹

Thus, the Ambassador manoeuvres among their own lack of knowledge and the ignorance of their friends. After his conversion Peter noticed that not only very few

21 Lucy. Interview by author. Tape recording, Bradford, UK. October 03, 2010.

of his non-Muslim friends knew anything about Islam (and he thought that maybe if they did they might have actually wanted to become Muslims or at least his decision might seem less strange to them) but also, more worryingly, he discovered that there are many born-Muslims that know nothing or next to nothing about their own religion.

The willingness to tackle problems as opposed to remaining blind to them suffuses both private and social aspects of the Ambassador archetype. The Ambassador is well aware of the simplistic and reductionist interpretations of the Muslim community in Europe which fracture Western society in two but at the same time he has an intimate knowledge of his brothers and sisters in Islam and does not pretend that there are no problems on the Muslim side, as they do not confuse reality and the ideal society. This knowledge of both communities enables them to prevent contact zones turning into conflict zones as often happens when Muslims and indigenous Europeans interact. Ambassadors offer discourse and practices that dismantle the fractures and ruptures and are able to transmit their values tied to identity and community irrespectively of the religious change.

Ambassadors are not only active in their immediate local environment but also their general civic engagement is quite high. Simultaneously they cannot be compared to radicals who, politicising religion, use an undefined “they” in order to manipulate the discourse in a paranoid reaction to the world that is against them. By contrast, he observes, *“that is a very different kind of mentality to being at peace, realizing that everything is in God’s hands.”*²² This shows that being rationally grounded does not mean that the Ambassador is not spiritual in his outlook. To the contrary, this holistic approach endows Ambassadors with the rare ability of navigating among the rocks of the unknown with delicacy and ease. In the first place they never lose the big picture so they are not easily swayed by minor disputes or debates.

The Ambassador archetype embraces, understands and applies diversity. But simultaneously it does not mean that everything is allowed and everyone is accepted in a sort of “let us celebrate everything and everybody” attitude what would make them not have any opinion in case they offend someone. To the contrary, the Ambassador acknowledges reasonable diversity but assumes a homogenous interpretation of Islam and insists that any allusion to violence goes way beyond the core of the settlement. Furthermore, although Ambassadors recognise the legitimacy of other groups, the rights of individuals to their belonging, their opinions are quite

22 Peter. Interview by author. Tape recording, Bradford, UK. October 03, 2010.

pronounced and during our conversation Lucy calmly explained me the superiority of Islam over other religions: “*I am a Muslim, and I do not mean to... I am not trying to insult any Christians or Jews or... I think Islam is more balanced.*”²³ Simultaneously, this does not render her discourse exclusive or inaccessible.

And the Ambassador archetype is a key element of this development. Immersed in the context of the process of becoming a Muslim they exercise fully what Klaus Eder calls “the inevitable scandal of inclusion”²⁴ and propose a heterodox solution offering the New Muslim community the possibility to express themselves in their full diversity neutralising cultural differences of believers through religious unity. Ambassadors abandon the theoretical assumption of a hierarchy of belongings which is replaced by the idea of a network of cross-cutting identifications working in unison within a common frame, and are held together by Islam, in which every cultural difference is pushed to the backstage. Islam as an encompassing unity prevents these from producing dynamics that would be prone to radicalisation. This way Ambassadors are given a sense of overarching belonging which means different things to different groups and is normatively influenced by the dialogue between several distinct voices that conceptualise different converts’ narratives. With their continuous insertion of new memories and projects the Ambassadors customize and reinvent Islam in order to address the transformation of the direction and the nature of the belief in Europe and provide the framework that corresponds to real life discourse about New Muslim identities.

The main criticism towards converts is that converts are *en bloc* more radical in their religiosity in the sense that they are less compromising, less willing to negotiate between their old and new identities. Ambassadors see the important differences that exist, the main concern being the fit between particularistic cultures and universal principles of Islam. Criticism of identities also involve their reconstruction and thus the Ambassador archetypes builds the new European dimension daily as well as the meaning of Islam by the nature of contextualization. Undoubtedly, in the future this will lead to the emergence of national versions of Islam whereby Islam is going to be customized to particular historical and cultural circumstances of European countries as undeniably values become charged with emotions by

23 Lucy. Interview by author. Tape recording, Bradford, UK. October 03, 2010.

24 Eder, K. (2008). Symbolic Power and Cultural differences: A Power Model of Political solutions to cultural Differences. In P. Mouritsen & K. E. Jorgensen (Eds.), *Constituting Communities: Political Solutions to Cultural Conflict*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 33.

linkage to history and culture. This also makes the Ambassador archetype the true ambassador of Islam in Europe and the beacon of reconciliation.

A Way to Go for Social Sciences

The great majority of research on conversion phenomenon discuss a situation where an individual meets religion purely in a material sense and the eschatological aspects are entirely absent in the analyses and although it is not always the spiritual sphere of religiosity that prompt conversion, in some instances conversion indeed is a story of an individual's meeting with God. On the one hand, the field is so dominated by rational approaches that strictly religious elements were belittled, especially that the mystical dimension of conversion escapes the tools of social sciences. On the other hand, researchers tend to think about conversions metaphorically and the mystical aspect remains untouched or is deemed irrelevant. Typical social science bias reduces religion to social and cultural or psychological factors ignoring the fervent zeal of genuine beliefs. This highly reductionist view, undermining the mystical aspect of religion as a source of spiritual peace and conversion as seeking of meaning and transcendence might perhaps be a consequence of rationalisation so typical for sciences, in the very nature of the sciences is the need to rationalise all social phenomena and therefore they strip the religious down to a set of convictions, a convention or purely social affair.

It is essential to investigate the religious element, not because Islam is inherently bad or inherently good (it is neither), but because even though very often radicalisation and conflictual behaviour has little to do with religiosity and radical theology (Salafism does not necessitate violence), religion is still powerfully interweaved into the narrative which attracted the radicalised individual.²⁵ Whereas the sphere of the inner life tends to be ignored, it must be emphasized that analyses conducted only on the rational level cannot do justice and are not able to portray the whole depth or capture the much wider scope of conversion. Paying attention to the material plane only diminishes the spiritual, and no matter how nuanced our understanding of the material is, ignoring the spiritual will seriously impede any analysis. Similarly, it is wrong to ask only “*what does this faith promise and to whom such promises most appeal*”²⁶ because it is not always the faith (the spiritual) but someti-

25 Roy, O. (2008). *Al Qaeda in the West as Youth Movement: The Power of Narrative*, CEPS Policy Brief No. 168.

26 Stark, R. & Bainbridge, W. S. (1980). Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects. *American Journal of Sociology*, 85:6, p. 1176.

mes a more mundane religion (material) and in the second place, various things in the same religious group will appeal to various individuals, conversely, two similar people may choose different religious groupings, or someone may convert and someone else might not.

However, in instances of conversion built on grievances, abjection and violence become a way to channel hatred and hostile feelings and project them onto the former community which epitomises the former sinful life and the old, condemned self. It is perhaps the greatest paradox of radicalisation that it actively strives to remove any boundaries by compulsory unification and homogenisation of society which in fact means enforcing borderlines. The desire to create an ideal world in which people would abide by the same laws and adhere to the same principles places a heavy weight on minor differences. Those differences ultimately become the least acceptable ones because the very nature of a boundary makes the critical divergences easy to deal with, whereas the ambiguity of small details makes them the most frustrating, and the most dangerous. The daily praxis and routine that escapes every attempt of categorisation and blurs the boundaries between spaces and times of war and peace²⁷ ultimately means that even if people share nothing else, at least they have a border in common, even if they share it from opposing sides.

This proposed framework shows why individuals feeling at ease with their hitherto prevailing identity and who embrace Islam not as the essence of “the other” but as something that completes the wholeness of their personality (acceptance) are far less inclined to proceed to activities that aim at destroying the culture in which they were brought up as opposed to those who, in order to embrace Islam, feel the need to discard all that they were before the *shahada* (rejection). This framework also indicates that when someone not so much embraces Islam, but rejects the West and everything it represents, by excluding the whole sphere of belonging, they make themselves more vulnerable towards radicalisation. The first case resembles a situation where a church building is no longer in use for Christian services but can still serve the community as a museum or an art gallery or a mosque. In the second instance the building itself is deemed undesirable and unfit to become a mosque, so it is destroyed to give space for new structures. The former case represents the Ambassador archetype.

27 Appadurai, A. (2006). *The Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay in the Geography of Anger*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 32.

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