Conversion to Islam: A Study of Australian Muslim Converts

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Conversion to Islam:
A Study of Australian Muslim Converts

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in Western societies has gained considerable attention, within both academia and the mass media. In the post-9/11 period, which has been characterised by widespread Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment, much of this attention has focused on converts' motives for embracing Islam and claims that this group is over-represented amongst Western jihadists. Significant attention has also been paid to anecdotal evidence of higher conversion rates amongst females, prompting confusion and questioning over why some would adopt a religion which is viewed by many as curtailing the rights of women. The growing body of scholarship on conversion has shed some light on these, and other, aspects of the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in the West, particularly in relation to conversion pathways and the female experience. However, numerous gaps in the literature remain. These include convert demographics, understandings of converts' Islamic identities and their perspectives on theological issues, the complex relationship between conversion and gender – particularly in relation to the male experience of conversion and comparative gender analyses, as well as in understandings of the differences and commonalities between converts to Islam and those who have been born/raised within the faith. In the context of Australia, existing research remains confined to a handful of qualitative studies which have focused on several aspects of the conversion phenomenon, such as the motivational factors and social experiences of female converts and the complex relationship between conversion and racial identity.

This thesis seeks to address some of these gaps in existing knowledge through a comprehensive study of Australian converts to Islam. Utilising data collected in a mixed-methods study, consisting of an online, national survey of Muslim Australians and a series of subsequent focus groups which provided qualitative insight into the survey findings, this thesis provides a broad overview of Australian converts to Islam, and represents one of the largest and most wide-ranging studies on this topic to date. More specifically, this thesis contributes to existing knowledge in several key areas. Firstly, through the wealth of quantitative data collected in the survey component, this thesis establishes a demographic profile of Australian converts, and for the first time, provides an empirically based estimate of the overall proportion of converts amongst the Muslim Australian population. Secondly, this study moves beyond the existing focus on converts' pathways to Islam and examines their identities and beliefs as Muslim Australians. This examination provides key insight into issues such as religiosity and ritual practice, the 'types' of Islam with which converts identify and practice, as well as perspectives on a variety of theological issues, ranging from jihad and the caliphate to the ethics of halal practices. Thirdly, this study expands upon existing understandings of the relationship between gender and conversion through a comparative analysis of female and male converts – an issue which remains largely overlooked within the existing literature. This analysis focuses on a range of issues, including conversion pathways, Islamic identity and belief, perspectives on religion, politics and society, as well as social connectivity and belonging. Finally, a comparative analysis of converts and born Muslims highlights a number of significant differences and commonalities between these two groups. While further research is needed to examine more thoroughly these and other aspects of this complex phenomenon, this thesis represents a significant contribution to knowledge of conversion to Islam in contemporary Australian society.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed_____Paul Mitchell

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Completing a PhD is a mammoth undertaking – one which can at times feel truly unsurmountable. Having a strong support system in place has been an absolutely critical part of this journey for me, and I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to everyone who has supported me during this time.

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INTRODUCTION

In the post-9/11 period, Muslims throughout the Western world have been exposed to a significant degree of scrutiny, suspicion and hostility. Empirical evidence suggests that during this period, large numbers of Western citizens have developed anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments (Markus 2018; Pew Research Center 2011), while political rhetoric, terrorism laws and media coverage have been viewed as having demonised and securitised Western Muslim communities, validating negative views of the faith and its adherents and confirming the 'threat' posed by Islam (Beydoun 2017; Cherney and Murphy 2015; Mitchell and Rane 2021). Despite these developments, it has also been suggested that conversion to Islam amongst Westerners has increased considerably during this time (Brice 2010). For Westerners who have chosen to embrace Islam, negative perceptions of the faith (in addition to other factors) can place these individuals in a precarious position. In this regard, the deeply personal and complex process of religious conversion is further complicated by the socio-political context in which it occurs. Socialisation and self-other relations often pose a significant challenge for Western converts, with some equating their desire to live by the tenets of Islam with 'social suicide' (Köse 1996).

This thesis is concerned with the complex phenomenon of conversion to Islam in contemporary Australian society. As with other Western nations, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment have risen dramatically within Australia during the post-9/11 era. While Muslims have lived peacefully in Australia for over a century prior to 2001, the post-9/11 time period has witnessed growing hostility towards Muslim Australians by large segments of the population (Rane *et al.,* 2020). Existing research, while limited, has sought to gain insight into the factors which lead Australian converts to Islam and to

explore other aspects of the phenomenon, such as the relationship between conversion and gender (predominantly in the context of females), and the relationship with conversion and race (see, for example: Alam 2018; King 2017; Turner 2010). Numerous gaps, however, remain. As this introduction and the following chapters will explain, this thesis makes a valuable contribution to existing knowledge of conversion to Islam in Australia through addressing several key gaps in the existing literature. These gaps include an overall dearth of quantitative data on Australian converts and the conversion phenomenon, comparative gender analyses, understandings of the differences and commonalities between converts and born Muslims, and insight into the ways in which Australian converts understand and practice Islam.

Conversion to Islam: Background and Context

The phenomenon of conversion to Islam has a long and diverse history, dating back to the origins of Islam in 7th century Arabia. During the formative years of the religion of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad's preaching and proselytizing was met with open hostility from the ruling tribe of Mecca, who viewed his message of monotheism and social justice as posing a threat to their political and economic dominance (Rane 2010; Rubin 1998). Despite the resistance of the Meccans to Muhammad's message, this new movement steadily gained followers, and by the time of Muhammad's death in 632, Islam had become the dominant religion in the Arabian Peninsula. Over ensuing centuries, the global spread of Islam witnessed conversion to the faith in a wide variety of settings and contexts. In the Middle East and North Africa, the process of Islamisation began following the early conquests of Muslim armies, though widespread conversion to the faith took centuries in some cases. In South East Asia, Islam spread in a gradual, non-violent process from around the 14th century, largely driven by traders and Sufi preachers

(Lapidus 2014). In most European nations, conversion was generally quite rare and often precipitated by positive travel experiences and encounters with practicing Muslims (Gilham 2015).

In a contemporary context, the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in Western societies has attracted considerable attention (Brice 2010; Sealy 2017). Reports of an increase in female conversion to the faith have been met with confusion and curiosity, with some questioning the choice to adopt a religion which is seen by many as being misogynistic and subjugating women (King 2017; Mitchell, Mamone and Rane 2021). Suggestions that Western converts are particularly susceptible to extremism and radicalisation (Schuurman, Grol and Flower 2015; Sealy 2017; Snook, Brannum-Martin and Horgan 2022) have also led to this group being framed as a zealous, unstable element which poses a significant security concern to the nations in which they reside. In a broader context, conversion occurs in a socio-political climate of pervasive Islamophobia and anti-Islam sentiment, further complicating the already complex process of religious conversion. For many converts, negative societal attitudes towards Islam and Muslims can have significant consequences, including discrimination and harassment from segments of wider society who view them as "traitors", as well as rejection and hostility from friends and family who struggle to accept their decision to embrace Islam (Jensen 2006; Mitchell and Rane 2018).

Despite the challenges associated with becoming Muslim in non-Muslim, Western societies, the process proves to be profoundly rewarding for many converts. Those who have embraced Islam highlight the positive impacts that their chosen religion has had on their lives, providing meaning, clarity and effecting positive behavioural changes. Additionally, converts are not only viewed as having the ability to act as cultural

interlocutors between Muslims and non-Muslims, but often actively contribute to the emergence of a uniquely Western Islam (Duderija and Rane 2019, 234)

Duderija and Rane (2019) suggest that converts, through their unique background, activism and ideas, are an important agent in the creation of a distinctly Western Islam for four primary reasons. These include (1) the fact that their Islam does not have established ethno-cultural roots; (2) that by acting as cultural mediators, converts promote the acceptance of a 'Western Islam' in the minds of Western Muslim immigrants and non-Muslim Westerners; (3) that their existence highlights the possibility, indeed reality, of Western Muslim citizenship; and (4) that their "frequent critiques of traditional cultural or ethnic Islam… contribute to the engendering of a Western Islam" (2019, 234).

Islam in Australia

Before considering the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in contemporary Australian society, it is first necessary to consider this in the broader context of Islam in Australia. Islam's presence in Australia dates back several centuries, with contact between Muslims and Indigenous Australians predating European colonisation (Stephenson 2010). Prior to colonisation, Macassan fishermen had engaged in trade with Indigenous communities of northern Australia. In some cases, these contacts resulted in conversion to Islam (Stephenson 2010), though it is impossible to identify the number of cases or the overall extent of this phenomenon.

Following British colonisation, the Muslim presence in Australia remained minimal. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a small number of Afghan cameleers arrived in Australia to assist with the 'opening of the interior'. While this community remained small, there were documented cases of intermarriage with

Indigenous women (Stephenson 2010) and the first Australian mosque was constructed in the late 19th century in Marree, South Australia (Rane 2010). Over the following decades, Muslim migration to Australia was limited through the introduction of the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901, which essentially prohibited the entry of non-white migrants (Jupp 2002). In the aftermath of the Second World War, the abolition of the Immigration Restriction Act in 1959 and the adoption of a multiculturalism policy by the Australian Government in the 1970s saw Muslim migration begin to increase, largely from Lebanon and Turkey (Kabir 2005, 147). The late 20th and early 21st centuries witnessed a further increase in Muslim migration to Australia, particularly among refugees from Western Africa, and the Middle East (Mansouri 2017). Today, Islam is one of the fastest growing religion's in Australia. As of 2021, the Muslim Australian population was 813,400, representing 3.2 percent of the overall national population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Despite the long history of Islam and Muslims in Australia, a number of time-period events have led to hostility towards, and concern about Islam amongst the Australian population (Rane *et al.* 2020). Since 2001 and the events of 9/11 in particular, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment have become an increasing concern in Australian society. As Rane *et al*. (2020) observe, "the past two decades have seen a marked increase in anti-Islam/anti-Muslim sentiments, which various studies and polls have found are harbored by 25 to 50 percent of the Australian population." Amongst the Muslim Australian community, reports of Islamophobic abuse and harassment have reached significant levels (Iner 2019), with Muslim women being the primary targets. Furthermore, as rates of Islamophobia have increased, "for the first time in Australia's history, multiple social movements and political parties have emerged with explicit anti-Islam agendas" (Rane *et al*. 2020). These trends have arguably been fuelled by pejorative

media coverage and political rhetoric. Regarding the former, news media have been criticized as contributing to this rise in anti-Muslim sentiment through a construction of Islam as a threatening 'other', and which has consistently linked Muslims to violence and terrorism, positioning them as an 'enemy within' (Aly and Walker 2007; Dreher 2018). Regarding the latter, political discourse, including from leading members of the nation's dominant political parties, has specifically targeted Muslims as a threat to Australia's national security and cultural identity, with debates arising over the compatibility of Islam and 'Australian values' (SBS News, 2015). Furthermore, the past decade has witnessed a rise in Far-Right extremism within Australia, which has often been explicitly linked to anti-Islam sentiment. For example, the Christchurch terror attacks which targeted mosques in New Zealand were carried out by Australian citizen Brenton Tarrant (Baker and Truu 2019). And in 2021, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) revealed that Far-Right extremism accounted for approximately half of the organisation's active cases – a significant increase from around 10 percent in 2019 (Zwartz 2021). It is within this broader context that the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in Australia occurs.

Definition of Terms

While this will be discussed in further detail in later chapters, it is important to provide a brief definition of key terms that will be utilised throughout this thesis – in particular, the terms 'convert', 'revert' and 'born Muslim'. Throughout this paper, the term 'convert' will be utilised to describe those who have converted to Islam from either another faith background or a non-religious background. The term 'revert', which will be explained in more detail in Chapter 2, refers to a differing perspective on the term 'convert' which is preferred by some individuals who have adopted Islam. Finally, the term 'born Muslim'

refers to practicing Muslims who were born/raised as Muslim, rather than having converted to the faith. While other terms, such as 'cradle members' and 'non-coverts' are also utilised within the broader scholarship on religious conversion (see, for example Beider 2014; Kleinmann 2012), the term 'born Muslim' has been selected as the most-appropriate in the context of this thesis due to the complexities surrounding the concept of 'conversion' within Islam.

State of the Literature

While academic research on religious conversion has been conducted for almost a century, scholarship on conversion to Islam was largely neglected until the late 20th century (Köse 1996). Since this time, a growing body of scholarship, primarily within the social sciences, has sought to understand various aspects of this phenomenon. In particular, this research has been primarily concerned with understanding why individuals convert to Islam, their experiences during conversion, and the role which gender plays in the conversion process. To date, the vast majority of studies have been qualitative in nature, with quantitative data on Western converts remaining scarce. These studies and their findings will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Overall, the limited scope in quantitative research on this subject has thus far hindered empirically based estimates of the overall number of converts in Western nations, convert demographics, as well as broader trends relating to convert experiences, beliefs and practices.

Another of the key limitations within the existing body of conversion scholarship has been the dominant focus on conversion trajectories and motivational factors at the expense of explorations of these individuals' religious identities and perspectives as practicing Muslims. While understanding personal backgrounds and the factors which

motivate individuals to embrace Islam is undoubtably important, this focus has precluded a more comprehensive understanding of convert identities and post-conversion experiences. For example, scholarly research on converts' understandings of Islam, levels of religious literacy and perspectives on theological issues remains sparse (King 2017). Additionally, few studies have considered the specific 'types' of Islam with which converts identify (Maslim and Bjorck 2009; Shanneik 2012; Shavit and Spengler 2021).

The following chapters will provide a more comprehensive review of existing literature on religious conversion in a broader context, and conversion to Islam more specifically. Chapter One will consider the body of scholarship on the broader phenomenon of religious conversion, examining how this phenomenon is defined and conceptualised, as well as key findings relating to the backgrounds, motivations and experiences of religious converts. Chapter Two will provide a comprehensive review of existing literature on the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in Western societies, outlining the dominant themes and findings of research in the field. It will also highlight current gaps in the scholarly literature and their relevance to this thesis.

Research Objectives

The overall objective of this exploratory study is to develop a broad profile of Australian converts to Islam, considering a wide range of factors including demographics, conversion pathways, religious interpretations and orientation and social connectivity. It also seeks to examine often overlooked themes in the study of conversion, primarily comparisons between converts and born Muslims, and between male and female converts. This research was guided by a series of six primary research questions, as outlined below:

Research Questions

1. What is the demographic profile of Australian converts to Islam?
2. What factors lead Australian converts to embrace Islam and how is the conversion process experienced?
3. How do Australian converts to Islam understand, interpret and express their faith?
4. How do Australian converts to Islam view their place in Australian society?
5. Regarding the above questions, what are the key differences and commonalities between male and female converts?
6. Regarding identity, belief and social connection, what are the key differences and commonalities between Australian converts to Islam and born Muslims?

Study Rationale and Significance

The significance of this research lies in its unique contribution to existing knowledge of the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in contemporary Australian society. Firstly, existing scholarship on this phenomenon in a general Western context remains primarily qualitative in nature. In the Australian context, almost no quantitative research has been conducted on the phenomenon of conversion to Islam. This study addresses this key gap in the existing literature by providing the first in-depth, quantitative research on Australian converts to Islam. In particular, it provides valuable insight into the demographic profile of Australian converts, trends relating to conversion pathways, religious identity and belief, ritual practice, social connection and views on social issues. Additionally, it provides the first empirical estimate of the overall percentage of converts amongst the broader Muslim Australian population.

Secondly, as has been previously highlighted, the bulk of existing research on Western converts to Islam has tended to focus on conversion trajectories and pathways, and post-conversion social experiences. To date, only minimal research has sought to examine converts' identities as Muslims or to explore how these individuals understand, interpret, and practice their faith. This key gap is addressed in this thesis through an in-depth exploration of converts' religious identities, interpretations of Islam and perspectives on a range of key theological issues, including those relating to concepts such as shariah, jihad and the relationship between Islam and politics.

Thirdly, while the role of gender in the conversion process has been emphasized by researchers (see, for example, van Nieuwkerk 2004; King 2017; McGinty 2006), existing studies have overwhelmingly focused on female converts. To date, only minimal research has been conducted on male converts (Mitchell and Rane 2018; Suleiman 2016) or has sought to provide comparative analyses on the experiences and beliefs of female and male converts (Rao 2015). This key gap is addressed in this thesis through a comprehensive comparative analysis of female and male converts to Islam in Australia, considering differences and commonalities based on the gender variable.

Finally, recent years have witnessed a growing fixation on the purported vulnerability of Western Muslim converts to radicalisation and extremism, as well as an apparent overrepresentation of converts amongst Western jihadists. While several studies have examined these issues, in-depth understandings of the differences and commonalities between converts and born-Muslims have been limited by a focus on theory over empirical data, an over-reliance on outdated and anecdotal evidence, and in some cases, a lack of academic rigour. Additionally, little research has sought to move beyond comparative studies in the context of radicalisation and extremism in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the potential similarities and differences

between converts and born Muslims. This study seeks to address some of these issues by providing a comparative analysis of converts to Islam and born Muslims, in relation to Islamic identity and belief, Muslim typologies and Islamic orientations, perspectives on key issues relating to political Islam, as well as social connection and belonging. In addressing the aforementioned gaps in the literature, this thesis provides a key contribution to understandings of the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in contemporary Australian society.

Methodology

As will be outlined in further detail in Chapter 3, this study utilised a mixed-methods approach which combined quantitative and qualitative components in order to address the research questions. This approach, which consisted of (1) a quantitative survey of Muslim Australians and (2) a series of subsequent qualitative focus groups, was selected in order to benefit from both methodological paradigms. The inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative methods enabled the researcher to effectively address questions pertaining to convert demographics, measure and identify trends relating to the primary research questions and to conduct comparative analyses on the variables of gender and conversion status, while also providing nuanced insights into participant beliefs and experiences.

Chapter Structure

This thesis consists of nine chapters. Chapter One begins with a broad overview of the phenomenon of religious conversion. Key definitions of this concept are provided, along with an outline of theoretical frameworks and findings from the existing literature. The

relationship between gender, religion and religious conversion is also examined in order to provide context for gender-based comparative analyses.

Chapter Two provides an overview of existing scholarship on conversion to Islam, in both a broader Western and a specifically Australian context. It outlines the dominant themes and key findings of this body of work, while highlighting key gaps in the literature which are of particular relevance to this thesis.

Chapter Three provides an overview of the methodological approach utilised in this study. The stages of research design, data collection and data analysis will be outlined, and the choice and appropriateness of these methods will be discussed and explained.

The findings of this thesis are then outlined in Chapters Four, Five, Six, Seven and Eight. Chapter Four provides a demographic profile of survey participants, taking into account variables such as gender, age, educational attainment, employment status and geographic location. These demographic markers are also considered in relation to those of survey participants who identified as born Muslims, in addition to the wider Muslim Australian population.

Chapter Five focuses on conversion pathways and processes, considering the factors which motivated participants to convert to Islam, their thought processes during the pre-conversion period, the ways in which their understanding of Islam has evolved over time, and the various challenges and obstacles they have encountered throughout the post-conversion period.

Chapter Six examines the religious identity of participants, exploring aspects of religiosity and ritual practice, Muslim typologies, the specific interpretations of Islam practiced by Australian converts, and perspectives on a range of theological issues.

Chapter Seven further explores participants' Islamic identities, with a specific focus on key concepts related to political Islam. In particular, this includes the relationship between Islam and democracy, the institution of the caliphate, the concept of shariah (commonly understood as Islamic law) and the contentious topic of jihad.

Chapter Eight moves to the theme of converts and society, considering questions of connection and belonging in the context of family and friends, the Muslim community and wider Australian society. Participants' perspectives on various social issues, as well as levels of trust in social institutions will also be explored.

Chapter Nine provides a discussion of the primary findings of the study, considering how these connect to the foundational research questions. In particular, this examines questions of Australian convert identity and belief, the relationship between conversion and gender, and commonalities and differences between converts and born Muslims. This chapter concludes with a discussion of directions for future research in the area of religious conversion.

Conclusion

This introduction has provided key background information and context to this thesis, situating it within the existing scholarship and outlining the value and originality of the research. The following chapters will provide an in-depth review of the existing scholarship on religion, religious conversion and conversion to Islam in a general Western context, identifying key themes and findings within the literature, while highlighting existing deficits which this thesis aims to address.

CHAPTER 1: RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

Overview

Religious conversion is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, having occurred across and within diverse faiths over millennia. Before examining the particular case of conversion to Islam in Western societies, it is first necessary to consider this phenomenon in a broader context – one which takes into account the significance of religion to society and the human experience, and which considers the role of religion in everyday life. This chapter presents a broad overview of literature relating to religion and religious conversion, considering key themes and findings and establishing a frame of context and reference for this thesis.

The Relevance of Religion

Religion has been a major part of the human experience for thousands of years. From the polytheistic religions of the ancient world, to the emergence of major monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, religion has played an enduring role in human society. Despite views that the relevance of religion in the modern world was declining in the face of secularism, religion continues to play an integral part in the world today (Sarre and Babie 2020; Tamir, Connaughton and Salazar 2020). Faiths such as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism continue to experience consistent growth in terms of adherents and followers throughout the globe (Pew Research Center 2017b), while large proportions of national populations say that religion is an important part of their lives (Tamir, Connaughton and Salazar 2020). Throughout the Western world, including Australia, Christianity and its various denominations represent the dominant faith of most nations. However, adherents of other faiths, including Islam, account for large minorities of

Western populations (Pew Research Center 2017b). Interestingly, the Pew Research Center suggests that globally, Islam is growing at twice the rate of other major world religions, and is expected to become the world's most followed religion by the latter half of this century (Pew Research Center 2017b).

Within academia, religion has been one of the most studied phenomena in the field of sociology since its inception, with research in this area considering issues of religious belief and experience, religiosity and ritual practice, the relationship between religion and the state, religious conversion and the relationship between religion and gender. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a comprehensive overview of the field of religious studies in a broader context, the following sections of this chapter will consider several themes which are of particular relevance to this thesis – including those of religious conversion, and the relationship between religion and gender.

Religious Conversion

Phenomena of religious conversion (or religious change) have been the subject of a considerable number of studies, particularly in the fields of psychology, sociology and history (see for example, Snook *et al.* 2019; Spilka *et al*. 2003). Traditionally, this research focused on conversion to Christianity and its various denominations, however the later years of the 20th century witnessed a growing scholarly interest in new religious movements (Rambo 1993; Van Nieuwkerk 2006, 2), and more recently, Islam (see, for example, Köse 1996; Roald 2006; Sultan 1999). Conversion is viewed as being within the broader framework of religious change, alongside denominational switching and disaffiliation (Beider 2014; Rambo 1993). While there are a variety of approaches to defining and analysing this phenomenon, religious conversion is generally understood to refer to the adoption of a religion or faith movement with which one previously had no

affiliation (Halama 2015). This may involve religious change from one faith to another, or the adoption of a religion by an individual of a non-religious background. It is important to note, however, that "definitions of conversion are diverse, and no consensus has been reached regarding its operationalization" (Snook *et al.* 2019, 225).

Furthermore, despite the significant academic attention which religious conversion has received, particularly in the fields of psychology and sociology, "there is no consensus on its causes, mechanisms, and typology" (Keri & Sleiman 2017, 285). Indeed, religious conversion can be understood as a deeply complex and diverse process which can vary significantly based on the particular religion or faith system in question, as well as between differing social, political and historical contexts (Baer 2014; Hermansen 2014; Montgomery 2014).

Motivational Factors

Concerning the factors which motivate individuals to engage in processes of religious conversion or religious change, a number of explanatory theories have been advanced. Historically, traditional approaches to the study of religious conversion tended to view converts as passive rather than active participants in the conversion. As Snook and colleagues explain, "theories that form the traditional paradigm of conversion research view the causes of conversion as external, irresistible, and supernatural", placing a strong emphasis on the "power of God" (2019, 224). By contrast, contemporary perspectives on the causes of religious conversion give agency to converts by recognising them as active rather than passive actors in this process. In this context, sociological and psychological approaches to conversion often "stress that converts seek to develop meaning, personhood and self-identity within their social and societal contexts" (Snook *et al.*, 224).

Historically, religious conversion has been influenced by numerous factors, including those of political, social and even financial nature, at both the macro and micro-levels (Montgomery 2014). In a contemporary context, religious conversion appears to be influenced primarily by social factors, and motivated by a vast array of individual-level factors, ranging from mystical experiences to intellectual curiosity (Ding and Devine 2017; Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Mirshahvalad 2020).

From a sociological perspective, research on conversion to major religious traditions suggests that interpersonal or 'affectional' factors often play a significant role in religious conversion (Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Mitchell, Mamone and Rane 2021). Existing findings suggest that while various factors may contribute to converts gravitating towards a particular faith, interpersonal relationships with practitioners of a new religion, including those of either a romantic or platonic nature, as well as other factors concerning social identity and belonging, can be particularly influential in one's decision to embrace a new faith (Ding and Devine 2017; Radford 2015; Snow and Machalek 1984, 182).

It has also been asserted that various types of personal crises can act as a catalyst for religious conversion (Köse 1996; Rambo 1993, 166; Shavit and Spengler 2021; Wilkinson *et al*. 2021), including the breakdown of relationships, the death of a loved one or disillusion with a current faith. Rambo's model of religious conversion places a strong emphasis on crisis as a precipitating factor in the search for a new religion, suggesting that "crises force individuals and groups to confront their limitations and can stimulate a quest to resolve conflict, fill a void, adjust to new circumstances, or find avenues of transformation" (1993, 166). Some research, does however, problematise the existing focus on personal crises as an explanatory factor for religious conversion, suggesting that the "biographical reconstruction" of conversion narratives often exaggerate the nature of pre-conversion crises (Jindra 2011, 279).

While the aforementioned factors, amongst others, can provide some explanatory power in relation to why individuals choose to convert to a new faith, as this study will show, these causal factors are diverse, and no single factor can predict conversion. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a comprehensive overview of the scholarship on the causes of religious conversion in a broad context, it is hoped that this section provides sufficient information to highlight the complex and diverse pathways which lead individuals to change religions.

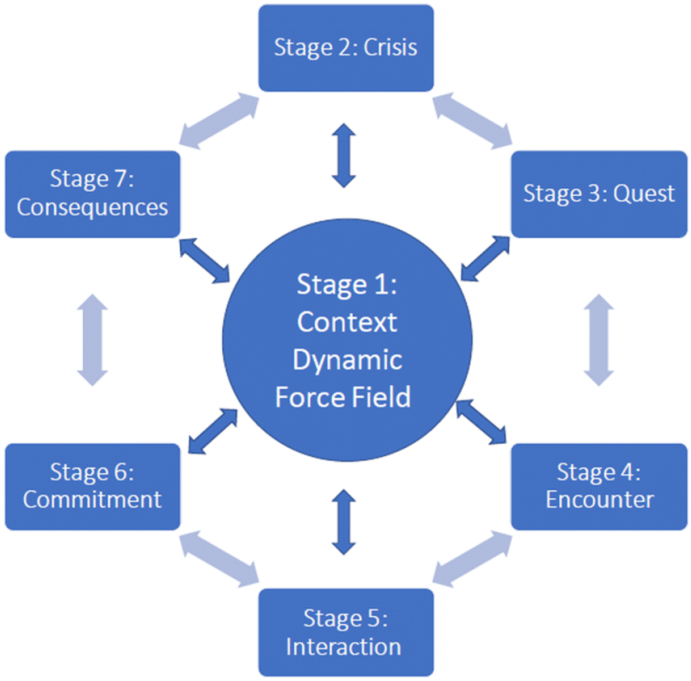
The Conversion Process

While earlier scholarship tended to consider conversion as a 'life event', the work of scholars such as Lewis Rambo have led to a more nuanced understanding of religious conversion as being processual in nature (Rambo 1993), and "involving a series of events rather than a stand-alone experience" (Snook *et al*. 2019, 224). Rambo's conceptualisation and model of religious conversion has become highly influential within the broader scholarship on religious conversion, providing an in-depth and contextual approach to the study of this phenomenon.

Rambo suggests that religious conversion is best understood as "a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations and orientations" (1993, 5). In his seminal work, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, the author proposes seven distinct, yet interconnected, processual stages of religious conversion (see Figure 1). These include (1) context, (2) crisis, (3) quest, (4) encounter, (5) interaction, (6) commitment and (7) consequences (Rambo 1993). According to this framework, religious conversion is a multifaceted and deeply complex phenomenon, encompassing "individual, cultural, social, and religious dimensions", and the proposed stages are not considered to be universal, but rather serve

as a model to "organise the cluster of themes, patterns, and processes operative in religious change" (Rambo 1993, 165).

Figure 1. Rambo's Religious Conversion Model



According to Rambo, the stage of Context is the most comprehensive of all. This stage "encompasses the modes of access and transmission, provides the models and methods of conversion, and also contains sources of resistance" (1993, 165).

The second stage is that of 'Crisis'. According to Rambo, crises of various sorts tend to act as the overall catalyst for religious conversion. While the nature and intensity of crises can vary considerably between converts, crisis is viewed as a driver of change, propelling converts on a 'quest' for change, transformation and meaning.

The third stage of 'quest' occurs when future converts begin to "actively seek solutions to their problems and strive to find meaning, purpose and transcendence"

(Rambo 1993, 166), which often takes the form of organised religion. As highlighted above, this stage is considered to be exacerbated during periods of crisis, in which individuals "actively look for resources that offer growth and development to "fill the void", solve the problem or enrich life" (Rambo 1993, 56).

The next stage in Rambo's framework is that of 'encounter'. Encounter occurs as a result of the future convert's 'quest' and involves complex interactions between the convert and an agent or advocate of conversion representing the religion in question. Future converts may engage in any number of interactions as they explore various faiths, and the nature of these interactions is not necessarily missionary in nature.

The 'encounter' stage is followed by that of 'interaction'. Here, individuals engage in personal interaction with members of the faith in question and "intense levels of learning" about the religion. This often involves participation in religious rituals, developing an understanding of key theological arguments and establishing relationships with practitioners. Rambo explains that during this stage, religious "rhetoric provides the convert with a system of interpretation relevant not only to the religious sphere of life, but also, in some cases, to the totality of a person's life" (1993, 168).

Following the stage of 'interaction' comes 'commitment'. This represents a key stage in the process as converts formally commit to a new faith, something which generally includes some form of conversion ceremony. In Christianity, for example, this involves a baptism ceremony in which individuals are ritually inducted into the religion. In the case of Islam, converts are required to recite the *shahadah* or testimony of faith in the presence of practicing Muslims.

The final stage in the process is termed 'consequences', and as the name suggests, involves converts becoming aware of the consequences of their decision to convert. These consequences will vary significantly between individuals, in terms of their nature and

intensity. While some will experience positive transformations, gaining a sense of purpose and fulfilment, others may feel that their new faith does not in fact meet their needs.

Other processual models of religious conversion have been formulated by various scholars, including those specifically concerned with conversion to Islam. These models will be examined in detail in the Chapter Two of this thesis.

Types of Religious Conversion

Due to the diverse nature of religious conversion and change, it is important to consider different 'types' of religious change which have been identified by researchers. Despite the evident diversity in experiences of religious conversion, a number of scholars have also sought to establish typological frameworks or systems of conversion 'motifs' in order to help describe and categorise these complex processes. While some of these analytical and descriptive frameworks have been constructed in the context of religious conversion more broadly, others have been specific to the phenomenon of conversion to Islam. The latter will be examined in detail in Chapter Two.

One of the more influential classificational frameworks of religious conversion is that of Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) conversion 'motifs.' The six descriptive motifs proposed by these scholars include intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive conversion. Each of these motifs is "characterized by the degree of social pressure involved, temporal duration, level of affective arousal, affective content, and the sequence of belief-participation" (Köse and Loewenthal 2000, 102).

Within this framework, 'intellectual' conversion "involves reading and other investigations of alternative theodicies". This type of conversion tends to be brief, "entailing self-conversion with little social pressure" (Köse and Loewenthal 2000, 102).

‘Mystical’ conversions are individual-level experiences, considered to be influenced not by social pressure, but rather perceived mystical encounters. ‘Experimental’ conversions are considered to be motivated primarily by individual-level curiosity, with low levels of social pressure, in which converts essentially ‘test the waters’ by participating in a religion. ‘Affectional’ conversions are primarily influenced by an individual’s strong interpersonal connection to an adherent(s) of a faith. Social pressure is considered as medium in such cases, with affection being the dominant factor. ‘Revivalist’ motifs are identified as conversions characterised by “managed ecstatic arousal in a group context” (Köse and Loewenthal 2000, 102). ‘Coercive’ conversions, which are considered extremely rare, are understood as conversions which occur under coercive persuasion, generally entailing “a high degree of external pressure over a relatively long period of time” (Lofland and Skonovd 1981, 383), with participation preceding belief.

Figure 2. Lofland and Skonovd’s Conversion Motifs

VARIABLES	MOTIFS					
	-1- Intellectual	*-2- Mystical*	*-3- Experimental*	*-4- Affectional*	*-5- Revivalist*	*-6- Coercive*
Social pressure	Low/none	Low/none	Low	Medium	High	High
Temporal Duration	Medium	Short	Long	Long	Short	Long
Affective arousal	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High	High
Affective content	Illumination	Awe, love, fear	Curiosity	Affection	Love, fear	Fear, love
Belief-participation sequence	Belief-participation	Belief-participation	Participation-belief	Participation-belief	Participation-belief	Participation-belief

The ‘Zeal’ of the Convert

Another theme within the conversion literature is that of the ‘convert’s zeal’. According to this theory, those who convert to a religious movement or faith tend to exhibit higher levels of religious commitment and ‘zealotry’ than do those who are born or raised within

the religion. While this theory is often referenced within arguments that Western converts to Islam are more prone to extremism than their born Muslim counterparts, it has also been suggested that this applies to religious converts in a broader context outside of Islam (Beider 2014; Olson 2008).

The causes of this purported zealotry are considered by some to be due to a desire for the newly converted to 'prove' their religious commitment to other adherents of the faith, or in some cases, due to a stage in the conversion process in which recent converts become 'emotionally obsessed' with their new religion. These concepts will be further discussed in the context of Islam in Chapter Two of this thesis.

Some scholars, however, have sought to problematize this theory, suggesting that the general consensus concerning the 'zeal of the convert' is misguided and inaccurate, with precedence given to theoretical arguments over empirical data. For example, Beider's (2014) research on American religious traditions found that when religious background was taken into consideration, converts in fact displayed lower levels of religiosity compared to 'cradle members' of a faith. The author suggests that rather than conversion status, the specific religion or religious denomination in which a convert was raised is a greater predictor of religious zealotry (2014, 11).

Religion and Gender

While numerous studies have sought to understand gender-based differences with respect to religiosity and ritual practice, little research has attempted to explore these differences in the context of religious converts. Additionally, understandings of comparative gender experiences of the conversion process have received little attention within academia. Considering the gendered nature of religious identity and practice, as asserted by scholars

such as van Nieuwkerk (2006) and McGinty (2006), the lack of scholarly insight into the relationship between gender and religious conversion represents a significant gap within the scholarship. Despite the lack of existing research on this phenomenon in a non-Islamic context, it is nevertheless important to consider the relationship between religion and gender in a broader context.

The phenomenon of females generally being more inclined to religiosity than their male counterparts has been well documented, and Stark (2002, 495) observes that throughout history, from ancient Greece and Rome to the spread of Christianity and the heretic movements of medieval times, organised religions have tended to attract more women than men. Even in Islam, it is noted that Khadija (d. 619), the first wife of Muhammad (d. 632), was the first to embrace Islam and that women were prominent among his earliest followers (Ahmed 1986; Sayeed 2013).

For a contemporary perspective, numerous studies provide quantitative evidence for this phenomenon, with Beit-Hallahmi suggesting that the "greater religiosity of women, demonstrated in consistent research findings over the past 100 years, is one of the most important facts about religion" (2014, 89). A 2016 survey on gender and religiosity examined the gender gap in relation to five key areas of religiosity: affiliation to a faith, attendance at worship services, prayer, personal importance of faith, and beliefs in core concepts. Across the board, it was repeatedly found that females presented as more devout than males (Pew Research Center 2016).

Despite this trend being documented consistently (Devine 2013; Stark 2002; Sullins 2006), the causes of this phenomenon have been studied considerably less. While there are a number of explanatory theories, concrete answers remain nebulous. Amongst the theoretical explanations for gender differences in religiosity are those relating to "socialization, social-structure and status, vulnerability, and personality and psychology"

(Schnabel 2018, 59) though Schnabel observes that "risk preferences theory and the assertion of 'universal' gender differences have dominated recent debate on the topic" (2018, 59). According the this theory, being non-religious is considered to be 'spiritually risky', and as men are viewed as less risk-averse than women, they may be less inclined towards religion (Collett and Lizardo 2009; Miller and Stark 2002; Schnabel 2018).

When assessing the gender disparity phenomenon in relation to Islam specifically, scholars have found that this is a unique case as, unlike most other faiths, Muslim women and Muslim men appear to display fairly similar levels of religious commitment (Pew Research Center 2016, 6). Some studies suggest that, in the Islamic context, men actually demonstrate higher levels of religiosity than women (Schnabel 2018, 67). When it comes to attendance at worship services, Muslim men are more active than Muslim women, but this may be due to cultural and religious emphasis on men attending worship services at mosques. In a survey of 39 Muslim countries, it was found that 70 percent of Muslim men indicated they attended weekly whilst only 42 percent of women said the same (Pew Research Center 2016, 13). This is not surprising, as men are expected to attend Friday prayers in a communal setting, whereas women are free to perform their prayers in a home setting. Additionally, women often face restricted access to mosques and/or do not feel welcome to attend (Ghafournia 2020; Woodlock 2010).

While, outside of the Islamic context, females may generally be considered as more religiously devout, it has also been suggested that males may, in certain contexts, be more dogmatic in how they understand and interpret religion. For example, Schnabel's study on gender differences in religion found that, in the context of Christianity, women were more religious, but less religiously dogmatic and that their beliefs were "more inclusive and benevolent than men's" (2018, 68). He suggests that this is due to the fact that "women and men may 'do religion' in gendered ways, with women's religious

expression being more tolerant and inclusive, consistent with gender socialization and gendered norms about women being caring, communitarian, and other-focused" (Schnabel 2018, 59).

Interestingly, these particular gender differences in religious identity and experience do not appear to be universal, "but specific to particular cultural contexts" (Schnabel 2018, 68). For example, the trend of women being more religious but less dogmatic than men appears to be unique to the Christian context, with males in Muslim and Jewish contexts demonstrating a higher level of religiosity than women, and in some areas, being less dogmatic than women. More broadly, it was also found that men trended "toward less dogmatism in non-Christian contexts" (Schnabel 2018, 67). Findings such as these highlight the diverse and contextual nature of the relationship between gender and religion.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined religious conversion in a general context, establishing key definitions and conceptualisations of this phenomenon and highlighting prominent theories and findings from within the existing literature. It has also explored the relationship between religion and gender, which provides key context and background to this study's examination of the differences and commonalities between male and female converts to Islam. The following chapter will provide a further review of existing scholarship on religious conversion, with a specific focus on conversion to Islam in non-Muslim societies.

CHAPTER 2: CONVERSION TO ISLAM

Overview

While the study of religious conversion has a long history, it was not until the late 20th and early 21st centuries that conversion to Islam began to receive sustained scholarly attention. Over the past several decades, there has been considerable growth in academic interest and research on the topic of conversion to Islam in Western nations. To date, existing studies have been primarily qualitative in nature, and have examined a variety of aspects of this phenomenon. Dominant themes within the literature include pathways to Islam and processes of conversion, gender and the experiences of female converts, various social challenges emanating from the decision to convert, the relationship between conversion and race/ethnicity, and converts and extremism/radicalisation. This chapter will outline key themes and findings of this research, while highlighting existing gaps in the literature that are of particular relevance to this thesis.

The Concept of 'Conversion' within Islam

While the terms 'convert' and 'conversion' are widely used within the scholarship on religious conversion, it is important to note that these concepts are somewhat more complex within the Islamic tradition. As Dutton notes, "there is no word in Arabic for 'conversion' per se. Rather, there is the idea of 'becoming a Muslim', for which the verb *aslama* (literally, 'to submit') is used" (1999, 151). Dutton further explains that it is from the verb *aslama* that the words Muslim, which means "one who submits", and Islam, which "means 'submitting, submission' are derived" (1999, 151). Broadly speaking, becoming a Muslim involves "accepting God as Lord and accepting the Prophet Muhammad as the final prophet and messenger of this Lord" (Dutton 1999, 153; see also Galonnier 2018). The act of conversion to Islam involves the recitation of the *shahada*

(proclamation of faith) in the presence of Muslim witnesses. In this declaration, an individual must attest that "I bear witness that there is no God but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God" (Dutton 1999, 153). Thus, while converts are expected to adhere to Islamic doctrine and orthopraxy, particularly in relation to the five pillars of Islam, the act of conversion itself is rather straightforward and simple, particularly when compared to other religions such as Judaism (Kravel-Tovi 2017).

Surrounding the concepts of *aslama* and Islam is the somewhat more complex notion of '*fitra*'. This refers to the idea that all people are born with an inherent disposition towards God, and that by embracing Islam, one is not 'converting' but rather 'reverting' to a natural state (Barylo 2018, 29-30). The concept of *fitra* is often cited by new Muslims who reject the label of 'convert', preferring instead to identify as 'reverts' (Barylo 2018). These concepts and terms will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Historical Perspectives on Conversion to Islam

Historically, the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in non-Muslim societies can be traced back to early 7th century Arabia, during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. While the first converts to Islam are believed to have been members of the Prophet's family, specifically his wife Khadijah and his cousin Ali, other citizens of Mecca soon embraced the new religion (Brown 2011; Donner 2010; Rogerson 2006). As Muhammad's message of monotheism and social justice challenged the status quo and the power of the ruling elite, the early converts tended to come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, however, a number of prominent Meccans also embraced Muhammad's message (Rane 2010, 32; Rubin 1998) While the nascent Muslim community consolidated in the town of Medina, and later Mecca, gaining political and military strength, greater numbers throughout the region began to embrace Islam (Brown

2011; Donner 2010). Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslim armies quickly conquered key regions outside the Arabian Peninsula, beginning an expansive, though often gradual, process of Islamization and conversion. As Donner (2010) asserts, subject populations often maintained their own religions for prolonged periods once they came under Muslim rule – a development which appears to have been tolerated for some time.

Despite widespread narratives of Islam being a religion which was spread by the sword, the dynamics of conversion amongst non-Muslim populations appear to be far more complex. While documentary evidence of the early expansion period remains scant, conversion generally does not appear to have been forced, or in some cases, even encouraged amongst subject populations. Recent research on historic documents referred to as covenants of the Prophet Muhammad suggests that forced conversion was expressly prohibited by the Prophet, a sentiment which is also expressed in verses of the Quran (Rane 2022).

As Lapidus explains, "though the original assumption of Muslim and Western writers was that the Middle East was quickly and massively converted to Islam, nowhere in the Arab sources is there explicit information about the conversion of large numbers of people, and certainly not of whole villages, towns or regions" (2002, 42). Indeed, "contemporary evidence for conversion among non-Arabs in the early decades of Arab rule is very rare" (Hoyland 2014, 160). In numerous cases, Muslim armies and administrators appear to have lived in isolation from these populations in garrison towns, which may have hindered potential conversion (Hermansen 2014, 636). Conversions did, however, occur in these regions, for a variety of reasons which likely included social, political, economic and religious factors (Hermansen 2014; Lapidus 2002). As the Caliphate began to take on a more distinctly Muslim identity in the early-mid 8th century,

conversion appears to have hastened, particularly in the regions of Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Khurasan (Donner 2010; Lapidus 2002). To some extent these conversions may have been aided by the state's "sporadic attempts at encouraging conversion", including a short-lived fiscal incentive (Lapidus 2002, 43). Overall, however, these conversions accounted for only a small percentage of subject populations, and the large-scale adoption of Islam throughout the Middle East and North Africa proceeded at a gradual pace over the next several centuries (Lapidus 2002; Hoyland 2014, 161).

In some cases, the religion of Islam was adopted by the conquerors of Islamic empires, as was the case of the Mongols following their defeat of the Abbasid Caliphate in the 13th century. After the sacking of Baghdad, the Abbasid seat of power, in 1258 and the installation of a puppet regime under Mongol rule, the conquerors developed an interest in the Islamic faith (Jackson 2017). As Armstrong notes "it was Mongol policy to build on local traditions once they had subjugated an area, and by the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries all four of the Mongol empires had converted to Islam" (2002, 98). The conversion of the Mongols was met with hostility from some Muslim scholars, such as Ibn Tamiyyah, who deemed the new rulers as 'un-Islamic' and issued a fatwa directing jihad against the state (Rane 2010, 177).

In other parts of the world, such as South East Asia, the spread of Islam was a gradual and peaceful process which took place over several centuries. While there is some debate over specific dates, Islam is believed to have been introduced to the region from around the 13th century, with the process of Islamization being driven by Muslim traders, Sufi preachers and intermarriage, rather than military conquest (Mutalib 2008).

In later centuries, a number of cases of conversion were recorded amongst Europeans from non-Muslim societies. For example, Gilham's (2014) research on the history of British converts notes that the first recorded case of a British convert was the

of John Nelson in 1583. Examining the context of these early conversion, Gilham explains that these occurred when "Britain's contact with the Islamic lands and peoples of the Ottoman Empire and North Africa intensified through trade and plunder on the high seas" (2014, 3). Over the ensuing years, several high-profile Britons, such as Sir Henry Quilliam, converted to Islam, usually following travel to Muslim lands and positive contacts with local populations. In more recent times, a number of factors have contributed to the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in Western societies. These factors will be explored in further detail in later sections of this chapter.

Terminology

While earlier sections of this paper discussed general definitions and terminology relating to religious conversion, it is also necessary to consider terminology specific to the phenomenon of conversion to Islam. A review of the literature demonstrates that among Muslims, there is no clear consensus on preferred terminology regarding the adoption of the faith. Existing scholarship suggests that there are a number of terms which individuals use following the adoption of Islam, with the most frequently cited being 'convert', 'revert', 'New Muslim' or simply 'Muslim' (Brice 2010, 24). One of the more frequently used terms is 'revert', which refers to a notion that all individuals are born Muslim - thus by embracing Islam, one is not 'converting', but 'reverting' to their natural state (King 2013, 7). The term 'convert' is also contested by some, who view this as a "discursive tool used to marginalise them within the Muslim community" (Turner 2010, 38). In his survey of British converts to Islam, Brice (2010) found that no single term was viewed as preferable by a majority of participants, with the largest pluralities preferring the terms revert (39%) or convert (37%). Smaller numbers preferred to term 'New Muslim' (12%) or identified other specific terms such as 'Muslim' or 'embracer' (Brice 2010, 24). While

acknowledging the diversity of views and preferences concerning terminology (and recognising that it may be a problematic construction to some), for the purpose of clarity and consistency, the terms 'convert' and 'conversion' will be primarily used throughout this thesis.

In addition to those who have converted to Islam, this thesis is also concerned with those who have been born/raised as Muslims. Within the literature on religious conversion, several terms are used to describe individuals who have been born/raised within a certain faith, rather than converting into it. These terms include 'non-converts', 'cradle members', and in the context of Islam 'born-Muslims'. While several of these terms will be referenced throughout the following chapters, the term 'born-Muslim' will be primarily used for the purpose of clarity and consistency.

Estimates and Demographics

Despite an increase in academic research on conversion to Islam in Western nations in recent years, quantitative data on this phenomenon remains limited, and in some cases quite outdated. Deficits in empirical data relating to convert estimates can be explained in part by the absence of questions relating to religious affiliation and religious change in many national censuses throughout the Western world (Karagiannis 2012). As such, in many cases it is difficult to ascertain not only the total number or percentage of converts, but also the total number of Muslims more generally amongst national populations (Schuurman, Grol and Flower 2016, 5). The most consistent and reliable estimates come from the Pew Research Center's surveys of Muslim Americans. Since 2007, the Pew Research Center has conducted three national surveys, which have found that converts comprise between 20 and 23 percent of the American Muslim population. These studies have also provided further insight into the demographic profile of American converts. For

example, the Pew Research Center's 2007 survey found that African Americans represented a majority (59%) of American converts to Islam, and that 91 percent of converts overall had been born in the United States (2007, 22).

In the United Kingdom, Brice (2010) estimated that as of 2010 there were approximately 100,000 British converts to Islam, believed to represent approximately 4.0 percent of the total British Muslim population. This figure was arrived at by extrapolating data from the 2001 Scottish census concerning religious affiliation and change and applying it to the broader population of the United Kingdom. Post-2001 data was then collected through a survey of mosques throughout the United Kingdom in order to identify monthly rates of conversion (2010). While this figure provides a valuable estimate of the overall number of British converts, it should nevertheless be treated with caution due to the outdated nature of the original data and the potential limitations of the methodological approach utilised by Brice.

Beyond the aforementioned figures, reliable data on convert numbers in other Western nations remains sparse. Although widely referenced within the scholarship, and often erroneously presented as fact, estimates from various Western European nations appear to be of a somewhat dubious nature. These estimates generally appear to be based on unverifiable, anecdotal evidence and 'educated guesses' from Muslim organisations and converts in their corresponding countries (see: Bousetta and Bernes 2007; Schuurman, Grol and Flower 2016). Resultantly, these estimates should be considered speculative and their presentation as factual evidence throughout the conversion scholarship remains highly problematic. Despite these limitations and concerns, Table 2.1 provides an outline of these estimates.

Table 2.1. Estimates of Muslim Converts in Europe[1]

Country	Estimated Number of Converts to Islam	Estimated Percentage of Converts Amongst Muslim Population
Belgium	56, 000	8.8%
Denmark	2, 800	1.4%
France	215, 000	1.4 – 4.6%
Germany	215, 000	0.3 – 4.5%
Spain	50, 000	2.5 – 5.1%
The Netherlands	17, 000	1.4 – 1.7%
Sweden	6, 000	1.7 – 2.0%

In the context of Australia, no empirical efforts to identify the overall number or percentage of converts amongst the broader Muslim Australian population had been attempted prior to the present study. Zammit (2011) estimated that approximately 10 percent of Muslim Australians were converts to Islam, however this figure appears to have been entirely conjectural and no supporting evidence is provided by the author to support this claim.

Overall, the lack of available demographic data on converts is symptomatic of a general lack of quantitative research in the field of conversion studies, which is largely characterised by smaller-scale, qualitative research. While the latter provide valuable, in-depth explorations of various aspects of the conversion phenomenon, the dearth of quantitative data in this area has thus far precluded understandings of broader trends relating to convert numbers and demographics, as well as of various aspects of religious identity, practice and belief.

[1] Estimates taken from Schuurman, Grol and Flower 2016.

Pathways to Conversion

Amongst other factors, globalisation and immigration, greater interpersonal contact with Muslims and a greater public awareness of Islam in the post-9/11 era have arguably contributed to a reported increase in rates of conversion to Islam in Western societies over the past several decades (Brice 2010). The pathways which lead Western converts are, however, incredibly diverse in nature and may be influenced by a range of factors. As such, the question of motivational factors has long been a salient theme within the existing conversion scholarship. To date, research on this topic has been largely qualitative in nature, though a number of quantitative studies have also sought to identify trends regarding convert motivations and conversion trajectories.

According to Allievi (cited in van Nieuwkerk 2006), conversion to Islam may be understood as either rational or relational in nature. Broadly speaking, rational conversions are considered those to be motivated by an intellectual interest in Islamic beliefs and teachings. Conversely, relational conversions are viewed as those which are motivated primarily by interpersonal factors, such as friendships with practicing Muslims, travel to Muslim majority countries, and romantic relationships or marriage to Muslims. Allievi's framework aligns with Lofland and Skonovd's 'intellectual' and 'affectional' religious conversion motifs (1981), as discussed earlier in Chapter One.

While there is considerable diversity between individual cases, social interaction and romantic relationships with practicing Muslims (factors which can be considered as 'relational') often play a key role in both introducing potential converts to Islam, and ultimately, motivating them to embrace the faith (van Nieuwkerk 2006). These interpersonal relationships may include marriage to a practicing Muslim, having Muslim friends or acquaintances, or positive experiences travelling to Muslim-majority nations. Such experiences and factors, which may be categorised as 'relational' or 'affectional',

appear to be highly influential in the journeys of Western converts. For example, Köse's study on 70 British converts to Islam found that affectional motifs could be identified in 66.0 percent of participants' narratives. Interestingly, such motifs were found to be more common amongst female (90.0%) than male (60.0%) converts (Köse and Loewenthal, 108). Research by Maslim and Bjorck's (2009) research on female conversion in the United States provides further insight on this issue. In this study, it was found that 20.7 percent of participants converted to Islam because they were considering marriage to a Muslim, while 16.8 percent cited the influence of close friends who were Muslim.

In terms of specific 'rational' or 'intellectual' factors, existing research highlights a range of specific themes and aspects of Islam which appear to resonate with converts. Converts may cite the perceived logic and clarity of Islam, the perceived unaltered and divine nature of the Quran, as well as the "holistic nature of Islam" (Haddad 2006; Mitchell and Rane 2018). Disaffection with prior faiths and Islam's perceived resolution of individuals' questions regarding doctrinal issues and questions about life has also been highlighted in a number of studies. Mirshahvalad (2020) identifies several key themes which may be considered to make Islam more appealing to converts in comparison to Christianity. The author suggests that "the absence of the doctrine of the Trinity, the definition of Jesus as a prophet, direct accessibility to God, and Islam's engagement with social praxes...make this religion clearer, simpler and more rational than others" (2020, 2). Haddad identifies the 'scientific aspects of the Quran' as being particularly appealing to some, highlighting one participant's focus on "the scientific knowledge in the Quran", particularly concerning "description of the embryological process" (2006, 29). Some converts are also attracted to the structure, "daily discipline and specific requirements" which Islam is seen to provide (King 2013, 40).

As van Nieuwkerk (2004; 2014) observes, conversion pathways are often quite complex in nature, and may involve a combination of rational and/or relational factors. Highlighting the often multifaceted nature of conversion trajectories, Mitchell and Rane (2018) found that amongst male converts to Islam in Australia, multiple factors were often identified as contributing to the decision to adopt Islam. For example, while some individuals found Islam through 'relational' encounters with practicing Muslims, their attraction to specific Islamic teachings were also a dominant factor in their decision to convert, in addition to affectional bonds.

As with religious conversion more broadly, it has also been claimed that conversion to Islam is often precipitated by some form of personal crisis (Köse 1996). The specific nature of such crises, however, can vary significantly. In some cases, this may involve the breakdown of a marriage or romantic relationship or the death of a loved one, leading to a cognitive opening which helps to facilitate conversion. A number of studies have also documented increasing instances of conversion to Islam amongst those in prison (Wilkinson *et al*. 2021). While it is difficult to assign causality to such circumstances, the research does appear to suggest that in many cases, some form of personal trauma or crisis does precede the decision to convert.

Additionally, some converts will cite mystical or 'miraculous' events which motivated their decision to convert. These may involve dreams which are viewed as mystical or divine in nature, or a belief that prayers for a miracle or divine sign had been answered. Mirshahvalad's study on Italian converts to Shi'a Islam found that "liminal subjects on the threshold of conversion usually start to perceive signs, miracles and special dreams" which serve to bolster their resolve to convert (2020, 366). Such cases, however, tend to be less commonly reported within the literature than intellectual or interpersonal factors. For example, Köse (1996) found that amongst participants in his

study on British converts, 'mystical' motifs could only be identified in 14.0 percent of cases.

One area which has received only minimal attention within studies on conversion motivations is that of direct *da'wa* or organised proselytization (see Poston 1992; Chen and Dorairajoo 2020). Such activities often include street preaching, where copies of the Quran are distributed free of charge and passers-by can engage with proselytizers regarding the tenets of Islam. While it has been documented that *da'wa* organisations are active throughout the Western world, it remains unclear as to what extent such activities may have on influencing conversion (Chen and Dorairajoo 2020; Shavit and Spengler 2021).

Types of Conversion

In his study on conversion to Islam in the United Kingdom, Brice (2010) refers to two primary convert typologies – the 'convert of convenience' and the 'convert of conviction'. Brice defines the 'convert of convenience' as an individual who has converted to the faith "purely to facilitate marriage to a Muslim partner and afterwards shows little or no interesting in Islam or the practices associated with it" (2010, 2). Furthermore, the convert of convenience will generally neglect to self-identify as a Muslim. The 'convert of conviction', conversely, is considered to be an individual who has converted due to "some other intellectual or emotional reason" (2010, 2). According to Brice, this type of convert generally displays a much stronger adherence to the teachings of the faith, while self-identifying as a member of the religion.

In her work on conversion to Islam, Wohlrab-Sahr analysed processes of conversion through a 'double frame' of syncretism or symbolic battle (1999, 251). Wohlrab-Sahr's framework considers there to be "two logics of adopting Islam" (199,

253), with each of these modes representing opposite ends of the conversion spectrum. According to this framework, syncretism (or alternation) is characterized by the adoption and incorporation of a new faith in a manner which does not result in a "fundamental reorientation" of an individual's identity (Wohlrab-Sahr, 354). Conversely, symbolic battle (or conversion), may be understood as cases in which there is a perceived incompatibility or significant tension between the individual's former life and their newfound faith and identity. Through this logic, converts may engage in "permanent forms of transformation that imply the rejection of former commitments" (Wohlrab-Sahr, 355).

Stages of Conversion

While much attention has been paid to the pathways which lead converts to embracing Islam, other studies have also sought to understand the various stages of the conversion process following the initial act of taking the *shahadah*. Roald's study on female conversion in Scandinavia identified three distinct 'stages' of the conversion process – 'love', 'disappointment' and 'maturity' (2006, 48). The initial stage is considered to be characterized by a strong commitment to incorporating Islamic beliefs and practices into all aspects of a convert's life. Sometimes referred to as 'convertitis', this stage can result in the practice of Islam becoming an emotional obsession for converts, as they attempt to "practice every little detail of the Islamic precepts" (Roald 2006, 49). Jensen (2008, 393) further elaborates on this stage, asserting that:

> The newly converted often exhibit a so-called fanaticism with their new religion, which is expressed in very ritualised behaviour such as only wearing Islamic dress and a preoccupation with the Islamic rules of what is haram ('forbidden') and halal ('allowed')*of doing things 'right'.

While most converts will move past this stage, with their practice of Islam either moderating or declining, this is not always the case. For example, some Western converts continue to intensify their practice of, and commitment to Islam years after their initial conversion (King 2013, 49). Roald notes that it is "particularly adherents to the 'extreme movements', such as the *salafis* and those of the *hizb al-tahrir*" who remain in this stage for prolonged periods of time (2006, 52).

The ensuing stage of 'disappointment' may begin as 'convertitis' fades and converts become overwhelmed by the enormity of religious regulations and expectations. Roald suggests that this period often also includes disappointment among converts in relation to the behaviour of born Muslims, which they may feel does not live up to the ideals of Islam. During this period, some converts "withdraw from the born-Muslim community and turn towards the convert community", while others may leave the faith entirely (2012, 353).

The third stage identified by Roald is referred to as one of 'maturity'. During this stage, converts come to terms with the "discrepancy between ideal and reality" and begin to explore a more contextual understanding of their new faith (Roald 2006, 49-50). Roald observes that during this period, converts describe a feeling of coming "back to themselves", as they are able to more successfully integrate their plural identities in a more cohesive way (2006, 51).

Roald later revised her proposed framework to include a fourth 'stage' of conversion (that of 'secularization'), while re-terming the prior three stages as 'zealotry', 'disappointment' and 'acceptance'. Regarding the fourth stage of 'secularism', the author suggests that converts who undergo this stage "tend to adopt an approach to religion as wholly private, ie., the secular view that religion and politics should be separated" (Roald 2012, 356). Similar to converts who experience the second stage of 'disappointment',

those who experience the fourth stage of 'secularization' are also critical towards born Muslims. The key difference between these stages, however, is that converts in the fourth stage also tend to be critical of the notion of Islam as a 'way of life'. Roald suggests that this is "particularly due to their disappointment with the political situation in Muslim countries, the huge problems with Muslim communities in Western countries, and the recent link between Islam and terrorism" (2012, 357).

Marking Identity

As converts work to articulate and establish their new religious identities, they may also decide to change their name, dress or physical appearance as a way of asserting their new Muslim identity. The adoption of an 'Islamic' name is considered to be a "highly symbolic act" – one which may "strengthen the new identity and the sense of belonging to a group" (Zebiri 2008, 111). While converts are often encouraged by born-Muslims to take a new name following conversion, this is generally not seen as a necessity. Research suggests that while many converts do indeed adopt new names, others will resist this step for a variety of reasons (Mitchell and Rane 2018; Köse 1996).

In addition to the adoption of new 'Muslim' names, converts may also change aspects of their physical appearance as they articulate and express their new identities as Muslims. In this regard, the adoption of certain forms of clothing considered to be 'Islamic' appears to be the most common step. For female converts, this may involve wearing a niqab or hijab following conversion, while male converts may adopt certain forms of clothing such as full-length robes (*thawb*) or skull caps (*kufi*) (Mitchell and Rane 2018). Additionally, some male converts view growing a beard as a way of emulating the appearance of the Prophet Muhammad (Mitchell and Rane 2018).

Existing research demonstrates that there is significant diversity among converts regarding attitudes towards altering their physical appearance in order to reflect their new identities. While some converts may view these changes as a necessary step, or indeed a religious requirement, others may view them as superficial and wholly unnecessary (Mitchell and Rane 2018). Despite this diversity in perspectives, the tendency among converts to change the ways in which they dress following conversion does appear to be more common amongst women. In his research on British converts, Brice found that female converts were more than twice as likely to alter their dress after becoming Muslim (2010, 26). These findings aligned with those of Köse, who found that while 70.0 percent of female converts had adopted new forms of dress, this had only occurred in 6.0 percent of male converts (1996, 131). Such a finding is perhaps unsurprising, considering widespread views amongst Muslim communities relating to expectations of female Muslims to cover and dress modestly.

Convert perspectives on these issues may also be influenced by the time-period in which they convert. In their study on male converts, Mitchell and Rane found that those who had adopted Islam during the 21st century, appeared to have faced higher degrees of pressure to conform to "outward manifestations of 'Islamic' identity" (2018, 233). Conversely, those who had converted during earlier periods appeared to place less emphasis on external markers of identity.

Which Islam?

When converting to Islam, converts are confronted with a multitude of voices and perspectives on Islamic belief and practice. As Inge observes, during the initial period of conversion, converts often have difficulty "navigating the Islam market" and may find themselves "ill-equipped to distinguish between different interpretations" of the faith

(2017, 76). While much scholarly attention has been paid to the question of "why Islam?", comparatively little attention has been paid to the question of "which Islam?" This is a significant oversight, as the interpretations of Islam with which Muslim converts identify do not just represent mere labels. Islam is a diverse faith with a range of interpretations and traditions, and the differing religious and ideological orientations of Western converts may have a significant impact on religious belief and practice, understandings of the role of Islam in converts' lives, as well as varying impacts on converts' social practices and behaviours. Despite this diversity, few studies have sought to engage with the various 'types' of Islam practiced by converts. While "current research suggests that most convert to one of the Sunni traditions" (Duderija and Rane 2019, 157), a review of the existing scholarship reveals only minimal consideration of this issue.

Several quantitative studies have, however, sought to quantify these trends amongst American converts to Islam. The Pew Research Center's survey of Muslim Americans found that amongst participants who identified as converts, a majority (55.0%) were Sunni, while approximately 6.0 percent were Shi'a (2007). Approximately one quarter (24.0%) of participants stated that they did not identify with any particular Islamic interpretation or sect. Amongst female converts in their study, Maslim and Bjorck (2009) found that the largest plurality (46.7%) in the study on American converts identified as Sunni, while a considerable 42.1 percent "did not affiliate with any particular Muslim sect." While further quantitative data is arguably needed, these findings may indicate that amongst Western converts, females may be less inclined than males to gravitate towards specific branches or interpretations of Islam.

Existing qualitative studies on conversion have found that converts identify with a variety of sectarian branches and interpretations of Islam, ranging from Sunni Islam to Shi'ism, from Salafism to Sufism (Köse 1996; Shavit and Spengler 2021). Some converts

appear to avoid identification with specific 'types' of Islam, and such tendencies may be due to a lack of knowledge or interest regarding different Islamic traditions and schools of thought (King 2013), or to concerns over what is perceived as the problematic nature of sectarianism and division within the Muslim community (Mitchell and Rane 2018). Mitchell and Rane's (2018) research on male experiences of conversion within Australia found that four of the ten converts interviewed identified with specific interpretations of Islam. Three of the men identified with specific Sunni *madhahib* (schools of thought), while one identified with Sufism. Another participant described his personal interpretation of Islam as being derived from several traditions, including Sunnism, Shi'ism and Sufism (Mitchell and Rane 2018). Most participants who did not identify with a specific branch of Islam preferred to describe themselves as 'just Muslim', with several participants stating that they perceived sectarian affiliation as being divisive within the broader Muslim community. The findings of this study also indicate that converts' understandings of Islam and the specific interpretations of the faith with which they identify may change over time. For example, two of the men reported that they had shifted between particular schools of Sunni thought as a result of either further religious education, or due to social experiences (Mitchell and Rane 2018).

These findings are consistent with those of King's (2013; 2017) research on female converts in Australia, which found that while half of interviewees did not identify with specific interpretations of Islam or schools of Islamic thought, the other half did adhere to specific 'versions' of the faith. These included specific Sunni *madhahib* and Sufism, (King 2013, 33). As with Mitchell and Rane's findings, King also noted that convert understandings of Islam and adherence to specific schools of thought were not static and, in some cases, changed over time due to personal experiences. In some cases, the evolution of convert understandings of, and approaches to Islam, led to the rejection

of earlier affiliations with specific sectarian branches or theological approaches, and the adoption of others (King 2013).

Duderija and Rane note that the "interpretation of Islam adopted by converts can significantly impact on their social relations due, for instance, to the role they perceive Islam to require of them" (2019, 155). King (2013) for example, found that female converts' interpretations of Islam had a significant impact on issues such as dress, gender relations and a range of other issues. Women adhering to a more conservative interpretation of Islam appeared more likely to wear what they considered 'traditional' forms of Islamic clothing, such as the burqa or niqab (King 2013). There are significant social implications relating to such decisions, particularly in light of assertions that Western converts who appear to be more 'visibly' Muslim, experience greater hostility from members of the general public (Moosavi 2015).

In some cases, understandings and interpretations of Islam may even have a major impact on converts' professional lives. King found that following conversion, one participant in her study (formerly a professional musician) had adopted the view that "music is not allowed in an Islamic way of life" (2013, 49). As a result, this individual undertook a "radical realignment of her life-world" (King 2013, 49), which led to her ending her career in music in order to fulfil a perceived religious obligation.

For some converts, the particular 'types' of Islam which they convert to may also lead to social obstacles within Muslim communities. In their study on female converts to Shi'a Islam in North America, Inloes and Takim (2014) found that participants reported significant levels of marginalization and social exclusion from 'born Muslims' in Shi'a communities. This was particularly evident among converts who had initially embraced Sunni Islam, before converting to Shi'ism. Converts described their experience within Sunni communities positively, explaining that "they had felt much more welcomed and

accepted among Sunnis, who had also provided material support to new converts, such as religious books and transportation to the mosque" (Inloes and Takim 2014, 7). In contrast, convert experiences with Shi'a communities were described in less positive terms, with participants detailing common experiences of racism and social exclusion. Inloes and Takim's (2014) study also highlights the presence of sectarianism in the experiences of converts, finding that upon converting from Sunnism to Shi'ism, converts were effectively ostracized by members of the Sunni community.

Social Identity and Challenges

Following the act of conversion, many converts experience profound shifts in their social identities and personal relationships. As Spoliar and van der Brandt (2020) note, conversion is rarely perceived as a 'neutral act'. Rather, "it tends to be imagined as establishing new boundaries, and transgressing pre-existing religious, political, social and cultural boundaries' (2020, 3). This is particularly true of conversion to Islam in the Western world, where, due to pervasive negative perceptions of Islam, the act of conversion has been equated with 'social suicide' (Köse 1996).

The decision to adopt and practice a certain version of Islam may result in significant obstacles for converts at a broader social level. Following conversion, converts may be viewed by some segments of society as 'cultural' or 'race traitors' (McGinty 2007), and subjected to physical and verbal abuse (Moosavi 2015). Jensen's exploration of the relationship between "national, ethnic and religious identities" amongst Danish converts to Islam found that participants' experiences with wider society were shaped by a perceived "incompatibility between so-called Western values and Islam" (2006, 389). Similar themes were identified in McGinty's (2007) study on female conversion to Islam in Sweden. Here, it was observed that the act of conversion and the adoption of the

headscarf were seen to "challenge some central notions of what constitutes Swedish national identity" (McGinty, 476). Through these actions, converts were viewed by some as "traitors to Swedishness" (McGinty, 476). As such, the perceived transgression of national identity and normative behaviour can pose significant challenges for converts in terms of their interactions with wider society and their sense of belonging.

The decision to convert can also place a significant strain on existing family relationships, as relatives struggle to understand or accept the decision of a loved one to adopt Islam. In his study on conversion to Islam in the United Kingdom, Brice found that 66 percent of his participants had encountered negative reactions from members of their family after revealing that they had converted to Islam (2010, 21). While Brice did find that in the majority of cases family attitudes towards the decision to convert either became positive (43%) or neutral (30%), a significant minority (27%) of participants reported that their families' negative attitude towards their conversion remained. Similar findings have been reported in other conversion studies, which have found that while the attitudes of family and friends may improve over time, in some cases conversion does lead to permanent alienation or estrangement from loved ones (Mitchell and Rane 2018). Fear of negative responses from loved ones may often lead converts to hide their new faith from family and friends. Numerous studies have found that many converts spend varying periods of time after conversion "in the closet" before they feel comfortable revealing their new faith to their families and social networks (Turner 2010). In some cases, converts may conceal their new religious identities for prolonged periods of time (Guzik 2018).

As well as encountering hostility and marginalisation from non-Muslims, many converts also find socialisation into existing Muslim communities to be difficult. Participants in Mitchell and Rane's study on male converts, for example, reported varying

levels of acceptance among members of existing Muslim communities (2018). While some converts reported significant levels of acceptance and support from born Muslims, others reported less positive experiences. For example, one participant noted that there was a tendency amongst born Muslims to view converts to the faith as 'tainted goods.' He expressed a belief that acceptance of converts extended 'only so far', and that born-Muslims often imposed unrealistic expectations on converts in relation to personal behaviour and religious practice (Mitchell & Rane). These findings are consistent with those of Brice's survey of British converts, in which he found that half of his respondents cited 'acceptance within the Muslim community' as one of the major difficulties that they had encountered in their conversion journeys (2010, 22). In the context of connection and belonging, 59 percent of respondents in that study said that they felt a part of the wider Muslim community, while 38 percent said that they did not (Brice 2010, 28).

Media representation poses another societal challenge for Western converts to Islam, as it does Western Muslims more generally. Several content analyses of representations of converts in the mass media have found that reporting on converts is overwhelmingly negative and in the context of violence, terrorism and criminality. For example, an analysis of British newspapers during the period of 2008-2015 found that 55 percent of articles "were directly reporting on British converts to Islam who had either planned or carried out an act of terror and were represented as either one or a combination of terrorist, extremist, radical" (Sealy 2017). Another 11.5 percent of stories focused on stories relating to criminality and violence, while the remaining themes included specific convert stories (18%), celebrities who had converted to Islam (11%), race/ethnicity (1.5%) and gender (0.5%). Sealy further observed that within these stories, converts were often depicted as representing a 'cultural threat', "along with the more physical threat posed by terror and violence" (2017, 200). The author asserts that a

growing number of articles have focused on the "cultural and religious differences between Islam and Britain or "the West" more generally", with converts being depicted as transforming "from an "us" into a "them"" through the act of conversion (2017, 200).

These findings are reflected in Brice's research on British media coverage of converts to Islam. This content analysis of convert-related newspaper stories between 2001 and 2010 found that 62 percent of articles were related to terrorism, with a further 14 percent relating to fundamentalism or extremism (2010, 14). Again, it was found that converts were broadly depicted as posing a security threat, with the author highlighting headlines such as "Whites being lured into Islamic terror" and "Al-Qaeda's white army of terror" (Brice 2010, 15).

Gender

While scholars such as van Nieuwkerk (2006) have asserted the importance of gender in understanding conversion processes and experiences, existing scholarship has focused almost exclusively on the experiences of female converts, with only limited research on either the male conversion experience (Mitchell and Rane 2018; Suleiman 2016) or comparative gender analyses of the conversion phenomenon (Winchester 2008; Rao 2015). Several comparative studies have, however, explored the role of gender in post-conversion processes of identity reconstruction and religious practice amongst. For example, Rao's (2015) study of American converts explored the gendered nature of the conversion process, arguing that male participants were influenced and informed by a notion of 'responsible masculinity', while female converts were influenced by a notion of 'self-sacrificing femininity'. The author describes the concept of responsible masculinity as being in opposition to the notion of 'secular masculinity', which is understood as "aggressive and sexually irresponsible". In contrast to 'responsible

masculinity', the notion of self-sacrificing femininity referred to an understanding that 'women's individual sacrifices enable the reproduction of a morally distinct religious order'. The construction of converts' religious identities based on these gendered constructs was observed as being influenced by, and manifested through changes to clothing (such as veiling amongst women and the growing of beards amongst men), as well as acceptance of the practice of polygyny (Rao 2015).

Other studies have examined the physical manifestations of converts' religious identities and their adoption of new forms of 'Islamic' clothing and physical appearance. For example, research by Brice (2010) and Köse (1996) have found that following conversion, female converts were more likely to change their clothing and physical appearance than their male counterparts. In addition to the aforementioned issues, Köse and Loewenthal's research on conversion in the United Kingdom examined gender-specific differences regarding conversion pathways. In their analysis of conversion motifs, the authors found that male converts were more likely to associate with intellectual motifs, while female converts were more likely to identify with affectional motifs (2000, 108). Within this framework, intellectual conversion motifs are described as involving 'reading and other investigations of alternative theodicies', and is considered to be 'normally brief, entailing self-conversion with little social pressure.' Affectional motifs are considered to be present in cases where 'personal attachments or strong liking play a central role.' Similarly, Allievi's 'typology of conversion itineraries' separates 'rational' and 'relational' conversion (cited in van Nieuwkerk 2006). Generally speaking, 'rational' conversion itineraries are motivated by an intellectual interest in Islamic beliefs and teachings, while 'relational' itineraries are motivated by personal relationships and encounters with Muslims (van Nieuwkerk 2006).

Gender also appears to play a key role in the conversion pathways of some female converts in other ways. Examinations of convert biographies and conversion narratives have highlighted the appeal of "Islamic conceptions of manhood and womanhood", clearly demarcated gender roles and the importance of motherhood amongst many female converts (van Nieuwkerk 2006; Sultan 1999). For some, Islam also provides a critical framework through which the perceived sexualisation and devaluation of women in Western societies are rejected (van Nieuwkerk, 2006). Karin van Nieuwkerk's research on female converts has attempted to isolate how gender plays a role in conversion to Islam in a Western context, suggesting that the "gender discourse mainly centres on gender roles, sexuality, and motherhood." In this regard, the author suggests that "Islam provides converts with constructions of gender that allow them to live according to their *fitrah*, their feminine nature, without being treated as sex objects" (2006, 114). Van Nieuwkerk describes her participants as having the same thinking as Difference Feminism and as subscribing to gender essentialism theory, noting that female converts criticized Western gender roles as being in a state of 'disorder', overemphasizing 'equality' to the detriment of 'equity' and appreciation of differences (2006, 103-104). For some women, converting to Islam was seen as a way to address this dissatisfaction; with the perception that Islam upholds that 'the sexes are complementary', appreciated for their differences and thus not held to the same expectations (van Nieuwkerk 2006, 103). The value of motherhood was raised as an example, noting that while Islam "permits women to stay at home and take care of the children", there was a perception that modern Western societies undervalue this role by expecting women to simultaneously raise children and earn an income (van Nieuwkerk 2006, 104).

Comparing Converts and Born Muslims

Despite repeated claims that converts are overrepresented amongst radicalised Western Muslims compared to born Muslims, only minimal research has sought to understand the differences and commonalities between converts and born Muslims. This gap in the literature is somewhat surprising, particularly in light of suggestions that converts are disproportionately represented amongst radicalised Western Muslims. In the Australian context, no studies have specifically sought to compare the identities, beliefs and experiences of converts and born Muslims. Several studies have, however, provided some insight into differences between these two groups in a broader Western context.

Research conducted on Muslim Americans by the Pew Research Center (2011), for example, highlights some differences between Western converts and born Muslims relating to religiosity, ritual practice, theological views and social relations. For example, the study found that while similar proportions of converts and born Muslims were considered to have a high level of commitment based on the survey's overall religiosity index, in terms of ritual practice, born Muslims (50%) were more likely than converts (37%) to pray five times a day (2011, 25).

The survey also identified areas of difference in relation to social and theological views. For example, it was found that American converts were "less comfortable with gender separation" in mosques compared to born Muslims. While slightly over half (51%) of born Muslims felt that women should pray separately to men, only 36 percent of converts held the same view. Converts (33%) were almost twice as likely as born Muslims (17%) to believe that women should pray alongside men (Pew Research Center 2011, 30). Participants in this study were also asked about religious pluralism, specifically their views on which religions 'lead to eternal life'. A greater proportion of converts (67%) than born Muslims (53%) answered 'many religions', rather than 'only Islam' (Pew

Research Center 2011, 29). Regarding social identity and interpersonal relations, it was found that born Muslims were more likely than converts to say that all or most of their close friends were Muslims (Pew Research Center 2011, 35).

Converts and Extremism

Another theme within the literature relates to the purported relationship between conversion and extremism. A number of studies have examined the phenomenon of radicalisation and violent extremism amongst Western converts, often focusing on the purported overrepresentation of converts among Western jihadists (Bartoszewicz 2013; Kleinmann 2012; Schuurman, Grol and Flower 2016). Some data does appear to support an overrepresentation of converts amongst jihadists and foreign fighters from the United States, where between 20 and 23 percent of the Muslim population are converts to Islam (Pew Research Center 2007; 2011; 2017). Kleinman's analysis of 'homegrown' militancy in the United States, for example, found that between 2001 and 2010, 29% of radicalised Sunni militants were converts to Islam (2012, 283). In the context of foreign fighters, Vidino and Hughes' (2015) study found that converts accounted for 40 percent of ISIS recruits in the United States legal system. Unfortunately, more recent data in these areas does not appear to be currently available.

In a broader Western context, however, such claims may be premature. This is primarily due to a dearth of reliable, empirical data relating to the overall number/percentage of converts in various Western nations (which are often the result of anecdotal evidence or 'educated best guesses', yet erroneously reported as fact by some scholars), as well as limitations in publicly available information regarding the identities and backgrounds of terrorism suspects. Schuurman, Grol and Flower's study on the

relationship between conversion and radicalisation, for example, notes that their research was completed "using anecdotal and largely unverifiable information" (2016, 7).

In the Australian context, existing data does not appear to support suggestions of converts' overrepresentation in this area. An ongoing study of "Australian citizens and residents charged with terrorism offences or known to have joined radical Islamist terrorist organisations since the start of the Syrian civil war" (Lowy Institute) has found that amongst this cohort, approximately 9.3 percent were converts to Islam.

Kleinmann's study of 'homegrown' Sunni militants in the United States provides further insight into the differences between converts and born Muslims in the context of radicalisation. In an analysis of 83 case studies of American militants of convert and non-convert backgrounds, Kleinmann sought to understand if there were key differences or commonalities concerning the "mechanisms and processes that lead to radicalization." The author concluded that while both converts and born Muslims were affected to a similar extent by group-level factors, "individual or internal forces, such as identity issues or cognitive function and style, play a much greater role in radicalizing converts than they do for those raised as Muslim" (2012). Through a survey of 177 converts and 179 born Muslims, Fodeman, Snook and Horgan (2020) measured participants' attitudes based on the Activism and Radicalism Intention Scale (ARIS). A comparative analysis of both cohorts found that compared to born Muslim respondents, "converts were significantly more supportive than non-converts of using legal and nonviolent, as well as illegal and violent, means to advocate for Muslim's rights" (2020, 694). The authors also found evidence to suggest that "converts may only have higher intentions of engaging in radicalism more than non-converts" due to a higher likelihood of intending to engage in activism (2020, 694).

Several theories have been proposed in order to explain the involvement of Western converts in terrorist activities and jihadist groups. For example, in their study on Islamist radicalization and terrorism in Europe, Rabasa and Bernard suggest that the individual background and conversion experiences of converts may help to explain and understand processes of radicalization. The authors suggest that individuals lacking strong religious knowledge, "are poorly educated or have criminal or other troubled backgrounds" (2015, 90) may be particularly at risk. Elaborating on this point, Rabasa and Bernard suggest that these factors may result in a convert's inability to "filter out extremist rhetoric" (91), both in the context of personal interactions and exposure to extremist content on the internet. Bartoszewicz notes that the view of European converts as a security risk stems from both a belief that converts "lack the necessary religious knowledge…thereby constituting easy prey for radicals" and a notion of "convert's zeal" (2013, 17). This view considers converts as often being desperate to demonstrate their commitment to their new faith, and as such are "willing to do anything, including perpetrating the most atrocious acts of political violence" (Bartoszewicz 2013, 17).

The aforementioned theories concerning the apparent vulnerabilities of converts to radicalisation have been challenged by Jones and Dawson (2021), who note that despite the potential merit of these theoretical explanations, they are often not supported by empirical evidence. The authors further suggest that the tendency amongst some scholars to conflate conversion to Islam with 'conversion' to extremism is problematic, and that more attention should be paid to the post-conversion experiences of converts in order to identify potential factors which may contribute to radicalisation. The notion of the 'convert's zeal' in the Islamic context is further problematised by Snook, Branum-Martin and Horgan (2022). The findings of the authors' comparative analysis of religiousness between American Muslim converts and non-converts "directly contradict the idea that

U.S. Muslim converts are especially zealous", with converts exhibiting lower levels of religiousness across a range of variables compared to non-converts. The authors also caution against blind acceptance of the 'convert's zeal' theory, asserting that "speculation about this phenomenon has made converting to Islam an even more stigmatizing and marginalizing process" (2021, 4).

The Case of Australia

Despite the increase in academic interest in conversion since the turn of the century, research on conversion to Islam within Australia remains limited to a handful of qualitative studies. As Martinot and Ozalp observe, various major studies conducted on Muslim Australians in recent years have failed to "explore adequate representations of converts to Islam" (2020, 29). To date, "there are no studies quantifying the scale of conversion to Islam and almost always voices of Australian Muslim converts are non-existent" (Martinot and Ozalp 2020, 29). Such a lack of consideration poses significant challenges to gaining knowledge about this phenomenon in Australian context, while also marginalizing the voices and experiences of an already liminal community. Nevertheless, a small body of qualitative research has provided valuable insights into certain aspects of the conversion experience in Australia.

As with conversion studies in a broader Western context, a primary theme amongst research in the Australian context has been gender and the experiences of female converts to Islam. King's (2017) research in this area explored the backgrounds and conversion pathways of six female converts. The author identified five common factors in participants' conversion pathways and experiences, including a prior belief in God; being drawn to Islam as a result of meeting practicing Muslims; a process of research and preparation as they established their understanding of Islam; a feeling that Islamic beliefs

and values "resonated with their own prior convictions"; and experiencing social challenges due to their conversion (2017, 453).

Research by Woodlock (2010) has examined the experiences of female converts in the context of mosque access, highlighting the challenges and obstacles encountered by women converts in Melbourne, Australia. Among those interviewed, "most had negative experiences with mosques", with six of nine participants expressing that they did not feel welcome at the mosque. The author found that these negative experiences were the result of multiple factors, including cultural and linguistic differences, "differing religious views and gender discrimination" (2010, 271).

Other studies have provided insight into different aspects of the conversion phenomenon. In her research on Australian converts, Alam (2012; 2018) explores issues of race, racialisation and identity through the experiences of white converts to Islam. The author asserts that due to the racialized nature of Islam in contemporary Western societies, including in Australia, white converts to Islam are subjected to processes of racialisation following conversion, in which they are stripped of the 'racially neutral identity' of whiteness and "racialized as non-white by virtue of their appearance" (2018, 35). These processes of racialisation are understood to be reinforced by what are termed "observable elements of culture." In the context of Islam, this primarily refers to 'Islamic' forms of clothing, such as the headscarf, niqab, thawb or kufi (see also Mitchell and Rane 2018). For many converts, these processes of racialisation may serve as a catalyst for discrimination and abuse directed towards them. Participants in Alam's study recounted numerous experiences of racial abuse (generally experienced as anti-Arab racism) as well as the questioning of their national identity by members of the wider community, as well as by family and friends. The author asserts that these findings support the notion that "Islam is racialized as non-white and pitted in opposition to the Australian nation" (Alam

2018, 3). Alam's findings are reflected in other studies on conversion to Islam in Western nations (Galonnier 2015; Moosavi 2015).

In the Australian context, Mitchell's research on male converts found that participants were subjected to racialized abuse which was seemingly connected to their visibility as Muslims. For example, one Indigenous Australian convert recounted an incident in which he and his wife had been abused during a flight on which his wife had worn a headscarf (Mitchell 2016). Overall, the findings of these studies reinforce the highly complex, and often socially fraught, nature of conversion to Islam in Western societies, where converts' religious, national, cultural and ethnic identities may be called into question by non-Muslim members of wider society.

Stephenson's (2010; 2013) research on the relationship between Islam and Indigenous Australia has also explored the complex relationship between religious, cultural and ethnic identity. Through wide-ranging research, the author charts historical encounters between Indigenous Australians and Islam/Muslims from the pre-colonial period to the present day. In the context of pathways to Islam in a contemporary context, Stephenson asserts that for some Indigenous converts, perceptions of a cultural convergence between Islam and Indigenous belief systems provide a strong motivation for embracing Islam. Stephenson also examines the notion of 'kinversion' amongst Indigenous Australians (2010, 91). As explained by the author, this concept refers to "an Indigenous connection to Islam that is culturally – usually family or kin – based. It does not involve the "active acceptance of, or even any great acquaintance with Islamic doctrine" (2013, 432). This notion somewhat mirrors the Muslim typology or orientation of 'cultural nominalist' proposed by Saeed (2007), in which one's identity as a Muslim is considered to be primarily informed by family or cultural background, rather than religious belief or practice.

While the aforementioned studies provide valuable insights into conversion to Islam in Australia, it is clear that numerous gaps in the literature remain. These include, amongst others, an existing dearth of quantitative data (including convert demographics), understandings of the differences and commonalities between converts and born Muslims, comparative gender analyses, and insights into the particular forms and interpretations of Islam with which Australian converts identify and practice. This thesis seeks to address some of these gaps, while providing key contributions to understandings of conversion to Islam in a broader Western context.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a review of existing research on conversion to Islam in a Western context. It has provided an overview of the key themes and findings of the conversion scholarship, while highlighting significant gaps within this scholarship. In doing so, this chapter has sought to situate this thesis within the broader body of conversion research, while highlighting the importance of current gaps which it seeks to address. The following chapter will outline the methodological approach of this study, detailing the stages of research design, data collection and data analysis.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological approach utilised in this thesis. It begins by outlining the research problem and the specific research questions which informed this study. It will then discuss the process of research design and the selection and appropriateness of the methods of data collection and analysis. The benefits and limitations of this approach will then be examined, along with strategies which were employed to mitigate the potential limitations associated with the research method.

The Research Problem

As the previous chapters of this thesis highlighted, existing research on the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in Australia remains confined to a handful of qualitative studies which have focused on specific aspects of convert identities and experiences, with a number of key gaps in the literature remaining. These gaps include, amongst others, a lack of quantitative data on Australian converts, minimal understanding of converts' interpretations of Islam, beliefs and the schools of thought with which they identify, an absence of comparative understandings of converts and born Muslims, as well as insight into comparative gender experiences. The overall objective of this study was to address some of these key gaps in the existing literature, while developing a broad profile of this little-understood group. The research was guided and informed by a series of broad research questions, as outlined below:

1. What is the demographic profile of Australian converts to Islam?

2. How do Australian converts to Islam understand, interpret and express their faith?
3. What challenges do converts encounter following their adoption of Islam?
4. How connected are converts to different segments of Australian society?
5. How do Australian converts to Islam differ from born Muslims in relation to key variables concerning religious identity and practice, social identity and social and religious views?
6. What are the differences and commonalities between male and female converts to Islam?

A Mixed Methods Approach

In the field of social research, there are numerous options relating to methodological approaches and frameworks. Perhaps the most basic distinction in this regard is between quantitative and qualitative approaches. In simplest terms, quantitative research seeks to numerically measure specific phenomena, such as attitudes and behaviours, while qualitative research "refers to collecting and interpreting information about some phenomenon without concern for quantities" (Thomas 2003). Epistemologically, there are key differences between these approaches. As Yilmaz (2013, 312) explains:

> Quantitative research is informed by objectivist epistemology and thus seeks to develop explanatory universal laws in social behaviours by statistically measuring what it assumes to be a static reality…On the other hand, qualitative research is based on a constructivist epistemology and explores what it assumes to be a socially constructed dynamic reality through a framework which is value-laden, flexible, descriptive, holistic, and context sensitive.

While understanding the different epistemological foundations of quantitative and qualitative methods is an important first step in selecting a particular research method, it is also crucial to examine the broader benefits and limitations of both approaches. Bryman identifies the primary 'preoccupations' of quantitative research as measurement, causality, generalisation and replication' (2015, 152). The author explains that this measurement-focused approach provides key benefits in social research. These include the ability for researchers to "delineate fine differences between people" (Bryman 2015, 152) pertaining to specific characteristics and variables, the presence of a "consistent device or yardstick for making such distinctions", and the fact that "measurement provides the basis for more precise estimates of the degree of relationship between concepts" (Bryman 2015). Quantitative approaches to social research do, however, have limitations. Proponents of qualitative research often stress the weaknesses of quantitative approaches, suggesting that "the control demanded by quantitative methods strips away the context that is central to life" (Brodsky, Buckingham, Scheibler and Mannarini 2016, 13). In the field of social research, qualitative approaches such as ethnography and phenomenology prioritise gathering in-depth data regarding particular phenomena as understood and experienced by human subjects. As described by Brodsky *et al*., "an important goal of qualitative methods is discovery, that is, developing holistic, comprehensive descriptions of systems, theories, and processes, as well as identifying factors and working hypotheses that warrant further research" (2016, 13). While such approaches do allow for more in-depth and contextual understandings of particular phenomena when compared to quantitative methods, the qualitative approach does have its own limitations. For example, critiques of qualitative methods assert that this approach is often too subjective in nature and poses major challenges relating to replicability and generalisability (Bryman 2015, 398-399).

In light of the benefits and limitations of quantitative and qualitative approaches, some researchers seek to draw upon the advantages of both. As Connell explains, the notion of methodological pluralism recognises "that all research methods have relative advantages and disadvantages and that researchers should draw upon a variety of methods and use those most appropriate to the specific questions being studied" (2016, 121). The mixed-methods approach to social research emerged in the mid-20th century and was driven by "researchers and methodologists who believed qualitative and quantitative viewpoints and methods were useful as they addressed their research questions" (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner 2007, 113).

In order to utilise the advantages inherent in both approaches, a mixed methods framework combining quantitative and qualitative aspects was employed. The approach utilised in this study involved, firstly, constructing a web-based survey to gather a wide range of quantitative data regarding demographics, as well as various aspects of convert identities, attitudes and social experiences. The wealth of data collected via this method allowed for the establishment of a broad demographic profile of respondents, the identification of dominant trends and themes, and the testing of relationships between key variables.

Following the completion of the survey, a series of subsequent focus groups were conducted in order to add a qualitative component to the data. These sessions involved a presentation of key survey findings, after which participants' views on these issues were solicited through a group discussion. This approach, which will be discussed in detail throughout this chapter, proved to be a successful method which allowed the researcher to gather a wide range of quantitative data, while supplementing this with nuanced, qualitative insights into the survey findings.

Online Survey: The Quantitative Dimension

As the primary objectives of this study included gathering demographic data and measuring attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, a quantitative component to data collection and analysis was considered essential. Furthermore, a quantitative approach allows the researcher some capacity to generalise their findings, which qualitative interviews and focus groups are unable to do. Throughout the stage of research design, multiple quantitative data collection options were considered. Surveys or questionnaires, which have been utilised in multiple studies on both converts to Islam (see, for example: Brice 2010; Maslim and Bjorck 2009) and Western Muslims more broadly (see, for example: Pew Research Center 2011; Pew Research Center 2017), were viewed as the most logical choices in this regard. Surveys and questionnaires have long been common in the field of social research (Wright and Marsden 2010, 4), due to their ability to facilitate "comprehensive and systematic examination of social life" (House *et al.* 2004, 3). House et al. conceptualise sample surveys as "a telescope on human society", one which can "provide empirical images of the populations of organizations, communities, societies, and even the world" (2004, 3). As the authors elaborate, "like a telescope, its focus can be broadened or narrowed to allow examinations of supra- and subpopulations of individuals or organizations and, ultimately, even individual communities, organizations, or persons" (House *et al*. 2014, 3). In the context of this study, the survey 'telescope' would be focused on the Muslim Australian community, and in particular, those individuals who had converted to Islam.

Once the survey method was selected as the primary data collection tool, it was then necessary to consider the most appropriate format for dissemination. The options considered here included the more traditional telephone or mail-survey formats, as well as an online format. Stern and colleagues observe that "the world of primary data

collection has changed dramatically in the past 20 years", and "nowhere is this trend more apparent than in the realm of survey research" (2020, 448). Over the past several decades, there has been a significant decline in survey response rates, particularly in the context of traditional methods such as mail and telephone surveys (Batterham 2014). Stern *et al.* contend that due to "the social and technological changes associated with how people communicate...interviewer-administered forms of data collection, such as telephone surveys" have become less successful due to the "cultural shift to asynchronous forms of communication" (2020, 449). Due to this shift to a "culture of self-administration", online survey methods have become increasingly popular as an alternative to more traditional methods (Stern *et al.* 2020, 449). Despite some concern over receiving sufficient response rates through this method (Shih and Fan 2008), an online survey was selected as the most practical option for this study. This choice was informed by three primary factors.

Firstly, due to limitations in funding, resources and time, mail and telephone methods were not considered to be either cost-effective or logistically practical, nor likely to generate sufficient or valid responses. As Batterham observes, the costs associated with these approaches "can be considerable, both in terms of overhead (costs of materials, postage, call centres) and personnel (logistical management of mail-outs, in-taking surveys, employment of telephone operators)" (2014, 185). The minimal cost associated with constructing and disseminating a survey through a tool such as Lime Survey was thus viewed as the most effective way of reaching a large sample size with the limited resources available. In addition to funding considerations, an online option was also considered to be the most time-effective approach. For example, when conducting a survey via mail or telephone, it is crucial to consider logistical aspects such as turn-around time for mail responses, time associated with conducting telephone-based surveys, as well as processes of data collation. An online approach, while still being dependent on

sufficient response rates, removed the need for the aforementioned activities and streamlined the process of data collection as all responses were automatically uploaded to a secure and centralized database.

Secondly, the decision to utilise a web-based method was also informed by the potential of the internet and social media to recruit members of minority communities. As Stern and colleagues assert, "using online surveys has provided the opportunity for new means of highly targeted recruitment of underrepresented and otherwise hard-to-reach groups through avenues such as social media sites" (2020, 449). In their study, the authors found that targeted social media ads were particularly effective in facilitating online survey recruitment amongst gender and sexual minority youth (2020). Others have noted the potential of social media to reach marginalized communities at risk of "under-sampling in online survey research" (Johnson et al. 2016, 89), as well as other social groups (Ramo & Prochaska 2012). As the goal was to survey members of the Muslim Australian community, including converts to Islam – a minority within a minority - , the ability to incorporate social media engagement and promotion into the recruitment process was considered to be particularly beneficial.

Thirdly, the concept of social desirability bias also contributed to the final decision on data collection. In simplest terms, the theory of social desirability bias suggests "that respondents answer questions about normative behavior to appear prosocial to interviewers" (Brenner & DeLamater 2016). Resultantly, participants may inaccurately report behaviours, beliefs and attitudes which are considered to be socially unacceptable or counter-normative. Research does, however, suggest that the method of data collection and the level of researcher-participant interaction can affect the potential of social desirability bias in responses (Tourangeau & Ting, 2007; Pew Research Center 2015). It has been suggested that participants are more likely to report higher frequency

of prosocial behaviour in "interviewer-administered surveys than on the self-administered questionnaires used in mail and web surveys" (Brenner & DeLamater 2016). For example, in a national survey of Australians which utilised both interviewer-administered and self-completion forms of data collection, it was found that participants reported higher levels of negative sentiment towards Muslims when completing the online version of the survey which did not include any interaction with an interviewer (Markus 2019, 4).

As the survey included probing questions relating to participants' religious identities and views, including potentially sensitive topics such as jihad and shariah, there was a concern regarding the possibility of such a bias. The level of anonymity afforded by an online survey option in which the participant was assured of confidentiality and was not required to engage directly with the research team was viewed to be advantageous in limiting the potential for social desirability bias. Overall, while there are undoubtedly limitations to this approach, as will be discussed later in this chapter, the use of the online survey tool ultimately proved to be an effective and efficient choice.

Focus Groups: The Qualitative Dimension

As part of the mixed methods approach which informed this study, a series of post-survey focus groups were held in order to provide a qualitative perspective on the survey results. During the early stages of research design, a number of potential qualitative approaches were considered. These included online questionnaires as a follow up to the survey, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. While each approach has its own corresponding benefits and drawbacks, focus groups were ultimately selected as the most appropriate choice.

Focus groups, which may be defined as "a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment" (Krueger and Casey 2009, 2), have been utilised in social research since at least the 1940s. According to Morgan's definition, focus groups consist of three core components:

> First, it clearly states that focus groups are a research method devoted to data collection. Second, it locates the interaction in a group discussion as the source of the data. Third, it acknowledges the researcher's active role in creating the group discussion for data collection purposes (1996, 130).

The focus group format offers a number of benefits when compared to other options. In terms of logistics and time constraints, focus groups offer a pragmatic alternative to one-on-one interviews. While the latter would have enabled more detailed, in-depth discussion on an individual basis, the feasibility of this approach may have proven to be difficult in terms of logistical arrangements, time constraints and other factors such as the costs associated with audio transcription and travel. In selecting the focus group method, the researcher was able to obtain a wealth of rich, qualitative data, with a large sample size which would have been less feasible through individual participant interviews, due to scope, timeframe and resource limitations.

In addition to these pragmatic considerations, the dynamics of the focus groups also offered additional benefits compared to an online questionnaire or individual interviews. As George asserts, "the interaction between focus group participants has the potential to create a dynamic synergy that is absent in individual interviews" (2012, 257). Morgan further explains that these dynamics make "discussion in focus groups more than the sum of separate individual interviews", as "participants both query each other and

explain themselves to each other" (1996, 39). In the context of this study, the dynamic conversations generated within the focus groups yielded a wealth of rich data. Despite the benefits of the focus group method, there were also a number of limitations associated with this approach. These limitations will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

Research Design

Prior to the early stages of research design, a comprehensive review of existing literature on conversion to Islam in a general Western[2] context was conducted. This allowed for the identification of key themes and findings within the conversion scholarship, while also revealing notable gaps in the literature. These findings helped to inform the direction of the research, including potential methodological approaches and specific research questions. Overall, the broader study on which this thesis is based was designed and conducted by a research team consisting of three Griffith University doctoral candidates and two research supervisors. Based at Griffith's Centre for Social and Cultural Research, this project was titled the Islam in Australia survey. Broadly speaking, the overarching objective of this study was to gain insight into the ways in which Muslim Australians understand, interpret and express Islam in contemporary Australian society. Each of the PhD candidates involved focused on a specific theme within this overarching framework, with this researcher focusing on Australian converts to Islam.

Once the overall objectives of this study and its methodological framework had been constructed, the research team began to design the survey questions and data collection tool. While many questions were derived from the scholarly literature and prior studies of a similar nature, others were constructed in order to address key gaps in the existing scholarship. Due to concerns regarding religious and cultural sensitivity, as well

[2] In this context, the term "Western" refers to Western European and Scandinavian countries, North America, Australia and New Zealand.

as regarding potential mistrust amongst Muslim Australians for research of this nature, the research team felt it essential to engage meaningfully with Muslim communities. Throughout the process of designing the survey, Muslim community organisations throughout Australia were actively engaged with and consulted. This engagement included a consultation session with Muslim community leaders and representatives, in which feedback was sought with respect to the content, wording and overall direction of draft versions of the survey. Questions were refined and reworked with the guidance and feedback provided in these sessions.

The final version of the survey included approximately 150 questions, spread over eight primary sections. These included demographic questions, questions specific to participants that identified as converts, as well as a range of others broaching religiosity, views on social and theological issues, and issues relating to social connectivity and belonging. The majority of responses were measured using 5-6 point Likert scales. Several open-ended questions were also included, in which participants were prompted to provide a written response.

Following the conclusion of the survey component, the research team designed and conducted a series of focus groups, the aim of which was to gain qualitative insight into the survey findings. Due to the wealth of data collected in the survey, and the multiple foci of the study, it was necessary to develop an effective and efficient approach to these sessions. After careful consideration, it was decided that these sessions would involve a brief presentation of the survey's findings, which would provide key background and context for participants, followed by a group discussion in which participants would be asked to provide their thoughts on three broad themes. These themes coincided with the primary research focus of each PhD researcher, with one of these being the theme of conversion/converts to Islam. Within the discussion on converts and conversion, the

researcher chose to focus on three sub-themes which aligned with the study's overall research questions. These included (1) convert demographics, (2) the differences and commonalities between female and male converts and (3) the differences and commonalities between converts and born-Muslims. At the conclusion of these semi-structured discussions, participants were given the opportunity to discuss topics or findings of their choice. Despite some limitations, which will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter, the focus group format proved to be effective in gaining qualitative insight into the key themes and findings of the survey data.

Ethical Considerations and Anonymity

As this study involved human subjects, it was conducted strictly according to Griffith University's human research ethics guidelines. Ethical clearance was received from the Griffith Human Research Ethics Committee (**Reference 2019/042**) prior to the commencement of data collection. All participants were provided with informed consent materials prior to beginning the survey and focus groups and each were required to provide informed consent. For survey participants, this consent was in the form of a checkbox, and the survey could not be commenced until this consent had been provided. Focus group participants were required to read and sign an informed consent form prior to the commencement of each session. This material (included in this thesis as Appendices A and B) outlined the nature and objective of this study, as well as the rights of participants. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty and were assured that their identities would remain anonymous. No incentives, financial or otherwise, were provided.

While participation in the research was considered to present minimal risk to survey and focus group participants, it was recognised that the personal nature of some

questions had the potential to cause emotional distress. Participants were therefore provided with contact details for several counselling and mental health services in order to minimise and counter such risks. The materials provided to participants also included contact details for the Griffith Research Ethics office, in the event of any concerns regarding the conduct of the study.

Data Collection and Participants

Data collection occurred in two primary stages. The first involved a national, online survey of Muslim Australians, while the second involved a series of seven post-survey focus groups conducted in various cities around Australia.

Stage 1

The first phase of data collection involved an online national survey of Muslim Australians. Conducted through the Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Griffith University, the survey was fielded using Lime Survey. Participants were recruited via social media and with the assistance of various Muslim community organisations and mosques throughout Australia. These organisations also assisted in the dissemination of the survey via mailing lists. Social media presence was largely centred on engagement via a dedicated Facebook page which promoted the survey. A link to the online survey was provided through this page, which was also used to advertise and solicit participation in the focus groups. Muslim community organisations and individuals associated with these organisations further assisted by sharing survey posts through their social media networks.

Data collection occurred over a two-month period from the beginning of September 2019 until the end of October 2019. Participants were eligible to complete the

survey if they identified as Muslim, were Australian citizens or permanent residents, and were aged 18 years or over. High School aged individuals under 18 were able to take part in the survey with the consent of a parent or guardian. A total of 1034 eligible participants completed the survey, with 163 (15.76%) self-identifying as converts to Islam.

Stage 2

The second phase of data collection involved a series of seven focus groups which were conducted in seven cities around Australia: Brisbane, Logan, Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. Participants for these sessions were recruited primarily via social media, with events in each city advertised via the Facebook page. Registration was essential and links were provided to registration pages created via the Eventbrite website. In order to be eligible to take part in the focus groups, participants needed to identify as Muslim, be Australian citizens or permanent residents and be of 18 years of age or older. Participation in the focus groups was not conditional upon participants having completed the survey.

Between 6 and 14 individuals participated in each session, with an overall total of 72 participants. A demographic breakdown of focus group participants is included in this thesis as Appendix E. Each session commenced with a PowerPoint presentation which outlined key findings of the survey. This was followed by an open discussion in which participants were prompted to provide their thoughts and perspectives on three key areas, one of which being findings related to conversion and converts. All focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Additionally, all participants completed a short questionnaire (Appendix D), which included a series of demographic questions as well as several questions related to the survey findings. Within the demographic section, participants were asked to identify

if they were born/raised Muslim or if they had converted to Islam. Questionnaire responses were transcribed verbatim and uploaded to an Excel database for analysis.

Data Analysis

Survey data were analysed using both the Lime Survey tool and Statistics Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, V. 26). Lime Survey was utilized in order to calculate basic frequencies and to establish an overall profile of participants. Further analysis, including comparative analyses based on gender and conversion status, was then conducted using descriptive statistics in SPSS, in order to determine statistical significance and odds ratios.

Data from the focus groups and questionnaires were analysed using the NVivo software program. Following the completion of the focus group sessions, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and uploaded to NVivo. As the structure of the focus group sessions had focused primarily on three specific topics (demographics, interpretations and social connection), these formed the primary thematic clusters into which data were organised. A fourth thematic cluster labelled 'Other' was also created for data which did not fall into one of the primary three categories. Quotes were attributed to specific participants based on the city in which their focus group was held, and the participant number which they were assigned in that session. For example, Perth: Participant 1. The focus group questionnaires were also transcribed and uploaded to the NVivo program. As with the audio transcriptions, the data was subjected to a process of thematic coding before being organised into a series of four thematic clusters which mirrored those created during analysis of the focus group data.

Limitations

While the survey and focus groups yielded a wealth of valuable data, there are several limitations which need to be acknowledged. As this is the first large-scale, quantitative study of Muslim Australian converts, there are a number of challenges relating to ascertaining the representativeness of the survey sample. Without comparative empirical data regarding the demographic profile of Australian converts to Islam, it is not possible to ascertain how closely the survey sample represents the broader convert population. Additionally, due to a lack of existing, reliable estimates concerning the overall number or percentage of converts amongst the broader Muslim Australian community, there is a possibility that converts may have been either under-represented or over-represented in the survey sample.

Further considering the representativeness of the survey sample, while the overall survey sample (including both converts and born Muslims) demographically resembled the broader Muslim Australian population in a number of key areas, including age, gender and place of birth, there was an over-representation of participants who had completed higher education. This is perhaps not unexpected, considering research which has found that survey participants tend to possess higher levels of education than the general population (Kandel *et al.*, 1983; Picavet 2001).

It should also be added that in order to produce a sample of respondents that included a representative sample of converts to Islam, the researchers avoided promoting the survey to convert-specific groups. Rather, the survey was promoted amongst Muslim groups and organisations other than those that specifically identified as convert groups so as to not bias the sample and to get as close as possible to a representative sample of converts from within the broader sample of Muslim Australian participants.

With respect to the focus groups, several potential limitations must be highlighted. Firstly, the presence of focus group participants identifying as converts was limited. Of the 72 total participants, only five individuals identified as having converted to Islam. This number represented 3.6 percent of all focus group participants, significantly lower than the percentage of converts who completed the online survey. While it is difficult to identify the reason behind this disparity, it could be theorized that converts may feel more comfortable engaging in such research in an online setting, as opposed to a face-to-face setting. Additionally, as later chapters of this thesis will explore, survey participants who identified as converts (particularly female converts) reported weaker levels of social connectedness in relation to the Muslim community than did their born-Muslim counterparts. This may, in part, explain the reduced presence of converts in this setting. While the reduced participation of converts in the focus groups provided less qualitative data than had been expected, these sessions were nevertheless highly valuable and provided a wealth of rich data not only from the converts themselves but also from born-Muslims in relation to their perspectives of converts. The contributions of born Muslims to these discussions added further depth to these topics, with many individuals having personal relationships and experiences with converts, such as being involved in convert support services. This data provided added depth and insight into the experiences of Australian converts from the perspective of others within the broader Muslim community.

Additionally, due to the structure of each session, which began with a PowerPoint presentation outlining key findings of the survey and the inclusion of other themes within the discussion that followed, the amount of time dedicated to discussing convert-specific survey findings was limited. On average, this section of the focus groups lasted for an approximate duration of 20-30 minutes. As such, the convert-specific component of each

focus group discussion primarily focused on three key themes, as outlined earlier in this chapter.

One final potential concern in the context of the focus groups relates to social desirability bias. While the survey sought to minimise the risk of such bias through strict assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, in-person focus groups provided a greater challenge in this regard. While participants were not required to provide their names or personal details, the interactive nature of the sessions and the fact that each session was audio-recorded did pose some concern. In order to minimise this risk, participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. Participants in each session were assigned a number (for example, Number 1) in order to identify them in the audio recordings and transcripts. No participant names were recorded or included in the transcriptions or in this thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the methodological framework of this study, outlining the considerations which influenced and informed the methodological approach, and providing a rationale for the utilisation of a mixed methods approach which combined quantitative and qualitative components. It has also described the processes of research design, data collection and data analysis. Finally, limitations associated with the selected method were discussed, as well as efforts which were made in order to counter and limit these concerns. The findings of this study will be presented over the following chapters, beginning with an overview of participant demographics in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: DEMOGRAPHICS

Overview

As was discussed in Chapter Two, despite a considerable growth in scholarly research on the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in recent years, numerous gaps in the scholarship remain. Currently, the overwhelmingly qualitative nature of existing research has resulted in a near absence of reliable quantitative data on Western converts to Islam, severely limiting understandings of convert demographics and numbers. To address this critical gap in the literature, a number of demographic questions were included in the Islam in Australia survey, which were designed to gain insight into the overall proportion of Muslim Australians who are converts, and to develop a broad demographic profile of Australian converts to Islam.

This chapter provides a demographic profile of survey respondents, including comparative breakdowns based on gender and conversion status. Beginning with findings relating to convert estimates, it will outline key demographic data such as age, gender, birthplace, employment status and educational attainment, while presenting comparisons between converts and born Muslims, as well as between male and female converts. These findings address a key gap in the existing literature, providing crucial insight into the demographics of Australian converts to Islam.

Convert Numbers

As previously mentioned, empirically based estimates on the total number or overall percentage of converts amongst Western Muslim populations remains minimal. Prior to the present study, no empirical data on this issue in an Australian context was available. As such, the survey included a demographic question which asked participants to indicate

if they had been born/raised Muslim, or if they had converted/reverted to Islam. In total, 1034 Muslim Australians completed the Islam in Australia survey. Of this total, 163 participants self-identified as converts, representing approximately 15.8 percent of the total survey sample. Comparatively, research conducted by the Pew Research Center has found that converts account for approximately 21 percent of Muslim Americans (2017). It should be noted that African Americans constitute a significant minority of Muslim Americans overall, at around 13 per cent (the majority of whom are converts), and approximately 59 percent of American converts (Pew Research Center 2011, 9; Pew Research Center 2007, 22), which contributes to the relative high number of Muslim American converts. Other estimates of convert numbers in Western nations range from between 0.2 - 8.8 percent of national Muslim populations (Brice 2010; Schuurman, Grol & Flower 2016). However, as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, such estimates tend to be highly speculative in nature and are rarely supported by credible empirical evidence. While further data is needed to assess the validity of this finding, this figure nevertheless represents the first empirically based estimate of the overall proportion of Muslim Australians who are converts to Islam. Additionally, several factors gave the research team confidence in the accuracy of this figure. First, in order to avoid artificially inflating the number of convert respondents, the survey was not promoted to convert-specific groups. Second, throughout the two-month period in which the survey was fielded, the proportion of convert responses remained largely consistent at between 15 and 20 percent of the total sample.

Table 4.1 Demographic Overview

Demographic	Total Converts (Survey)	Total Born Muslims (Survey)	Muslim Australians (2016 Census)
	15.8% (*n*=163)	84.2% (*n*=871)	*n*=604, 240
Gender			
Female	61.4% (*n*=100)	48.8% (*n* =425)	47.0%
Male	38.0% (*n* =62)	51.1% (*n* =445)	53.0%
Other	0.6% (*n* =1)	0.1% (*n* =1)	-
Age			
10-19	1.9% (*n* =3)	5.2% (*n* =45)	19.4%
20-29	19.8% (*n*=32)	19.4% (*n* =169)	18.9%
30-39	24.1% (*n*=39)	35.4% (*n* =308)	19.7%
40-49	21.6% (*n*=35)	24.7% (*n*=215)	11.7%
50-59	14.2% (*n*=23)	8.0% (*n*=70)	7.0%
60-69	13.6% (*n*=22)	5.4% (*n*=47)	3.8%
70+	4.9% (*n*=8)	2.0% (*n*=17)	2.1%
Average age	43	38	-
Place of Birth			
Australia	74.2% (*n*=121)	32.0% (n=279)	36.4%
Overseas	25.8% (*n* =42)	68.0% (n=592)	63.6%

This estimate was raised in the focus groups, with participants asked about their views on the accuracy of this number. While some participants were surprised by this estimate, others considered this to be an accurate reflection of their own experiences within the Muslim community. Some participants, for instance, mentioned the regularity of which they would see Australians taking the *shahada* at their local mosque. If this figure were found to be representative, it would suggest that converts account for a considerable minority of Muslim Australians, and may number as high as approximately 128,000, based on data collected in the 2021 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022). Again, while such a number needs to be confirmed by additional research, this

preliminary estimate highlights the importance of gaining further insight into conversion in the Australian context.

Gender

In terms of gender, the survey sample included a higher proportion of female converts than male converts. From a total of 163 converts, 100 (61.4%) identified as female, 62 (38.0%) identified as male and 1 participant (0.6%) identified as other. In this regard, the demographic profile of survey participants closely aligned with that of Brice's (2010) survey of British converts to Islam, in which 62 percent of respondents were female, and 38 percent were male. It is noteworthy, however, that this disparity in gender representation was not present amongst born Muslim participants (see Table 4.1) where males slightly outnumbered females, and largely resembled the gender breakdown of the wider Muslim Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018a). While additional data is needed to assess the validity of this gender breakdown amongst Australian converts more broadly, these findings do appear to support assertions that female converts outnumber males in a general Western context (van Nieuwkerk 2006; Brice 2010). It is important to note, however, that empirical evidence of this purported trend currently remains minimal.

The higher representation of females among survey respondents who self-identified as converts was raised at a number of focus groups, with participants asked about their views on the accuracy of this finding. While some participants questioned whether this figure was indeed representative of the broader Australian convert population, others felt that this number was indeed reflective of reality. One focus group participant suggested that the gender breakdown of the survey sample was accurate and had remained consistent over the past several decades:

> …those statistics haven't changed in maybe 20, 30 years. I remember we looked at something similar to this, a long time ago. So this has been like this for a long time…And I always remember, it was about sixty percent for women and forty for men. So it's been about thirty years like that. So it's interesting for women that it has not changed (Canberra, Participant 8).[3]

In addition to discussing the potential accuracy of these numbers, focus group discussions also explored possible causal factors which might explain the higher proportion of female converts amongst Muslim Australians. Potential explanations of this gender disparity, as raised by focus group participants, will be discussed in Chapter Five.

As noted earlier, one convert participant identified as 'other', representing 0.6 percent of converts overall. Amongst born Muslims, one participant also identified with the gender diverse option of 'other'. This low level of representation is perhaps not surprising, considering findings from the 2016 Australian national census, in which gender diversity was calculated at a rate of 5.4/100, 000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018b). It should be noted, however, that "due to limitations associated with collecting sensitive information, limitations of the special procedures and willingness or opportunity to report as sex and/or gender diverse", the validity of this estimate is uncertain (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018b). Unfortunately, due to the small number of participants who identified with the gender diverse option (amongst both converts and born Muslims), gender comparisons discussed throughout this thesis will focus primarily on participants who self-identified as either male or female.

[3] NOTE: This participant self-identified as a born Muslim.

Age

Participants ranged in age from 16 to 77 years, with an average age of 43 years. As Table 4.1 outlined, converts were slightly older than born Muslims, who had an average age of 38 years. The slight disparities in age between converts and born Muslims is perhaps unsurprising. As converts to Islam tend to become Muslim somewhat later in life (see Chapter Five), it is to be expected that there would be less representation within younger age brackets. Concerning gender (see Table 4.2), female converts were, on average, slightly younger than their male counterparts, with an average age of 42 compared to 46.

Table 4.2. Convert Age by Gender

Demographic	***Female Converts (n=100)***	***Male Converts (n=61)***[4]	***Total Converts (n=162)***[5]
Average Age	42	46	43
Age group			
10-19	1.0% (*n*=1)	3.2% (*n*=2)	1.9% (*n*=3)
20s	23.0% (*n*=23)	14.5% (*n*=9)	19.8% (*n*=32)
30s	24.0% (*n*=24)	24.2% (*n*=15)	24.1% (*n*=39)
40s	23.0% (n=23)	17.7% (*n*=11)	21.6% (*n*=35)
50s	15.0% (*n*=15)	12.9% (*n*=8)	14.2% (*n*=23)
60s	11.0% (*n*=11)	17.7% (*n*=11)	13.6% (*n*=22)
70 and over	3.0% (*n*=3)	8.1% (*n*=5)	4.9% (*n*=8)

Education

Regarding educational attainment (see Table 4.3), participants exhibited a high level of post-secondary school qualifications. Almost half (49.1%) had completed a tertiary

[4] While there were a total of 62 male participants, one age value was missing from the completed surveys.
[5] As stated in the previous footnote, one age value was not included in the survey data. As such, the data presented covers 162 of the total 163 survey participants.

degree (including undergraduate, post-graduate and PhD), while almost one-quarter (23.3%) were currently engaged in tertiary-level study. These findings correlate somewhat with those of Köse's study of British converts, which found that 60 percent of participants had completed a tertiary degree, including bachelor's and Master degrees and PhDs (1996, 80).

Comparatively, survey participants who identified as being born/raised Muslim displayed slightly higher levels of educational attainment than did converts. Amongst born-Muslim participants, 61 percent had completed a tertiary-level degree, with 18.4 percent currently engaged in tertiary-level study.

Table 4.3. Educational Attainment*

Highest Level of Education	Converts	Born Muslims
High School	8.0%	4.0%
TAFE/Diploma	10.4%	6.9%
Apprenticeship	4.9%	1.2%
Bachelor's Degree	24.5%	27.4%
Post-Graduate Degree	20.9%	28.0%
PhD	3.7%	5.6%
Currently Engaged in Study[6]	27.6%	26.9%

Question: What is your highest level of education?

Survey participants overall (including both converts and born Muslims) possessed a higher level of educational attainment than that of the general public. It is estimated that around 30 percent of the wider Australian population have completed a Bachelor level

[6] This number includes those who are currently in high school, TAFE and university.

degree or higher (Statista 2021). While it has been found that Muslim Australians do tend to have slightly higher levels of educational attainment than the national average (Hassan 2015, 50; Hassan 2018, 33), it would also appear that survey respondents possessed higher levels of education than Muslim Australians more broadly. Utilising data from the 2016 national census, Hassan found that approximately 31.2 percent of Muslim Australians had completed either a Bachelor-level degree or other post-graduate qualifications[7] (2018, 33). Unfortunately, there is no more recent data concerning educational attainment currently available, and as such, these comparisons should be observed with caution.

Some research suggests that those with higher levels of education are more likely to respond to surveys and questionnaires (Hoffman *et al.* 1998; Picavet 2001), which may, to some extent, explain the over-representation of survey participants with tertiary level degrees. This factor does, however, pose some challenges in terms of the overall representativeness of the survey sample and should, as such, be noted as a potential limitation in the survey method. While this thesis does not examine participant responses in relation to the variable of education, this theme is explored in some detail elsewhere (Rane *et al.* 2020).

Employment

Of the 163 converts surveyed, a total of 103 (63.2%) were currently engaged in paid employment, including full-time, part-time and casual work. A total of 60 respondents (36.8%) were not currently in paid employment. Of those not currently working, 12.3

[7] It is unclear if those with a PhD or Master degree are included in Hassan's calculations. As such, these estimates should be viewed with caution.

percent were retired, 8.0 percent were students and 3.1 percent identified themselves as stay-at-home mothers or carers.

Table 4.4 Employment Status

Status	Converts	Born Muslims
Currently in paid employment[8]	63.2%	78.1%
Not currently in paid employment	36.8%	21.9%

Compared to survey participants who identified as born-Muslims, converts were less likely to be currently in paid employment and more likely to be retired (see Table 4.4). This disparity could be the result of a number of factors, including the higher proportion of converts than born Muslims who were over 60 years of age (see Table 4.1). It is also possible that converts are, in general, more likely than born Muslims to be unemployed, though such a suggestion is speculative. Further research is necessary to test the aforementioned assumptions. When compared to the general Australian public, survey participants overall (including both converts and born Muslims) reported lower levels of paid employment (Hassan 2018; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019).

Place of Birth

Additional demographic data was collected concerning participants' place of birth (see Table 4.1), with respondents asked to identify if they had been born in Australia or born overseas. Amongst converts, a clear majority (74.2%) indicated that they were born in Australia, while around one-quarter (25.8%) were born overseas. Participants were also asked to indicate the country or countries in which they had been raised. Amongst those who were born overseas, 22 different countries were identified. These included Australia,

[8] Includes those who were in full-time, part-time and casual employment, and those who were self-employed.

the United Kingdom, New Zealand, the United States, the Philippines and other nations in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

Additionally, participants who were born overseas were asked to identify the time-period in which they migrated to Australia. Approximately 34.1 percent of those born overseas arrived in Australia after the year 2000, 41.5 percent arrived during the 1980s-1990s, 22.0 percent arrived during the 1960s-1970s, and one participant (2.4%) arrived during the 1940s-1950s.

Comparatively, a majority (68.0%) of born Muslim respondents were born overseas, with a minority (32.0%) being born in Australia. Among survey participants overall, including both converts and born Muslims, 61.3 percent were born overseas, with 38.7 percent being born in Australia. This appears to align with findings on Muslim Australians from the 2016 national census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018a).

Overall, these findings present an interesting point of comparison to research on conversion in the United States. For example, a study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that amongst American converts, 91 percent had been born within the United States (2007, 22). Unfortunately, further comparative data on this point remains unavailable. Nevertheless, these differences do highlight the diverse and contextual nature of conversion to Islam across Western nations.

Geographic Location

In terms of geographic location, the survey sample included respondents from all Australian states and territories. The geographic location of survey participants is outlined in Table 4.5, alongside comparative data from the 2016 national Census. As highlighted in Table 4.5, the largest concentration of converts came from the state of Queensland, followed by New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia. Smaller proportions of

respondents were from South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Tasmania and the Northern Territory. Several factors may help to explain this overrepresentation. As the survey was conducted through Griffith University in Queensland, brand recognition may, to some extent, account for higher participation rates in the state. Additionally, the fact that Queensland represents the political heartland of Pauline Hanson's anti-Islam One Nation Party (Yosufzai 2019) may have motivated Muslim Australians in Queensland to add their voice to this research project. Such explanations are, however, entirely speculative. While this overrepresentation of participants from Queensland did pose some initial concern regarding the representativeness of the overall sample, an analysis of responses found no statistically significant differences in responses based on participants' state of residence.

Table 4.5. Geographic Location[9]

State	Converts (Survey)[10]	Born Muslims (Survey)	Total Respondents (Survey)	Muslim Australians (2016 Census)[11]
Queensland	38.7%	26.6%	28.6%	7.4%
New South Wales	20.9%	32.7%	30.65%	44.4%
Victoria	18.4%	23.3%	22.6%	32.6%
Western Australia	12.3%	9.8%	10.3%	8.4%
Northern Territory	1.2%	0.5%	0.6%	0.4%
ACT	1.8%	2.1%	2.3%	1.6%
South Australia	4.3%	4.7%	4.7%	4.7%
Tasmania	1.8%	0.3%	0.3%	0.4%

[9] State of residence was based on participants' postcodes.
[10] One participant did not include a valid response to this question. As such, these figures represent the responses of 162 survey participants.
[11] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018).

While similar patterns were observed between the geographic location of converts and born Muslims, there was a higher proportion of converts than born Muslims located in the state of Queensland, and a higher proportion of born Muslims than converts located in New South Wales. The cause of these disparities is difficult to theorize, and due to the absence of existing comparative data on converts to Islam in Australia, it is not possible to ascertain the representativeness of these numbers. While it is possible that the larger proportion of converts located in Queensland in the survey sample could be representative of the overall population of Australian converts to Islam, it is also possible that this disparity may be the result of limitations in the survey method or the strategy of participant recruitment. Future quantitative research may be able to provide clarity on this aspect of Australian convert demographics.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a broad demographic profile of participants who completed the Islam in Australia survey. In doing so, it has sought to address the existing dearth in empirically grounded demographic data in the field, while painting a picture of who Australian converts to Islam are. One of the key findings presented here is the tentative estimate that converts account for approximately 15.8 percent of the broader Muslim Australian population – a potentially significant number which ranks at the higher levels of national convert estimates in Western nations. The following chapter will outline further findings of this study, examining the topic of conversion pathways and processes.

CHAPTER 5: CONVERSION PATHWAYS AND PROCESSES

Overview

Within the existing literature, a great deal of attention has been paid to the factors which draw future converts to Islam, as well as the various processes converts undergo and experience as they construct and express their new identities as Muslims. A key goal of this study was to gain quantitative insight into various aspects of the conversion process as experienced by Australian converts to Islam, the findings of which are outlined in this chapter. Specifically, this chapter will examine the motivational factors which led participants to convert to Islam, as well as pre-conversion reservations and post-conversion challenges which they experienced. Additionally, it will consider the ways in which converts' understandings and practice of Islam have evolved throughout the conversion process. Furthermore, this chapter will also highlight the differences and commonalities between the responses of male and female participants, addressing a key gap in existing knowledge relating to comparative gender experiences of the conversion process.

Period of Conversion

While cases of conversion to Islam in Western societies have been documented for well over a century, it has been suggested that the rate of conversion has increased since the turn of this century (Brice 2010). Numerous factors may help to explain this purported trend, including processes of globalisation, increases in Muslim migration to the West, as well as a greater public awareness of, and curiosity about, Islam in the wake of 9/11.

Despite anecdotal evidence of a rise in the number of Westerners converting to Islam in the early 21st century, empirical evidence of such a trend remains sparse. As such, this thesis sought to gain insight into the specific time periods in which survey participants converted to Islam.

Considering the time-periods in which participants converted to Islam (see Table 5.1), it was found that a majority (78.9%) had converted since the year 2000, with an average period of 13.2 years since conversion. While comparative data on this point remains minimal, Brice's survey of British converts to Islam found that a slight majority of participants (56%) had converted to Islam after 2002, while 44 percent had converted in the year 2001 or earlier. As outlined in Chapter 3, several potential explanations have been posited in relation to this purported increase. For example, the events of September 11, 2001, are considered to have contributed to a greater global public awareness of Islam. Additionally, other factors such as globalisation and international attention paid to celebrities including Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens), Muhammad Ali, and Sinead O'Connor who have converted to Islam, may have contributed to broader Western public interest in Islam (BBC News 2018; Eig 2017).

For the present study, when the variable of gender was taken into account, it was found that a higher proportion of female converts than males had converted in the decade prior to data collection. In this regard, 54 percent of female converts had converted to Islam during the period of 2010-2019, compared to 41.9 percent of male converts. While further data is needed on this point, these findings provide tentative support for assertions that there has been a rise in the rate of female conversion to Islam in the West in recent years (Brice 2010).

Table 5.1. Period of Conversion

Period of Conversion	Female Converts	Male Converts	Total Converts
Before 2000	21% (N=21)	22.6% (N=14)	21.1%
2000-2009	24% (N=24)	35.5% (N=22)	29.2%
2010-2019	54% (N=54)	41.9% (N=26)	49.7%
Average age at time of conversion	28.9	31.4	29.9
Average years since conversion	12.6	14.5	13.2

Among participants, the average age at the time of conversion was 29.9 years. This finding appears to align with those of other studies on Western converts to Islam. For example, amongst participants in Köse's (1996) study on British converts, that average age at the time of conversion was 29.7, while the average age of the 166 participants in Poston's (1992) study on British and American converts was 31.4. Furthermore, Pew's research on Muslim Americans found that the majority of converts (76%) had converted to Islam before the age of 30. These findings suggest that despite assertions within the broader literature that religious conversion is a phenomenon which often occurs during adolescence, Australian converts to Islam tend to have moved beyond adolescence prior to making the decision to become Muslim.

Regarding the variable of gender, some slight differences were observed between male and female converts in relation to this question. For example, female converts were, on average, slightly younger than male converts at the time of conversion. Amongst females, the average age at conversion was 28.9 years, compared to 31.4 years amongst males. While further research on this point would be beneficial, this finding suggests that while some differences are observed in relation to the time-period in which female and

male converts embrace Islam, the stage in a convert's life in which they convert may not vary significantly based on the variable of gender.

Motivational Factors

Religious conversion is a diverse and complex phenomenon, and the factors which drive an individual to embrace a new faith may vary dramatically between religions, time periods and geographic, political and social contexts. The question of why Western converts embrace Islam is a dominant theme within the conversion literature, however, this has largely been in the context of qualitative research (King 2017), with few attempts to quantify such factors (Maslim & Bjorck 2009; Pew Research Center 2007). Participants who completed this survey were presented with a list of ten potential motivational factors, derived from the scholarly literature and asked "what were the most important factors in your life, or aspects of Islam, that led you to convert/revert to Islam?" Participants also had the option of selecting "other" and providing a written response to the question. In acknowledgement of the often multi-causal nature of conversion, participants were able to select as many options as applied.

Overall, no single motivational factor was identified by a majority of participants (see Table 5.2), with those which may be classified as 'intellectual' and 'spiritual' factors ranking amongst the most influential. The most commonly reported factors included the message of the Quran, which was endorsed by 44.2 percent of converts; answers to questions concerning the purpose of life (42.9%); and having experienced a spiritual awakening (42.3%). Slightly over one-third of participants (35.6%) identified a personal connection with a Muslim as being influential in their decision to convert. The least commonly reported factor (3.7%) was the death of a relative or friend.

An analysis of the survey data supports suggestions that conversion is often multi-causal in nature. Amongst converts overall, a majority of respondents (66.7%) identified multiple factors which had contributed to their decision to convert, while a minority (33.3%) identified only a single factor as contributing to this decision. When the variable of gender was taken into consideration, it was found that a higher proportion of female than male converts identified more than one factor which motivated them to convert to Islam. Amongst female converts, 71.0 percent described their conversion as being multi-causal in nature, compared to 58.1 percent of male converts.

Table 5.2. Motivational Factors*

Motivational Factor	Female Converts	Male Converts	Total Converts
Message of the Quran	46.0%	41.9%	44.2%
Answers to questions concerning the purpose of life	41.0%	45.2%	42.9%
Spiritual awakening	44.0%	38.7%	42.3%
Personal connection with a Muslim	37.0%	32.3%	35.6%
Example of the Prophet Muhammad	23.0%	38.7%	28.8%
Sense of community/belonging	26.0%	21.0%	24.5%
Disaffection or disillusion with a previous faith	22.0%	25.8%	23.9%
Marriage to a Muslim	27.0%	16.1%	22.7%
Personal hardship	12.0%	21.0%	15.3%
Death of a relative or friend	3.0%	4.8%	3.7%
Other	9.0%	14.5%	11.0%

Question: What were the most important factors in your life, or aspects of Islam, that led you to convert/revert to Islam?

In addition to factors which may be classified as 'intellectual' or 'spiritual', 'relational' or interpersonal factors also appear to be particularly influential for many converts. For example, more than one-third (35.6%) of participants identified a personal connection to a Muslim as having contributed to their decision to convert, while approximately one-

quarter (24.5%) had been motivated by a sense of community/belonging. Slightly less than one-quarter (22.7%) of participants identified marriage to a Muslim as having contributed to their conversion, with a higher proportion of females than males selecting this response. Overall, higher proportions of female respondents identified relational factors as having played a part in their decision to embrace Islam. While these gender differences were generally small, this trend was most pronounced in the context of marriage to a Muslim, a factor which was identified as having been influential by 27.0 percent of female converts, compared to 16.1 percent of male converts.[12] These findings appear to align with those of Köse and Loewenthal, who found that amongst British converts in their study, female participants were more likely than males to identify with affectional conversion motifs (2000).

Rambo (1993) argues that "some form of crisis", whether it be "religious, political, psychological, or cultural in origin", generally occurs in an individual's life prior to religious conversion. For some participants in this study, various personal crises and struggles contributed to their decision to become Muslim. For almost one-quarter of participants, experiences of religious questioning appear to have contributed to their decision to embrace Islam, with 23.9% of participants identifying "disaffection or disillusion with a previous faith" as influencing to their decision to convert to Islam.

Other forms of personal struggle or trauma were cited by a smaller number of participants. In this regard, 15.3 percent of respondents identified personal hardship as a key motivational factor. Additionally, a smaller number of participants (3.7%) identified the death of a loved one as being a contributing factor in their decision to convert. When the variable of gender was taken into consideration, it was found that a higher proportion

[12] This difference was not observed to be statistically significant.

of male converts identified these factors. In some cases, such as disillusionment with a previous faith or the death of a loved one, these differences were slight. The largest disparity came in the context of personal hardship, which was identified by 12.0 percent of female converts and 21.0 percent of male converts. While this disparity was not found to be statistically significant, further research may provide further insight into the gender-based differences concerning converts' pathways to Islam. Overall, these findings align with assertions by Gooren (2007) that while religious conversion may be precipitated by personal crises in some cases, this is not a universal factor.

Slightly over one quarter of participants (28.8%) identified the example of the Prophet Muhammad as contributing to their decision, with a higher proportion of male converts than female converts selecting this option.[13] While further research may provide clarity and insight on this issue, such a trend may potentially be explained by the gendered nature of religious archetypes and role models, a topic which has been examined by scholars such as El-Husseini (2008) and Deeb (2009) in the context of Shi'a Islam.

Finally, a total of 11 percent of respondents selected the option of 'other', providing a written response to this question. Interestingly, no participants specifically identified *daw'ah* or active proselytization as being a factor in their conversion pathways. While the absence of such a response option in the survey was an oversight on the part of the author, future research on conversion pathways and motivations may provide some insight into this issue.

While these findings provide insight into the personal experiences and factors which motivated participants to embrace Islam, it is important to note the potential for 'biographical reconstruction' when considering these issues. This concept suggests that

[13] This difference was not found to be statistically significant.

the act of conversion leads to “changes both to the way converts view and tell their life stories...and—therefore—to the way they make attributions regarding life events” (Snook, Williams and Horgan 2019, 226). As Jindra observes, “some argue that it is not possible to analyze a conversion narrative in terms of reasons and motives, since these stories are not accurate, but represent reconstructions or "accounts" of earlier experiences that are influenced by the official doctrine of a group” (Jindra 2011, 278). Additionally, it has been found that “conversion narratives also highlight or exaggerate prior crisis experience” (Jindra 2011, 279). This is another factor which further raises questions about the reliability of this approach.

Pre-Conversion Reservations

While converts may be attracted to Islam for a variety of reasons, they may also experience reservations or concerns in relation to specific Islamic teachings or beliefs, or issues commonly associated with Islam and Muslims (King 2013; Mitchell and Rane 2018). These reservations may be linked to concerns about social identity and the attitudes of others to their decision to embrace Islam. They may be linked to specific Islamic teachings or Muslim cultural practices which are seen as problematic. They may also be linked to media driven constructions of Islam which tend to focus on issues of gender inequality and religiously motivated terrorism.

Survey participants were asked about any potential reservations which they may have had as they were actively considering converting to Islam. This included issues relating to gender segregation, the relationship between Islam and politics, as well as jihad and terrorism in the name of Islam. Participants were presented with a list of ten options and asked to identify which areas may have posed a concern to them during this period.

Additionally, participants could select the option of 'other' and provide a written response to this question. Participant responses to this question, including a breakdown by gender, are outlined in Table 5.3. Overall, no single issue was highlighted as a source of concern by a majority of participants. The largest plurality of participants (36.8%) reported having no issues or problems during the pre-conversion period. This was followed by views about women, gender segregation and terrorism in the name of Islam. The issues of least concern were views about non-Muslims, mixing religion with politics and dietary requirements.

Table 5.3. Pre-conversion reservations/concerns about Islam*

Issue	Female Converts	Male Converts	Total Converts
No issues or problems	26.0%	54.8%	36.8%
Views about non-Muslims	15.0%	14.5%	14.7%
Views about women	34.0%	24.2%	30.1%
Views about homosexuals	23.0%	11.3%	19.0%
Views about violent jihad	27.0%	11.3%	20.9%
Mixing religion with politics	13.0%	11.3%	12.3%
Terrorism in the name of Islam	29.0%	12.9%	22.7%
Gender segregation	32.0%	19.4%	27.6%
Dietary requirements	12.0%	8.1%	11.0%
Other	21.0%	12.9%	17.8%

Question: 'When you were considering converting/reverting, which teachings or aspects of Islam, if any, did you have reservations about or find problematic?'

Considering gender differences (see Table 5.3), there were several noteworthy findings. Firstly, slightly more than double the proportion of female than male converts cited specific issues or attitudes which had caused them doubts or reservations. While just over one-quarter of women (26.0%) reported having "no issues or problems", more than

double the proportion of male participants (54.8%) said the same. A statistically significant difference was found in relation to this question, with the odds of a male convert having no pre-conversion reservations being 3.456 (OR) times greater than that of a female convert (95% CIs [1.767, 6.759], $p < 0.001$).

Additionally, a higher proportion of female than male converts reported experiencing reservations or concerns about every potential topic which was listed, although in some cases these differences were slight. For example, with respect to views about non-Muslims, similar proportions of female (15.0%) and male (14.5%) converts reported experiencing reservations. Similarly, the proportion of female and male converts who had concerns about mixing religion with politics was fairly closely aligned, and the aforementioned minor disparities were not found to be statistically significant. Regarding views about non-Muslims, it is possible that the low number of converts expressing reservations about this issue may be related to the specific interpretations of Islam to which they were exposed during the pre-conversion period. While the Quran demonstrates a particular level of respect for followers of prior monotheistic religions within the Abrahamic tradition (Rahman 2009, 162), specifically Christianity and Judaism as fellow 'People of the Book', some interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism and Wahhabism, reject positive relations with non-Muslims under the doctrine of 'loyalty and disavowal' (Shavit 2014). According to this concept, Muslims should dissociate themselves from non-Muslims (as well as Muslims who adhere to different interpretations of Islam) as a religious obligation. Participant views on relations with non-Muslims will be further considered in later sections of this thesis.

A greater disparity between the concerns of female and male converts was observed in relation to issues surrounding gender, sexuality and terrorism. In the context of gender, females were more likely to have had reservations or found problematic views

about women and gender segregation. Regarding the former, 34.0 percent of female converts reported having reservations or concerns relating to views about women, compared to 24.1 percent of male converts. Regarding the latter, 32.0 percent of female converts had experienced reservations or concerns about gender segregation, as opposed to 19.4 percent of male converts. These differences were, however, not observed to be statistically significant.

In the context of homosexuality, more than double the proportion of women than men reported experiencing concern regarding Islamic teachings on homosexuality. While a small minority of male converts did have reservations about such views, these findings somewhat align with other qualitative studies on male converts which have found that while some find negative views on homosexuality problematic (Mitchell and Rane 2018), most male converts tend to view this as morally unacceptable (Suleiman 2016). Conversely, Suleiman's research on British converts found that females were more accepting of homosexuality. The author observed that among his study's participants, a number "were openly accepting of homosexuals and wanted to see inclusive interpretations of Islam appropriate for all people, and which would not exclude the participation of gay and lesbian Muslims" (2013, 64). While no previous studies have specifically examined views on homosexuality amongst Muslim Australians, research in a broader Western context have found that Muslims in North America have become increasingly accepting of homosexuality in recent years, with this trend being more pronounced amongst Muslim women than men (Pew Research Center 2017, 91).

Considering issues of violent jihad and terrorism, more than double the proportion of female (27.0%) than male (11.3%) converts has experienced concerns regarding views about violent jihad and terrorism in the name of Islam. While it is difficult to explain this gender disparity, it is noteworthy that research on American Muslims has found that

females are more likely than males to be concerned about terrorism in the name of Islam (Pew Research Center 2017, 98). It should also be noted that amongst Western jihadists and radicalised Muslims, males appear to significantly outnumber females (Lowy Institute; Vidino and Hughes 2015, 7).

Further considering pre-conversion concerns and reservations, participants were also presented with the option of 'other', upon which they could provide a written response. A total of 17.8 percent of participants selected this option, including 21.0 percent of female converts and 12.9 percent of male converts.[14] Amongst these responses, six referenced social challenges (including those emanating from non-Muslims and Muslims), four (4) participants identified having experienced reservations about wearing the hijab, three referenced *hadd* punishments and two referenced Islamic views on music. Regarding the latter, Islamic views on music and its permissibility are the source of some debate (Saeed 2006, 88-90). In the context of social challenges, the various societal obstacles encountered by converts during the post-conversion period have been well documented. Such challenges are discussed in relation to the present study in later chapters of this thesis.

Unfortunately, due to space constraints, a follow-up question concerning how participants navigated or overcame these reservations was not included in the survey. Future qualitative research may shed some light on this aspect of the pre-conversion period and more thoroughly explore processes of questioning, information-seeking and decision-making amongst Australian converts.

[14] There was not found to be a statistically significant difference between the responses of male and female converts in relation to this question.

Evolution of Practice and Stages of Conversion

Since Rambo's (1993) assertion of the processual nature of the conversion process, research on religious conversion has increasingly considered the various stages which converts may experience throughout their conversion journeys. In the context of Islam, scholars such as Roald (2006) have stressed the dynamic and ongoing nature of the conversion process, noting that many Western converts to Islam may progress through various 'stages' of conversion after becoming Muslim. The survey sought to gain insight into such processes, by asking participants about how their understanding and practice of Islam had changed since the initial conversion period. Written responses to this question were analysed and thematically coded. In total, 148 written responses were submitted, with 87 of these considered sufficient for coding and analysis.

Among the responses to this question, a number of recurrent themes were identified. These included a continuing process of learning and gaining knowledge about Islam (41), moderation in religious practice (17), an intensification of commitment to Islam and ritual practice (14), and a shift to practicing Islam in a more private context rather than in social settings (4). Four participants also explained that they had shifted from one interpretation of Islam to another since their initial conversion period. For example, one participant now identified as practicing Shi'a Islam, after initially having converted to Sunni Islam. Such examples of intra-faith switching do not appear to be uncommon amongst converts, but seem to occur in some cases as converts gain a broader understanding of the various sectarian branches and schools of thought within Islam and shift to an interpretation which more closely aligns with their personal values and beliefs (Inloes and Takim 2014; Mitchell 2016).

Overall, as highlighted above, the most common theme was that of continued learning in order to deepen understandings of Islam, which was identified by 25.2 percent of all converts. These findings reflect those of other studies, which have identified that many converts continue to educate themselves about the Islamic faith following the act of conversion (King 2013; Mitchell and Rane 2018). In some cases, this involved formal education (including Arabic language studies), while in others this involved more private, self-directed study of Islam.

Several of the themes which were identified within participants' responses reflected Roald's concepts of 'love' (also referred to as 'convertitis' within the literature), 'disappointment' and 'maturity'. Regarding the former, this stage of 'love' or 'convertitis' somewhat aligned with the responses of 14 participants. The written responses provided by these participants indicated that since the act of conversion, their commitment to Islam had increased and that they had striven to more fully incorporate ritual and practice into their everyday lives. In the words of one survey participant:

> Since becoming Muslim I have evolved from just believing to practicing fully. I believed but had to make the conscious decision to not just be a Muslim but be a practicing Muslim. I read Quran more, prayed the daily prayers and started to wear hijab. Eating only halal food took time too (S883).

A number of responses aligned with Roald's description of converts moving beyond the stage of convertitis/zealotry, as they became less concerned with stringently following religious rules and guidelines. One participant outlined their evolution from 'love' to 'maturity', explaining that:

> Rather than being obsessed with minute details of the tradition I have now come to realise that first principles are the most important for a belief system (S324).

Several participants expressed that they were now less engaged with the Muslim community, due to disappointment with the behaviours and attitudes of born Muslims. In some cases, this was due to disagreement with commonly accepted practices such as gender segregation and the reactions of born Muslims to such a stance. In the words of one female convert:

> I have learned to be very private. I don't participate in prayers with other Muslim women or activities. I don't agree with segregation of males and females. I also know my views are considered as westernised and therefore I am considered as fake. "I'm not a real Muslim" is what I am told. That is why I am private (S46).

Another female convert explained that their experiences with born Muslims had led to a more private approach to their faith. In the words of this participant:

> My faith has become more private (I don't hide it and will openly discuss it) but I don't often seek out the community. I have a small group of Muslim friends who I see but it's not as regularly as I would like. Which means that I can sometimes feel a bit lost. But I'm constantly reminded that being a Muslim isn't just about the Islamic community - which is so diverse in their practices anyway (S588).

These journeys may be understood as aligning with the stages of disappointment and maturity outlined by Roald (2012).

Post-Conversion Challenges

Following the act of conversion (*shahada*) converts may encounter a range of obstacles and challenges directly related to their decision to embrace Islam. These challenges, which may include religious, cultural and interpersonal issues, have been the subject of a number of studies on conversion in Western nations (Al-Qwidi 2002; Jensen 2006; Woodlock 2010; Vroon-Najem 2019). Participants in this study were presented with a list

of potential challenges derived from the existing scholarship and asked to rate the level of difficulty which they had experienced with these issues (see Table 5.4).

Table 5.4. Post-Conversion Challenges*

Challenge	A great deal of difficulty	Some difficulty	Very little difficulty	No difficulty	N/A
Reactions or attitudes of family and friends	27%	41.1%	17.8%	11.6%	2.5%
Reactions from the general Australian public	22.7%	38.7%	24%	12.3%	2.5%
Locating support networks for converts/reverts	16.6%	31.4%	15.9%	25.1%	11%
Gender segregation	15.3%	28.8%	17.2%	34.4%	4.3%
Muslim cultural beliefs or practices	14.7%	35.0%	28.8%	19.0%	2.4%
Making Muslim friends	12.9%	25.2%	24%	36.2%	1.8%
Acceptance from the local Muslim community	12.3%	24.5%	19%	40.5%	3.7%
Attitudes towards the opposite sex	9.2%	28.2%	12.3%	42.3%	8%
Understanding the hadith	9.2%	34.4%	31.3%	22.7%	2.4%
Learning how to perform acts of worship	8.6%	27.6%	37.4%	26.4%	0%
Gaining authentic knowledge about Islam	8%	38%	25.8%	27%	1.2%
Understanding the Quran	7.4%	36.2%	33.7%	22.1%	0.6%
Dietary requirements	6.1%	18.4%	28.2%	46%	1.2%

Question: Since converting/reverting to Islam, to what extent have you experienced difficulties with the following?

Overall, the most challenging aspects of the post-conversion period for respondents concerned self-other relations. The reactions or attitudes of family and friends proved to be the most challenging in this regard, with 27.0 percent of participants experiencing a great deal of difficulty and a further 41.1 percent experiencing some

difficulty. These findings appear consistent with those of Brice (2010), who found that among participants in his study on British converts to Islam, 61 percent had encountered difficulties relating to the reactions of family and friends to their decision to convert to Islam. As outlined in Chapter Two, a number of qualitative studies have provided further insight into the impact of conversion on existing interpersonal relationships. Unfortunately, due to time and space constraints in the survey, a follow up question concerning how these reactions had changed over time was not included.

When the variable of gender was considered, it was found that female converts reported slightly higher levels of difficulty relating to the reactions of family members and friends. While this difference was not found to be statistically significant, when the topic was raised in the focus groups, several participants suggested that family members may have more difficulty accepting the conversion of a female relative than they would a male, possibly due to the more 'visible' changes that female converts may undergo. In the words of one focus group participant:

> I think for women in particular, it can be quite hard. Because if you are a male convert, not many people know unless you tell them you are unless you tell them you're a convert. But if you're female, and you decide to wear the hijab, you become more visible. And I think it makes it harder for you to reconnect with your friends and family members. And especially for family members, they are confronted by your physical appearance as well. (Canberra, Participant 8).

The question of a convert's 'visibility' as a Muslim, and the impact of this on one's social relations is a recurrent theme within the conversion literature. For example, studies conducted by Alam (2012) and Moosavi (2015) have found that for some Western converts, the act of conversion to Islam can lead to processes of 'racialisation' in which an individual's phenotypical attributes are superseded by visible markers of religious

identity. In such cases, through the adoption of 'Islamic' forms of clothing, Caucasian converts may be "re-racialized as 'not-quite-white', or even 'non-white', because of a persistent conflation of Islam as a 'non-white' religion" (Moosavi 2015, 41). Resultingly, these processes can expose converts to experiences of both racism and Islamophobia.

Additionally, it could be theorized that dominant perceptions amongst some segments of Western societies of Islam as an inherently misogynistic religion which subjugates women could have an impact on how loved ones respond to the conversion of a female. Negative reactions from loved ones regarding the conversion of a female family member or friend may be in, to some degree, driven by confusion over the decision to embrace Islam, or by concern about the implications for the converted, with respect to individual freedom and wellbeing. Resultantly, a lack of support or acceptance of a female convert's choice to convert to Islam may lead to detrimental impacts on familial relations in some cases. Due to the existing lack in comparative gender analyses of these issues, further qualitative research may help to provide further insight into this complex topic.

After the reactions of family and friends, reactions from the Australian public were the next most commonly reported challenge amongst survey participants. Almost one-quarter (22.7%) had encountered a great deal of difficulty with this, while a further 38.7 percent had experienced some difficulty. Only a minority of 12.3 percent reported no difficulties with this issue. These findings are perhaps unsurprising due to several factors. Firstly, the social challenges of converts in relation to hostility from some segments of wider society have been well documented in various Western nations (Jensen 2008; Moosavi 2015). Secondly, research on Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment in both Australia and the broader Western world have highlighted increasing instances of harassment and hostility directed towards Western Muslims. While the lack of a direct

follow-up to this question limits understandings of the Australian convert experience in this regard, these findings nevertheless suggest that acceptance from wider society is a significant challenge for a large number of converts.

The third most challenging aspect of the post-conversion period was identified as locating support networks for converts/reverts. Amongst participants, 16.6 percent had encountered a great deal of difficulty in this regard, while a further 31.4 percent had experienced some difficulty. This issue was also raised within the focus groups by participants who expressed a view that there were not sufficient resources available to recent converts. While research on this specific point remains limited within the existing scholarship, some studies have highlighted the lack of resources available to converts in Western nations (Brice 2010). In the Australian context, Underabi's study on mosques in Sydney and New South Wales suggests that "that converts may not be receiving the support needed from the institutions where they convert to Islam" (2014, 26). The author explains that "cross-tabulation between the mosques that received the highest number of conversions and those that offer new Muslim classes revealed that only six offer sustainable support in the form of new Muslims classes on a regular basis and the remainder claim to offer irregular support" (Underabi 2014, 26).

Other issues relating to socialisation into the Muslim community also posed a challenge for some participants. When asked about acceptance from their local Muslim community, 12.3 percent had experienced a great deal of difficulty, with a further 24.5 percent reporting some difficulty. Regarding making Muslim friends, 12.9 percent had experienced a great deal of difficulty, while 25.2 percent had experienced some difficulty. While a greater proportion of participants reported experiencing little or no difficulty with these issues, these findings further highlight some of the social obstacles experienced by converts in the post-conversion period.

Further examining socialisation into the Muslim community, the question of Muslim cultural beliefs and practices should also be considered. This issue has been highlighted in several conversion studies and refers to specific cultural beliefs or practices of born Muslims which may not have any religious foundation (Al-Qwidi 2002; Vroon-Najem 2019). Amongst survey participants, 14.7 percent indicated that they had experienced a great deal of difficulty with Muslim cultural beliefs and practices, with a further 35.0 percent experiencing some difficulty. Less than one-fifth (19.0%) of respondents had encountered no difficulties in relation to these issues. Unfortunately, the lack of a direct follow-up to this question precludes further examination of what these specific cultural issues are, and how converts navigated them. Future research on this point may assist in gaining a more nuanced insight into converts' processes of socialisation into Muslim communities.

Issues concerning gender segregation also proved challenging for some, with 15.3 percent of participants having experienced a 'great deal of difficulty' in this regard, and a further 28.8 percent experiencing 'some difficulty'. While a greater proportion of female than male respondents identified gender segregation as a challenge, these differences were not found to be statistically significant.

In the context of religious knowledge and understanding, some participants had encountered challenges relating to understanding key religious texts and gaining authentic knowledge about their new faith. A small number of participants (8.0%) expressed that they had experienced a great deal of difficulty with respect to gaining authentic knowledge about Islam, while a further 38.0 percent had experienced 'some difficulty'. Similar proportions of participants had experienced challenges in understanding the key religious texts of Islam - the Quran and the hadith. It may be considered unsurprising that only a minority of participants identified these areas as

posing a major challenge in the post-conversion period. As has been highlighted earlier in this thesis, existing research suggests that many converts engage in sustained periods of information seeking and study throughout the conversion process, often demonstrating a high level of commitment to understanding Islam.

Issues of ritual practice and religiously mandated lifestyle changes, specifically dietary requirements, posed less of a challenge for participants. A minority of converts (8.6%) reported having experienced a great deal of difficulty learning how to perform acts of worship, with approximately one-quarter (27.6%) experiencing some difficulty. Regarding dietary requirements, only 6.1 percent of participants had experienced a great deal of difficulty, while 18.4 percent of participants had experienced some difficulty. Comparatively, Brice found that among participants in his study on British converts, learning about acts of worship and dietary requirements ranked among the least challenging aspects of the post-conversion period (2010, 22).

Challenges relating to language barriers, particularly in relation to the mastery of the Arabic language, were also raised by some participants in the focus groups. Unfortunately, this issue was overlooked in the process of research design and relevant questions were not included in the final version of the survey. This oversight is regrettable, as learning the Arabic language, as well as language barriers in the contexts of mosques and social relations have been highlighted in other studies as being a major challenge for some converts. For example, Brice found that learning Arabic was the greatest challenge faced by British converts during the post-conversion period (2010, 22). Further research is recommended regarding language barriers and their impacts on converts' post-conversion experiences.

With respect to gender, generally minimal differences were observed in terms of the post-conversion challenges experienced by both male and female converts. While some disparities were noted, including in relation to difficulties with gender segregation, none of these were found to be statistically significant.

Overall, these findings suggest that while Australian converts experience numerous challenges following their conversion to Islam, social obstacles appear to be the most challenging. In particular, converts were most likely to experience a great deal of difficulty with the reactions and attitudes of family and friends and the reactions of wider Australian society. It is clear that despite the deeply personal nature of religious conversion, broader societal attitudes regarding Islam and Muslims have a significant impact on the lives and experiences of Australian Muslim converts. While a lack of follow-up questions within the survey precluded this study from gaining further insights into the ways in which converts navigate these social challenges, future research in this area may provide a more nuanced understanding of such issues.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined various aspects of Australian converts pathways to Islam and the processes which they undergo throughout the conversion process. It has provided key insights into converts' motivational factors and pre-conversion reservations about Islam, as well as the ways in which their practice and understanding of Islam has evolved over time.

Considering motivational factors, participants' pathways to Islam were found to be highly diverse, encompassing a variety of rational and relational factors, with no single factor being identified by a majority of participants. Additionally, it was found that for

most participants, conversion was influenced by multiple factors, rather than one specific cause. While some gender-based differences were observed in relation to motivational factors, these were not found to be statistically significant. Conversely, female converts were found to be more likely than their male counterparts to have experienced reservations about converting to Islam – a difference which was found to be statistically significant.

Regarding the challenges experienced by participants after becoming Muslim, it was found that social aspects of conversion presented the most difficulty, including the reactions of family and friends, the reactions of wider society, and finding acceptance amongst existing Muslim communities. When the variable of gender was taken into consideration, some minimal differences were observed between the post-conversion challenges experienced by male and female converts, none of which were found to be statistically significant.

The following chapter will provide an in-depth examination of participants' Islamic identities, exploring issues such as sectarian affiliation and identification, Muslim typologies (or orientations), questions of religious knowledge and perspectives on a range of key theological issues.

CHAPTER 6: ISLAMIC IDENTITY

Overview

In addition to various aspects of the conversion process, this thesis also sought to gain insight into the Islamic identities of Australian converts to Islam and the particular interpretations of Islam with which they identify and practice - issues which have been largely neglected within the existing body of conversion scholarship. This chapter will outline key findings of this thesis regarding converts' levels of religiosity and ritual practice, the particular traditions or interpretations of Islam with which they identify, various Muslim typologies or orientations under which they may be classified, sources of religious knowledge and guidance, views on interpreting the Quran, as well as perspectives on a range of theological and ethical issues. Additionally, this chapter explores the differences and commonalities amongst these themes in relation to the variables of both gender and conversion status. Through addressing these key gaps in the literature, this chapter provides a valuable contribution to existing understandings of Australian converts to Islam and their religious identities, beliefs and perspectives.

Religiosity and Practice

Research on religious identity often examines questions of religious commitment and measurements of ritual practice, such as prayer frequency and institutional attendance (see, for example, Pew Research Center 2007; Read 2015). In order to gain a deeper understanding into the religious identities of Australian converts to Islam, several questions were included in the survey regarding the importance of Islam to participants' identities and their frequency of ritual practice. When asked "how important is Islam to your identity?", a majority (67.5%) of converts rated this as 'very important'. Slightly

less than one-quarter (23.3%) said that Islam was 'important' to their identities, while a further 8.6 percent said that Islam was 'not very important'. Only one participant (0.6%) said that Islam was 'not at all important' to their identity.[15]

A comparative gender analysis of this question revealed that male converts (at 72.6%) were somewhat more likely than females (65.0%) to say that Islam was "very important" to their identity, while a slightly higher proportion of females (26.0%) than males (19.4%) said that Islam was "important" to their identity. Similar proportions of female and male converts reported that Islam was either "not very important" or "not at all important" to their identity.[16] Overall, there were not found to be any statistically significant differences between the responses of male and female converts. Due to the dearth of data in comparative gender analyses of Western converts to Islam, no direct comparative data is currently available on this point.

Further considering religiosity and ritual practice, participants were asked how often they performed *salat* (prayed). Almost three quarters (73.0%) of converts said that they prayed daily, while 8.0 percent prayed weekly. A minority of converts (16.6%) prayed only on occasion, while a small number (1.8%) never prayed. In relation to gender, some minor differences were observed in response to this question, with male converts reporting to pray somewhat more frequently than female converts. For example, 75.0 percent of male converts said that they prayed daily, compared to 71.0 percent of female converts. Slightly higher proportions of female converts also reported that they prayed

[15] It is worth noting that that as the survey was titled the 'Islam in Australia' survey, it may have attracted participants who are more committed to/identify with Islam. Although, it is also worth noting that 17% of respondents overall were 'nominal' Muslims.

[16] 8.06 percent of male converts and 8.0 percent of females converts reported that Islam was "not very important" to their identity; 0.0 percent of male converts and 1.0 percent of female converts reported that Islam was "not at all important" to their identity.

"only on occasion" or "never".[17] These differences were not found to be statistically significant.

Compared to born Muslim respondents, converts overall appear to be somewhat less likely to place a strong importance on Islam with respect to their identity, and reported slightly lower levels of ritual practice, though these disparities were not observed to be statistically significant. For example, regarding the importance of Islam to respondents' identities, a higher proportion of born Muslims (82.2%) said that Islam was 'very important' their identity (compared to 67.5% of converts), with a further 14.7 percent saying that Islam was 'important' to their identity (compared to 23.3% of converts). Regarding the frequency of *salat* (prayer), 77.8 percent of born Muslims reported that they prayed daily, compared to 73.0 percent of converts.

While little comparative data is currently available in relation to religiosity and ritual practice amongst converts and born Muslims, research by Pew Research Center (2007; 2011) provides some points of comparison in the context of Muslims in the United States. A 2007 survey found that differences concerning levels of religiosity between American converts to Islam and born Muslims were largely minimal. For example, 24 percent of born Muslims rated their level of religious commitment as 'high', compared to 19 percent of converts. A higher proportion of converts (58%) than born Muslims (49%) rated their level of religious commitment as medium, while 23 percent of converts and 27 percent of born Muslims rated this as low (Pew Research Center 2007, 26). In terms of prayer frequency, a later survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that born Muslims (50%) were more likely than converts (37%) to pray five times a day, while a

[17] 18.0 percent of female converts and 14.5 percent of male converts reported that they prayed "only on occasions."; 3.0 percent of female converts and 0.0 percent of male converts reported that they never prayed.

further 27% of converts (compared to 15 percent of born Muslims) reported that they prayed daily, though not all five times (2011, 25).

Compared to the general population of Australia, research conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 18 percent of Australians said that religion was a very important part of their lives, while 18 percent also reported that they prayed daily (2018, 64). It should be noted, however, that Islam places significant emphasis on daily prayers to the point that the faith of one who does not perform them is doubted according to many classical and contemporary scholars (Gleave 2015, 418). While no direct comparative data is available in the context of Muslim Australians, the Pew Research Center found that amongst Muslims in the United States, 65 percent said that religion was a very important part of their lives while 42 percent said that they prayed daily (2017, 25).

Overall, these findings suggest that despite some minor variations, Australian converts to Islam exhibit largely similar levels of religiosity and ritual practice when compared to born Muslims. Furthermore, converts appear to display a far higher level of religiosity when compared to the Australian general population. While these specific questions may not convey the full complexities of participants' levels of religiosity and commitment to ritual practice (for example, questions relating to the payment of *zakat* and other Islamic practices which may be considered obligatory), these findings do suggest that converts involved in this study possessed a high level of commitment to their faith.

Islam and Identity

In addition to questions regarding religiosity and ritual practice, the survey also sought to understand how participants viewed and expressed their identities as Muslims in the context of Australian society. Participants were presented with a list of four response

options and asked to identify "which of the following best describes how you identify as a Muslim?" A clear majority (76.7%) of respondents said that they 'publicly/openly identify as Muslim', while 5.5 percent said that they identified as Muslim within Muslim communities only. A further 4.3 percent said that they shared their identity as Muslim with family and friends only, while 13.5 percent considered their Muslim identity to be a private, personal matter.

While limited comparative data is available on this topic, Brice's (2010) study on British converts does provide some insight in this regard. Among participants in this survey, 52 percent strongly agreed with the statement "for others to know me as I really am it is important for them to know that I am a Muslim", while a further 30 percent agreed with the statement (Brice 2010, 27).

Comparatively, born Muslim respondents were more likely than converts to say that they publicly/openly identified as Muslim (88.4%), and were less likely to say that they identified as Muslim within Muslim communities only (3.2%), shared their Muslim identity with only family/friends (3.6%) or considered their Muslim identity to be a private, personal matter (4.8%). While the differences between converts and born Muslims were not found to be statistically significant, it is possible that there may be a slightly higher level of hesitancy on the part of Australian converts to publicly identify as Muslim due to post-conversion challenges relating to identity, acceptance and belonging. This notion appears to be supported to some extent by existing research which has found that some converts may conceal their Muslim identity for varying periods of time due to fears of rejection and hostility (Turner 2010).

When the variable of gender was taken into account, some minor differences were observed between the responses of male and female converts to this question, though

again, these were not found to be statistically significant. Female converts (at 79.0%) were slightly more likely than male converts (74.2%) to say that they openly/publicly identified as Muslim, while male converts (at 14.5%) were slightly more likely than female converts (12.0%) to say that they considered their Muslim identity to be a private/personal matter. While further research on this issue is recommended, it is possible that expectations or individual beliefs regarding 'Islamic' forms of clothing such as the headscarf or in some cases, the *niqab* (King 2017), may make it more difficult for female converts to conceal their religious identity in a public setting, should they wish to do so. Another factor which might be considered in relation to these findings is the gendered construction of Islam and Muslims in the mass media. As scholars such as Aly (2007) and Roose (2016) highlight, female Muslims tend to be depicted in media in terms of passivity and victimhood, while male Muslims have been framed as aggressive and sexual predators. It could be theorized that such media constructions may lead to some male converts being hesitant to publicly share their religious identity with members of the general public out of concern over how they will be perceived. This notion is, however, purely speculative. Future research may help to shed some light on the relationship between gender and identity pertaining to this issue.

Interpretations of Islam

While Islam and Muslims are often presented in the mass media in monolithic terms, there are various sectarian branches, schools of legal thought and theological movements within the Islamic tradition. Although all interpretations of Islam possess certain common foundational features, such as belief in God and the Prophethood of Muhammad, and of the Qur'an as the central, unifying text of Islam, considerable diversity exists in relation to theological doctrine, jurisprudence and orthopraxy (Ahmed 2016). Sunni and Shi'a

Islam are known as the most dominant branches of Islam today, however many variations exist both within and without these sectarian denominations. For example, within Sunni Islam there are four primary schools of legal thought (*madhhab*), including the Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki and Shafi'i (Rane 2010, 82). Additionally, there are multiple groupings with which Muslims identify on the basis of traditions and ideology, such as Sufi, Salafi, and progressive (Rane and Duderija 2021).

For converts to Islam, the diversity of views and interpretations present within Islam may be confusing and intimidating (Zebiri 2008). Research on the specific 'types' of Islam with which converts identify, and the pathways which lead them there, nevertheless remains limited. In her study of female converts to Islam, King observed that "in the literature regarding female converts in the West, there is very little discussion about the influence of particular schools of thought, trends in Islamic thought or particular discourses with which converts engage that have impacted their understanding and practice" (2017, 457). King's observation also appears to apply to male converts in the West, who have received relatively little scholarly attention compared to their female counterparts (Mitchell and Rane 2018).

In order to address this gap in the literature, survey participants were presented with a list of interpretations, groups and schools of legal thought, and asked to identify with which they most identified. Given the broad range of Islamic traditions and interpretations, as well as expected overlap between certain categories (for example, respondents identifying as Sunni and with a specific Sunni *madhhab*), response options were not mutually exclusive, and participants were able to select as many options as applied. Participant responses to this question are presented in Table 6.1, which also provides comparative breakdowns based on both gender and conversion status.

Table 6.1. Interpretation or Group*

Interpretation or Group	Female Converts %	Male Converts %	Total Converts %	Total Born Muslims %
Sunni	50.0%	64.5%	55.2%	65.2%
Shia/Shiite	6.0%	3.2%	4.9%	3.9%
Just Muslim	42.0%	35.5%	39.2%	33.1%
Sufi	15.0%	24.2%	18.4%	4.3%
Ahl Sunnah wal Jamaa	8.0%	14.5%	10.4%	13.0%
Salafi	6.0%	4.8%	5.5%	2.3%
Hanafi	10.0%	11.3%	10.4%	19.4%
Shafi'i	1.0%	16.13%	6.7%	6.7%
Maliki	1.0%	4.8%	2.5%	1.3%
Progressive	11.0%	6.5%	9.8%	4.4%
Other	3.0%	3.2%	3.1%	1.5%

Question: Which Islamic tradition, school of thought or group, if any, did you most identify with when you first converted/reverted to Islam?

Overall, a slight majority of converts (55.2%) identified as Sunni, while a large plurality of 39.2 percent described themselves as 'Just Muslim'. Almost one-fifth (18.4%) of converts identified with Sufism, with smaller numbers identifying as Progressive (9.8%), Salafi (5.5%) and Shi'a (4.9%). The proportion of participants identifying here as Sunni, Shi'a or 'just Muslim' appears to be somewhat consistent with other studies of Western converts. For example, Maslim and Bjorck's (2009) survey of female converts in the United States found that 46.9 percent of respondents identified as Sunni, while a study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 55 percent of American converts (both male and female) identified as such (2007, 22). Regarding the category of 'just Muslim', high numbers of participants in the aforementioned studies also identified as such. For example, Pew's survey estimated that approximately 24 percent of American converts did not identify with a specific Islamic tradition or interpretation (2007), while Maslim

and Bjorck's research found that 42.1 percent of female converts in their study "not affiliate with any particular Muslim sect" (2009). Similarly small proportions of converts identifying as Shi'a/Shiite were also observed in these studies.

The tendency amongst some converts to avoid specific identification or denominational labels has been observed in other conversion studies, and may be attributed to either a lack of knowledge or awareness of various trends within Islamic thought (see King 2017), or due to concerns over sectarianism and division amongst Muslim communities (see Mitchell and Rane 2018). One survey participant expressed their views on sectarian identification, explaining why they identified as 'just Muslim':

> While Islam is for all of humanity, Muslim (*sic*) taught me to see sects and divisions. I quickly disengaged from these people and opinions. I am not a Muslim who likes to place a prefix in my Muslim identity. I refuse to identify as a Sunni Muslim or Shia Muslim or a Practising Muslim or a Moderate Muslim...no prefixes...I am a Muslim. Period (S163).

Comparatively, a number of differences were observed between the interpretations of Islam embraced by converts and those of born Muslims. One of the more notable findings in this regard related to identification with Sufism. Among converts overall, 18.4 percent identified as Sufi. Comparatively, only 4.3 percent of born Muslims identified as such. This difference was found to be statistically significant.[18] Converts overall were also less likely than born Muslims to identify as Sunni, and more likely to identify as being 'just Muslim', 'progressive', Salafi and Shia (see Table 6.1). Regarding these differences between the identifications of converts and born Muslims, a number of possible explanations were raised by focus group participants. Several participants suggested that these differences may be explained by born Muslims being tied to the

[18] The odds of a convert identifying as Sufi were 5.084 (OR) times greater than a born Muslim, 95% CIs, [3.037, 8.510], $p < 0.001$.

specific Islamic traditions in which they were raised. In the words of one born Muslim (Brisbane, Participant 6): "I think that's the difference, I think you'll find the converts actually have a choice and made that decision. We are just born into it."

Existing research has found that many converts engage in detailed (and often prolonged) learning processes, both prior to and following the act of conversion, in which they seek to gain knowledge about Islamic teachings and practices (King 2017; Mitchell and Rane 2016; Turner 2010). This point was raised by other participants, who suggested that converts' research on Islam provided them with a strong understanding of the faith, thus enabling them to select the interpretation which best suited them. In the words of one focus group participant:

> All my life, all the converts I've ever met...a convert who makes that big, big step to convert from one faith to another, often do it with their eyes wide open. They'll often study…they'll do a lot more reading and often they will know a lot more than people who were just born as Muslims. So I think they tend to come into the faith with a very good understanding. And probably ask a lot of the questions maybe we take for granted. And hence when they would answer a question like this, they are more acutely aware of their position…because they've had to make that transition, from another faith to Islam. So they come to it with a really good understanding and know exactly where they stand. (Canberra, Participant 8).

It is also worth considering these findings in the context of the religious market theory, which several conversion scholars have engaged with (van Nieuwkerk 2006). This notion suggests that in a contemporary context, processes of "modernization and individualization" have "transformed religion and religious goods into matters of individual choice. Actors choose among several religious options the worldview that suits them best" (van Nieuwkerk 2006, 2). While this theory is generally engaged with in the broader context of intra-faith conversion, its principles also apply to a more nuanced examination of pathways to different branches within a particular faith.

Other participants suggested that the funding and organisational efforts of certain groups may explain the slightly higher levels of convert identification with more puritanical and 'hard-line' interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism. In the words of one female convert:

> I would say that when I tried to, after I took the shahada, I was looking for support groups, you know in terms of my faith, and the only really available ones at the time were much more hard line support groups. So they're like, yeah we'll support you, but…this is like, OK, this is how you dress, this is how you act, this how you…. And it was very proscriptive. (Brisbane, Participant 5).

In the words of another focus group participant:

> It's organised…how organised are the groups which provide the support. So you'll find that the restrictive groups have money behind them, so they have literature. They have the Salafi literature. They have all, you know…so that's what will be given to them. Maybe the Sufi groups than that, progressive groups. But in the mainstream…(?)…and they really don't have the support group for converts (Brisbane, Participant 4).

The influence of Salafi-oriented support groups was raised by another participant, who expressed a view that the socialisation and connectivity offered by such groups was appealing for some converts:

> I find it really odd, but I just wanted to hazard a guess. My experience with the Salafi community, limited experience with the Salafi community, was that they're very connected and they are often, they're very connected and they're constantly together and they're constantly having functions and I think convert women particularly appreciate that connectedness with the community (Melbourne, Participant 4).

This participant further explained:

> They do a whole dinner, the converts that come to them and they'll look after them really, really well. Whereas, if there's a convert that comes to the local mosque it's like 'oh you did your Shahada, congratulations', and we just move on and you're part of the team. The community really engages with those converts and ensures that they do attend and that they do feel welcome and they put a lot of effort into maintaining those converts (Melbourne, Participant 4).

The perceived simplicity and clarity of Salafist interpretations of Islam was also raised by one participant as being potentially attractive to converts:

> I think…there's an attraction to Salafism because there is an inherent belief that this is the one right way. I remember some of the questions you were asking were the multiple interpretations of Islam. Salafism is like…this is the Sunna, this is the Quran, this is the way – don't worry about everything else. So as much as the Sufi is an easy form of Islam, Salafism kind of simplifies things for you as well. Like, this is the way you should follow it, we are correct, it's pretty easy, don't worry about what everyone said. We're going back to the original source". So there could be that…that simplicity that comes with Salafism. It doesn't really entertain multiple interpretations of things. (Canberra, Participant 1).

The clarity and rules-based system provided by Salafist interpretations of Islam has been noted as an appealing factor in other conversion studies. For example, Shanneik's research on Irish converts to Islam found that for those who came from a strict Catholic background, the rules and rigidity offered by Salafism represented a form of continuity in the religious 'habitus' of converts (2011). Unfortunately, due to space constraints, questions pertaining to converts' prior religious affiliations were not included in the final version of the survey, nor in the focus groups. Future research may help to shed light on the potential relationship between the particular interpretations of Islam adopted by converts, and their pre-conversion religious affiliations.

Regarding other 'forms' of Islam, it was also suggested by a (born Muslim) focus group participant that the proliferation and influence of online Muslim preachers who identified with Sufism may have been a factor in the higher proportion of converts identifying as Sufi. In the words of this participant:

> Something that came to my mind was that, especially if we're talking about converts in Australia, there's been a lot of popular, fairly…really popular imams who could be…many of them from the Maliki sect who could identify as Sufi. And I think that a lot of reverts may go to them as their first source of Islamic information. Someone like Sheik Hamza Yusuf for example. Very, very popular. And is Western. Not necessarily Arabic or from Turkey or anything like that, so…an easy source of information that is probably more easy to understand that…to a Westerner. You see a lot of those kinds…that Maliki…there's a big popularity around those Maliki kind of sheiks that a lot of recent converts may be drawn to because of how they speak, and their books and things like that. So I think that would be…I feel that would be a source, for that disparity. (Canberra, Participant 1).

Similarly to Salafist-oriented organisations, one focus group participant also suggested that the support services and community-like nature of some Sufi-oriented groups may explain the higher level of identification with Sufism amongst converts. In the words of this participant:

> I probably would agree with that actually, because some groups do have better support, so that's probably the only thing that I feel could explain this. Because in my mind, they would have just chosen 'just Muslim', that's what I would have thought. I don't know so much about the Salafi…progressive… but Benevolence is known as quite Sufi, and they have fantastic support for reverts. Like converts, they'll have special classes for them, they'll have special programs, dinners and so forth, which other organizations don't offer. So if they're inclined to that, they get exposed to the way knowledge is provided to them, that might influence their thinking. (Melbourne, Participant 9).

In terms of gender, several notable differences were also observed between male and female converts in relation to the types of Islam with which they identified (see Table 6.1). While converts overall were more likely than born Muslims to identify as Sufi, this was more pronounced amongst male converts. Almost one-quarter of male converts identified as Sufi, compared to 15.0 percent of female converts. Conversely, female converts were less likely than males to identify with Sunni Islam, and more likely to describe themselves as being 'just Muslim', 'progressive', Salafi and Shia/Shiite. Additionally, female converts were less likely to identify with a specific *madhab* (school of legal thought) than were their male counterparts. To provide some context on this point, there are a number of prominent *madhahib* within the major sectarian branches of Islam. Within Sunnism, the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali schools are the major *madhahib*, while the Jafari and Zaydi *madhahib* being the major schools of thought within Shi'a Islam. Amongst participants, 12.0 percent of female converts identified with a specific Sunni *madhab*, compared to 30.6 percent of male converts. Overall, this trend was found to be statistically significant.[19] While this trend was observed across all major *madhahib*, it was most pronounced in the context of the Shafi'i school of thought. Comparatively, while only 1.0 percent of female converts identified with this *madhab*, 16.1 percent of male converts did so. This gender disparity was found to be statistically significant.[20] Concerning the high level of identification with the Maliki *madhab* amongst male converts, it could be theorized that this is due to gender-based differences in conversion pathways. For example, Mitchell and Rane's (2018) study of male converts to Islam found that a number of participants had been introduced to Islam after marrying women from South East Asia (for example Indonesia and Malaysia) where the dominant

[19] The odds of a male convert identifying with a Sunni madhhab were 3.317 (OR) times greater than a female convert, 95% CIs, [3.317, 7.463], p 0.003.
[20] The odds of a male convert identifying with the Shafi'i madhhab were 19.412 (OR) times greater than a female convert, 95% CIs, [2.417, 155.879], $p < 0.001$.

madhab is Shafi'i. While such a connection remains speculative, future research may be able to provide insight on this issue.

While a similar trend was observed regarding differences amongst born Muslims in relation to males being more likely than females to identify with a particular *madhab*, this was more pronounced amongst converts.[21] Although comparative data on convert identification with specific *madhahib* remains extremely limited,[22] research by King (2017) found that female converts in her study on Australian converts were largely ambivalent when it came to the question of schools of legal thought within Islam.

In addition to asking participants about the specific movements or interpretations of Islam with which they identified, the survey also asked about their views regarding the validity of other interpretations of the Islamic faith. Insight into this issue is considered to be particularly relevant, in light of the rise of sectarian tensions and conflicts which have plagued the Muslim world in recent decades (Hashemi and Postel 2017). This is arguably due, in part, to the global proliferation of Wahhabism and Salafist doctrines and their dismissal of divergent interpretations and approaches to Islam (Olsson 2017; Shavit and Spengler 2021). In order to gain insight into this issue from the perspective of Muslim Australians, participants were presented with a list of statements and asked "which of the following best describes your view on how Islam should be understood?" Overall, less than one-fifth of converts (19.6%) believed that there is only one valid interpretation of Islam, while a majority (74.2%) believed that there were multiple valid interpretations of Islam. Within this majority, 27.6 percent believed that there are "few valid interpretations of Islam", 25.7 percent believed there are "many valid interpretations" and 20.9 percent believed that "there are potentially as many valid interpretations as there are Muslims."

[21] Amongst respondents who identified as born Muslims, 21.4% of females identified with a specific *madhab*, compared to 30.8% of males.
[22] While several quantitative studies have examined Western converts' identification with specific sectarian branches, the question of *madhab* have not been measured in a quantitative context.

The remaining 6.1 percent of respondents were "unsure" in their response to this question. Comparatively, the responses of converts to this question were largely consistent with those of born Muslims. Some slight differences were, however, observed in this regard, though these were not found to be statistically significant. For example, converts were slightly more likely than born Muslims to believe that there is only one valid interpretations of Islam. Converts were also more likely to believe that "there are potentially as many valid interpretations as there are Muslims", a position which was endorsed by 20.9 percent of converts, and 12.9 percent of born Muslims.

Overall, these findings suggest that similar to born Muslims, the vast majority of Australian converts to Islam display an open and pluralistic attitude towards the diversity of interpretations and movements within the broader Islamic tradition, while rejecting the closed and rigid perspectives which seek to delegitimize or stigmatise other interpretations of Islam.

Typologies

While examining the particular interpretations of Islam with which Muslims identify can provide key insight into their beliefs, practices and identities, a broader approach which also considers Muslim typologies or 'orientations' may enable a more nuanced understanding of such issues. Described by Duderija and Rane as 'discursive-based classifications', this method takes a discursive based approach to "conceptualising diversity in Western Muslim identities" (2019, 32). As the authors explain, "discursive-based approaches are premised on the idea that when conceptualising identity formulations among (Western) Muslims, it is important to integrate Muslim opinions and attitudes with their perceptions of Islam itself and what Islam means to them" (2019, 32).

Several scholars have proposed theoretical frameworks of such typologies and orientations, with perhaps the most comprehensive of these coming from the work of Abdullah Saeed. Saeed (2007) proposed a typological framework of eight "broad orientations" which Muslims may fall within, based on a series of "discursive-related criteria". These typologies included (1) legal traditionalists, (2) theological puritans, (3) militant extremists, (4) political Islamists, (5) secular liberals, (6) cultural nominalists, (7) classical modernists and (8) progressive *ijtihadis*. While an exhaustive analysis of these typologies is not possible in this chapter, these orientations provide a nuanced descriptive framework which encompasses how Muslims understand, interpret and express their faith, taking into account issues of "law, theological purity, violence, politics, separation of religion and state, practice, modernity (and) *ijtihad*" (2007: 396). In some cases, such as that of the 'cultural nominalists', Muslim identity is based on culture and familial heritage, rather than religious belief and practice. As Saeed describes:

> The focus of cultural nominalists is on culture, rather than religion. This trend represents Muslims who are "culturally Muslim" — that is, those who are usually born into Muslim families and are associated with Islam but are not interested in the beliefs or practices of Islam. They may adopt certain basic beliefs but are not practicing Muslims except in so far as occasionally attending Eid prayer. They may also display some interest in religio-cultural practices like burial and circumcision. This trend represents a very large number of Muslims today (Saeed 2007, 400).

The typological framework utilised in this survey was created by the research team after engaging with and drawing upon various existing theoretical frameworks. The ten typologies formulated for this study reflect a wide spectrum of orientations, from what Saeed describes as the 'cultural nominalist' (Saeed 2007, 400), to the 'militant' and 'political Islamist'. While earlier survey questions asked respondents to identify with specific labels regarding their interpretations of Islam, this question was designed taking

into account the notion of *label avoidance*. According to this theory, "label avoidance is when people refrain from associating with particular categories or groups in order to avoid potential stigma" (Rane *et al.* 2020). As Rane *et al.* (2020) assert, "in Muslim communities, stigma can be associated with labels ranging from liberal, progressive, and secular to political Islamist and militant." Thus, rather than providing respondents with a series of typological labels, they were instead presented with a series of statements and asked to rate how well these described them as Muslims.

Typologies were not considered to be mutually exclusive, with considerable overlap anticipated between certain typologies.[23] Overall, the highest proportion of converts identified with the 'liberal' (77.9%) and 'progressive' (68.1%) typologies, followed by 'secular' (55.8%) and 'ethical-*maqasidi*' (54.0%) typologies. Smaller numbers identified with the 'traditionalist' (50.9%), 'Sufi' (41.1%), 'legalist' (31.9%) and 'political Islamist' (17.2%) typologies, with the fewest respondents falling under the 'militant' (8.0%) and 'cultural nominalist' (3.1%) typologies. A comparative gender analysis (see Table 6.2) revealed some interesting findings regarding identification with these typologies. While similar numbers of males and females strongly agreed or agreed with the 'liberal' typology statement, male converts were less likely than females to identify with the 'secular', 'progressive' and 'ethical-*maqasidi*' typologies. Additionally, higher proportions of male than female converts agreed or strongly agreed with the statements associated with 'legalist', 'political Islamist' and 'militant' typologies.

[23] In-depth analyses of the relationships between typologies are available in Rane *et al.* (2020) and Rane and Duderija (2021).

Table 6.2. Typology by Gender (Converts)*

Typology	Strongly Agree/ Agree (%)		Neither Agree/ Disagree and Unsure (%)		Disagree/ Disagree (%)	
	Female Converts	***Male Converts***	***Female Converts***	***Male Converts***	***Female Converts***	***Male Converts***
Liberal[24]	*77.0% (n77)*	*79.0% (n49)*	*17.0% (n17)*	*12.9% (n8)*	*6.0% (n6)*	*8.1% (n5)*
	77.9%		***15.3%***		***6.75%***	
Progressive[25]	*73.0% (n73)*	*59.7% (n37)*	*20.0% (n20)*	*24.2% (n15)*	*7.0% (n7)*	*16.1% (n10)*
	68.1%		***21.5%***		***10.4%***	
Secular[26]	*58.0% (n58)*	*51.6% (n32)*	*24.0% (n24)*	*19.4% (n12)*	*18.0% (n18)*	*29.0% (n18)*
	55.8%		***22.1%***		***22.1%***	
Ethical-*maqasidi*[27]	*59.0% (n59)*	*45.2% (n28)*	*23.0% (n23)*	*30.6% (n19)*	*18.0% (n18)*	*24.2% (n15)*
	54.0%		***25.8%***		***20.3%***	
Traditionalist[28]	*52.0% (n52)*	*50.0% (n31)*	*26.0% (n26)*	*37.1% (n23)*	*22.0% (n22)*	*12.9% (n8)*
	50.9%		***30.1%***		***19.0%***	
Sufi[29]	*47.0% (n47)*	*32.3% (n20)*	*27.0% (n27)*	*46.8% (n30)*	*26.0% (n26)*	*21.0% (n13)*
	41.1%		***34.4%***		***24.5%***	
Legalist[30]	*27.0% (n27)*	*40.3% (n25)*	*34.0% (n34)*	*38.7% (n24)*	*39.0% (n39)*	*21.0% (n13)*
	31.9%		***35.6%***		***32.5%***	
Political-Islamist[31]	*12.0% (n12)*	*25.8% (n16)*	*22.0% (n22)*	*32.3% (n20)*	*66.0% (n66)*	*41.9% (n26)*
	17.2%		***25.8%***		***57.1%***	
Militant[32]	*6.0% (n6)*	*11.3% (n7)*	*7.0% (n7)*	*24.2% (n15)*	*87.0% (n87)*	*61.3% (n40)*
	8.0%		***13.5%***		***78.5%***	
Cultural Nominalist[33]	*4.0% (n4)*	*1.6% (n1)*	*10.0% (n10)*	*8.1% (n5)*	*86.0% (n86)*	*90.3% (n56)*
	3.1%		***9.2%***		***87.7%***	

Question: Please rate the following statements according to how well they describe you as a Muslim.

[24] Statement (liberal): "I believe Islam aligns with human rights, civil liberties and democracy."
[25] Statement (progressive): "I am a committed Muslim who believes in the rational, cosmopolitan nature of the Islamic tradition based on principles of social justice, gender justice and religious pluralism."
[26] Statement (secular): "For me Islam is a matter of personal faith rather than a public identity."
[27] Statement (ethical *maqasidi*): "I am a committed, reform-minded Muslim who emphasizes the spirit and ethical principles of Islam over literal interpretations."
[28] Statement (traditionalist): "I am a devout Muslim who follows a traditional understanding of Islam."
[29] Statement (sufi): "I am a devout Muslim who follows a more spiritual path rather than formal legal rules."
[30] Statement (legalist): "I am a strict Muslim who follows Islam according to the laws of shariah."
[31] Statement (political Islamist): "I am a committed Muslim who believes politics is part of Islam and advocates for an Islamic state based on shariah laws."
[32] Statement (militant): "I am a committed Muslim who believes an Islamic political order and shariah should be implemented by force if necessary."
[33] Statement (cultural nominalist): "I am a cultural Muslim for whom Islam is based on my family background rather than my practice."

These findings, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Nine, suggest that overall, female converts appear more likely to display progressive and contextual orientations and understandings of Islam, while male converts are more likely to display politicized and legalistic interpretations of Islam. Unfortunately, no existing comparative data currently exists regarding the relationship between gender and Muslim typologies, either in the specific context of Western converts, nor on Western Muslims more broadly.

Considering the differences and commonalities between converts and born Muslims, several interesting findings were also observed. While the highest proportions of both converts and born Muslims identified with the liberal and secular typologies, the percentage of converts who strongly agreed/agreed with this statement was noticeably lower than that of born Muslims (see Table 6.3). In the context of the 'traditionalist' and 'legalist' typologies, converts were less likely to identify with these than were born Muslims. These findings may suggest that Australian converts are somewhat less likely than their born Muslim counterparts to place a strong emphasis on 'traditional' and/or 'legalistic' interpretations of Islam. Once again, unfortunately, no comparative data currently exists regarding differences in identification with such typologies based on conversion status.

Regarding the typology of 'political Islamist', converts were slightly less likely than born Muslims to strongly agree/agree with this statement, and slightly more likely to reject it. While gender disparities were identified amongst both converts and born Muslims in relation to this question, both female and male converts were less likely to agree with this typology statement than their born Muslim counterparts. Regarding the 'militant' typology, similar numbers of converts and born Muslims strongly agreed/agreed with the corresponding statement, while similar numbers also rejected this statement. This finding seems particularly noteworthy considering assertions that

Western converts to Islam are more susceptible to radicalisation and extremism than their born Muslim counterparts (Kleinmann 2012). While this point will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Nine, this finding, along with others presented in this thesis, does not support such assertions in the context of Australia.

In the context of the 'cultural nominalist' typology, there was a notable disparity between converts and born Muslims. While 19.1 percent of born Muslims strongly agreed/agreed with this typology statement, only 3.1 percent of converts did the same. A statistically significant difference was found in relation to this question, with the odds of a born Muslim identifying with the 'cultural nominalist' typology being 7.441 (OR) times greater than that of a convert (95% CIs [3.006, 18.415], $p < 0.001$). Such a finding is perhaps unsurprising, considering that converts have made a conscious decision to embrace Islam, while born Muslims have been born/raised within the faith. As such, their tendency to reject the notion that their identity as Muslim is largely informed by their family or cultural background is perhaps to be expected.

Table 6.3. Typology by Conversion Status[34]

Typology	**Converts**		**Born Muslims**	
	Total Agree[35]	***Total Disagree***[36]	***Total Agree***	***Total Disagree***
Liberal	77.9%	6.75%	91.3%	3.0%
Progressive	68.1%	10.4%	76.0%	5.6%
Traditionalist	50.9%	19.0%	62.6%	15.3%
Ethical-*Maqasidi*	54.0%	20.3%	59.4%	15.2%
Secular	55.8%	22.1%	53.4%	29.6%
Sufi	41.1%	24.5%	46.3%	21.5%
Legalist	31.9%	32.5%	45.6%	26.4%
Political Islamist	17.2%	57.1%	21.8%	50.9%
Cultural Nominalist	3.1%	87.7%	19.1%	67.9%
Militant	8.0%	78.5%	7.8%	79.9%

[34] Note: neutral and unsure responses not reported in table.
[35] Note: neutral and unsure responses not reported in table.
[36] Total includes respondents who "disagreed" and "strongly disagreed" with typology statements.

Perspectives on Theological and Ethical Issues

In addition to examining the broader Islamic 'orientations' or typologies with which participants identified, this study also sought to gain insight into converts' perspectives on a range of theological and ethical issues. These included issues relating to religious equality, halal practices and Islamic jurisprudence. Participant views on the concepts of shariah, jihad and the caliphate, issues commonly associated with political Islam or Islam, were also considered and will be discussed in the following chapter.

Survey respondents were presented with a series of statements and asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement. Participant responses are outlined in Table 6.4, which includes a comparative breakdown of responses based on conversion status. Regarding issues of gender relations and gender equality, a majority of converts agreed/strongly agreed with the statements "marriage should be based on mutual respect rather than the subservience of one spouse to the other" (93.9%) and that "women should be given the same right and opportunities as men" (78.5%). In the context of religious pluralism, a clear majority of converts (87.7%) believed that "people of all religions and no religion should be treated equally". Regarding Australian law and citizenship, 79.1 percent of converts agreed with the statement "abiding by Australian laws does not equate to disobedience to Allah", while 49.1 percent agreed that "taking the citizenship pledge (in the name of God) equates to a religiously-binding oath".

Table 6.4. Theological and Ethical Issues*

Issue/Statement	Strongly Agree/Agree		Strongly Disagree/Disagree		Neutral/Unsure	
	Converts	***Born Muslims***	***Converts***	***Born Muslims***	***Converts***	***Born Muslims***
"Marriage should be based on mutual respect rather than the subservience of one spouse to the other"	93.9%	95.5%	3.1%	1.5%	3.1%	3.0%
"Halal certifiers should assess the ethical treatment of animals as part of the halal certification process"	91.4%	92.0%	1.8%	2.0%	6.8%	6.1%
"People of all religions and no religion should be treated equally"	87.7%	93.6%	3.7%	2.9%	8.6%	3.6%
"Environmental sustainability should be given higher priority in Islamic discourse"	80.4%	83.6%	2.5%	1.8%	17.2%	14.6%
"Abiding by Australian laws does not equate to disobedience to Allah"	79.1%	88.8%	4.3%	3.2%	16.6%	8.0%
"Women should be given the same rights and opportunities as men"	78.5%	85.2%	8.6%	5.3%	12.9%	9.5%
"There needs to be more emphasis on Islamic ethics rather than jurisprudence when teaching Islam"	73.0%	78.4%	3.1%	2.9%	23.9%	18.7%
"Taking the citizenship pledge (in the name of God) equates to a religiously-binding oath"	49.1%	61.9%	14.7%	9.1%	36.2%	29.1%

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Other questions considered issues relating to the ethics of animal treatment in the halal food industry, environmental sustainability in Islamic discourse, and the importance of ethics in Islamic jurisprudence. A clear majority (91.4%) of converts believed that "halal certifiers should assess the ethical treatment of animals as part of the halal certification process", while 80.4 percent believed that "environmental sustainability should be given higher priority in Islamic discourse". Almost three-quarters (73.0%) of

converts believed that "there needs to be more emphasis on Islamic ethics rather than jurisprudence when teaching Islam". Overall, as Rane *et al*. observe, "these findings refute claims central to anti-Islam/anti-Muslim bigotry that Islam promotes cruelty to animals, violence (including domestic violence), and criminality. Rather, these results show that Muslim Australians align their faith with principles of equality, social justice, human rights, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability" (2020, 13).

Comparatively, the responses of converts and born Muslims aligned fairly closely in most cases. Interestingly, however, it was observed that in response to all questions, lower proportions of converts than born Muslims selected the options of agree or strongly agree, while higher proportions of converts selected the options of disagree/strongly disagree or neutral/unsure. The largest disparity in agreement was in relation to the following statement: "taking the citizenship pledge (in the name of God) equates to a religiously-binding oath". Slightly less than half of converts (49.1%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, compared to 61.9 percent of born Muslims. Converts were also slightly more likely than born Muslims to be neutral/unsure about this statement. While this disparity was not found to be statistically significant, it could be theorised that, as they are more likely to have been born/raised in Australia, converts may be less likely than born Muslims to be familiar with, or have considered this notion. A similar disparity was also observed in relation to the statement "abiding by Australian laws does not equate to disobedience to Allah", to which 79.1 percent of converts and 88.8 percent of born Muslims agreed. While the absence of follow-up questions on these issues, in both the survey and focus groups, precludes an understanding of potential causal or explanatory factors, future research may help to shed light on different understandings and perspectives on the relationship between religion, law and citizenship amongst Australian converts to Islam and born Muslims.

Sources of Religious Knowledge and Guidance

For many converts, gaining authentic knowledge about their new faith can pose a challenge as they seek to better understand Islam and construct their identities as Muslims. While several studies have considered processes of information seeking and information practice throughout the conversion process, understandings of these issues remain limited. In order to gain some insight into this aspect of the conversion process amongst Australian converts, several questions were included in the survey to evaluate participants' sources of religious knowledge and religious guidance.

The first of these questions presented participants with a list twelve sources and asked them to rate "how influential are the following sources for your current understanding of Islam?" Participant responses are outlined in Table 6.5, which includes a comparative breakdown based on participants' gender. Unsurprisingly, the Quran ranked as the most influential source of religious knowledge. Islam's sacred text, which is believed to have been revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel, was rated as being 'very influential' for approximately three-quarters (74.5%) of participants, and 'influential' for a further 19.0 percent. Only small minorities rated the Quran as being 'not very influential' (3.1%), 'not at all influential' (1.2%) or 'not applicable' (1.8%).

The second-most influential source for converts' religious knowledge was the *hadith* – the collected sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. These narrations, or Prophetic traditions, "form a supplementary source of Islam after the Quran" (Rane 2010, 19; Saeed 2006, 33), although they are not considered divine or 'revealed' as is the sacred text of the Quran. As Rane explains, "the functions of the Prophetic traditions are to clarify or explain the contents of the Quran…and to provide specific guidance on matters about which the Quran is silent or general" (2010, 19). For slightly more than half of converts (52.8%), the hadith were considered to be very influential for their current

understanding of Islam, while almost one-third (31.3%) rated this as being 'somewhat influential'.

Scholarly books represented another important source of converts' religious knowledge, with 36.8 percent rating these as 'very influential', while a further 42.9 percent said these were 'somewhat influential'. Smaller proportions rated scholarly books as being 'not very influential' (9.2%), 'not at all influential' (3.7%) or 'not applicable' (7.4%) to their understanding of Islam. These findings support other research which has found that many Western converts engage in extended processes of information seeking and learning about Islam throughout the conversion process. Furthermore, this notion is reinforced by other findings presented in this thesis which identified that a considerable number of converts surveyed continued to learn about Islam long after the initial period of conversion (see Chapter Five).

Family, university and school represented the least influential sources for participants' understandings of Islam. Regarding the former, only 6.8 percent of converts said that family was 'very influential' for their understanding of Islam, with a further 22.1 percent saying this was 'somewhat influential'. University was somewhat less influential than family, with 6.8 percent of converts describing this as 'very influential' to their understanding of Islam, and 10.4 percent describing this as 'somewhat influential'. School represented the least influential source of converts' understanding of Islam, with only 2.5 percent rating this as 'very influential' and 5.5 percent describing this as 'somewhat influential'.

Regarding gender, some differences and commonalities were observed between female and male converts in relation to this question (see Table 6.5). For both genders, the Quran and hadith represented the most influential sources of knowledge, with similar proportions of each identifying these as 'very influential'. In regard to scholarly books,

imams/sheikhs/ulema, academic scholars and friends, a higher proportion of male converts rated these as being very influential to their understanding of Islam. Slightly higher proportions of female converts identified the internet, social media and mosque/madrassa classes as being very influential sources of their religious knowledge. In the case of imams/sheikhs/ulema, the greater level of influence amongst male converts may be explained in part by issues of access. As identified within both the focus groups and other research (see Ghafournia 2020; Woodlock 2010), Muslim women often report limited access and feelings of exclusion with respect to the mosque and imams.

Overall, while the differences observed in relation to gender were, in most cases, minimal and not found to be statistically significant, future research may allow a more nuanced understanding of processes of information seeking and learning experienced by Australian converts to Islam, and how these may differ based on gender.

Table 6.5 Converts' Sources of Religious Knowledge by Gender*

Source	Very Influential		Somewhat Influential		Not Very Influential		Not at all Influential		N/A	
	F	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**
The Quran	75.0%	75.8%	20.0%	16.1%	2.0%	4.8%	1.0%	1.6%	2.0%	1.6%
	74.5%		**19.0%**		**3.1%**		**1.2%**		**1.8%**	
Hadith	53.0%	53.2%	30.0%	32.3%	8.0%	6.5%	4.0%	6.5%	5.0%	1.6%
	52.8%		**31.3%**		**7.4%**		**4.9%**		**3.7%**	
Scholarly Books	31.0%	46.8%	47.0%	35.5%	9.0%	9.7%	4.0%	3.2%	9.0%	4.8%
	36.8%		**42.9%**		**9.2%**		**3.7%**		**7.4%**	
Imams/Sheikhs/ Ulema	24.0%	38.7%	41.0%	32.3%	17.0%	12.9%	13.0%	12.9%	5.0%	3.2%
	30.1%		**37.4%**		**15.3%**		**12.9%**		**4.3%**	
Internet (websites, forums, YouTube, etc.)	23.0%	21.0%	44.0%	43.6%	27.0%	24.2%	4.0%	6.5%	2.0%	4.8%
	22.1%		**43.6%**		**26.4%**		**4.9%**		**3.1%**	
Academic Scholars	15.0%	25.8%	46.0%	30.7%	15.0%	12.9%	12.0%	16.1%	12.0%	14.5%
	19.0%		**40.5%**		**14.1%**		**13.5%**	**12.9%**	**19.0%**	
Mosque/Madrassa classes	17.0%	14.5%	27.0%	33.9%	13.0%	25.8%	23.0%	14.5%	20.0%	11.3%
	16.0%		**30.1%**		**17.8%**		**19.6%**		**16.6%**	
Social Media	14.0%	12.9%	32.0%	19.4%	31.0%	32.3%	19.0%	29.0%	4.0%	6.5%
	13.5%		**27.0%**		**31.3%**		**23.3%**		**4.9%**	
Friends	6.0%	16.1%	59.0%	40.3%	17.0%	14.5%	15.0%	25.8%	3.0%	3.2%
	9.8%		**52.2%**		**16.0%**		**19.0%**		**3.1%**	
Family	7.0%	6.5%	25.0%	17.7%	17.0%	14.5%	33.0%	27.4%	18.0%	33.9%
	6.8%		**22.1%**		**16.0%**		**31.3%**		**23.9%**	
University	7.0%	6.5%	12.0%	8.1%	15.0%	9.7%	21.0%	19.4%	45.0%	56.5%
	6.8%		**10.4%**		**12.9%**		**20.3%**		**49.7%**	
School	2.0%	3.2%	4.0%	8.1%	16.0%	9.7%	19.0%	27.4%	59.0%	51.6%
	2.5%		**5.5%**		**13.5%**		**22.1%**		**56.4%**	

Question: How influential are the following sources for your current understanding of Islam?

When the variable of conversion status was taken into account, a number of differences and commonalities were observed between the responses of converts and those of born Muslims (see Table 6.6). Firstly, amongst both groups, the Quran, hadith and scholarly books represented the three most influential sources of religious knowledge. In each of these cases, however, higher proportions of born Muslims than converts rated these sources being 'very influential', while higher proportions of converts rated them as being 'somewhat influential'.

While family does not appear to be particularly influential for converts' understandings of Islam, this is not the case amongst born Muslims. Approximately one-third (32.5%) of born Muslims rated family as being 'very influential' for their understanding of Islam, with a further 46.5 percent describing their family as 'somewhat influential', compared to 6.8 percent and 22.1 percent, respectively, amongst converts. Such a disparity is perhaps unsurprising, considering that born Muslims have been raised within Muslim families, whereas converts (despite some having married into Muslim families) were raised outside the faith.

Additionally, in the context of school, the disparity observed between converts and born Muslims may be explained to some degree by a number of born Muslim participants having attended Islamic schools, whereas this would not be the case for converts. Unfortunately, the survey did not inquire about the nature of participants' schooling (for example, if they attended Islamic schools), which precludes any exploration of such relationships.

Table 6.6. Born Muslims' Sources of Religious Knowledge

Source	Very Influential	Somewhat Influential	Not Very Influential	Not at all Influential	N/A
The Quran	83.9%	13.4%	1.5%	0.8%	0.3%
Hadith	69.0%	21.0%	5.4%	3.4%	1.2%
Scholarly Books	42.0%	38.8%	9.1%	4.1%	6.0%
Family	32.5%	46.5%	13.7%	6.7%	0.7%
Imams/Sheikhs/Ulema	29.9%	42.6%	16.4%	9.3%	1.8%
Academic Scholars	22.7%	39.5%	15.2%	12.3%	10.3%
Mosque/Madrassa classes	22.3%	37.7%	18.6%	13.7%	7.8%
Internet (websites, forums, YouTube, etc.)	15.7%	48.7%	21.9%	11.1%	2.5%
Friends	12.7%	47.9%	26.8%	11.4%	1.3%
School	9.8%	23.5%	25.1%	22.3%	19.3%
Social Media	8.7%	34.3%	33.1%	20.4%	3.4%
University	6.3%	18.0%	25.0%	27.0%	23.7%

In addition to sources of religious knowledge, the survey also asked participants about their sources for religious guidance (see Table 6.7). Participants were presented with a list of eight options (including 'unsure' and 'other') and were asked "in general, when you have a question that relates to Islam, which of the following sources are you most likely to consult for guidance?" Participants were able to select only one response option. Overall, the largest plurality (30.7%) of converts identified the Quran and Hadith as the sources which they would consult for guidance, with smaller numbers identifying contemporary traditional Islamic scholars (14.1%), the Quran alone (12.9%), contemporary progressive Islamic scholars (12.3%) and classical Islamic schools of thought (*madhahib*) (8.0%). A further 6.0 percent were unsure, while 14.7 percent selected the option of 'other'. While only minimal comparative data on this point is currently available, the results of a survey of Muslims in Canada provide

some interesting points of comparison. When asked "what individuals or organizations, if any, do you personally look to offer you guidance as a Muslim?", the largest plurality (42%) said that they look "nowhere in particular" for guidance. This was followed by local mosques/ Muslim organizations (22.0%); family (11%); the local Imam/sheik (10%); national Muslim organizations (5.0%); the Quran (5.0%); friends and community members (3.0%) and self-guidance/research (2.0%). As Rane *et al*. suggest, the differences observed here may be explained by multiple factors, including "respective questionnaire design, wording of the question, and/or the nature, or nurture, of the respective Muslim communities" (2020, 10). For example, regarding differences in questionnaire design and wording, participants in the present study were asked to rate how influential each source was for them, while the Canadian survey only allowed participants to select a single response option.

Table 6.7. Sources of Religious Guidance*

Source of Guidance	Female Converts %	Male Converts %	Total Converts %	Born Muslims %
Quran and Hadith	31.0%	30.7%	30.7%	40.8%
Contemporary traditional Islamic scholars	15.0%	12.9%	14.1%	12.0%
The Quran	13.0%	12.9%	12.9%	14.0%
Contemporary progressive Islamic scholars	14.0%	8.1%	12.3%	6.4%
Classical Islamic schools of thought (*madhahib*)	4.0%	14.5%	8.0%	9.8%
Unsure	6.0%	6.5%	6.1%	6.2%
Hadith	2.0%	0.0%	1.2%	0.6%
Other	15.0%	14.5%	14.7%	10.2%

Question: In general, when you have a question that relates to Islam, which of the following sources are you most likely to consult for guidance?

Further considering the results of the present study, participants who selected the option of 'other' were prompted to elaborate with a written response to this question. Among the 24 written responses provided by converts, a number of themes were identified, including local imams/sheikhs (n=7), family and friends (n=5), a combination of the listed response options (n=3) and specific contemporary scholars or imams (n=2).

When the variable of gender was taken into consideration, it was observed that the responses of female and male converts to these questions aligned fairly closely. Two exceptions in this regard related to classical Islamic schools of thought (*madhahib*), which were identified by a slightly higher proportion of male converts, and contemporary progressive Islamic scholars, which were identified by a slightly higher proportion of female converts. This finding adds some further support to the notion that female converts are somewhat more inclined than male converts towards progressive understandings and interpretations of Islam, while also providing an interesting point of comparison to findings presented earlier in this chapter which highlighted that a higher proportion of male than female converts identified with a specific Sunni *madhhab*.

When the variable of conversion status was taken into account, some minor differences were observed between converts and born Muslims. For example, born Muslims were more likely than converts to identify the Quran and hadith, and were less likely than converts to identify Islamic scholars, including 'contemporary classical' and 'contemporary progressive' scholars. While these differences were generally minimal and not found to be statistically significant, it could be theorised that the slightly higher proportion of converts consulting the work of Islamic scholars for religious guidance may be emblematic of the significant level of research which many converts engage in throughout the conversion process.

Interpreting the Qur'an

While the Qur'an is considered within Islamic tradition to be the word of God, as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, Islam's foundational and sacred text has nevertheless been interpreted in different ways by Islamic scholars and jurists for centuries (Saeed 2006). In order to better understand Australian converts' perspectives on how the Qur'an should be interpreted, a series of statements were included in the survey, with participants asked to identify the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each (see Table 6.8). Overall, a majority of participants endorsed a contextual and somewhat fluid interpretation of the Qur'an, while rejecting rigid, literalist approaches. For example, the statement which received the highest level of agreement from participants (75.5%) was that "the Qur'an should be read and interpreted contextually in relation to historic and social contexts". This was followed by "some verses of the Qur'an are specific to the Prophet Muhammad's time and circumstances while others are relevant to all times and places", with which 74.2 percent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed. The statements which received the lowest level of agreement were that "the Qur'an should be read and interpreted literally" (27.0%) and that "the Qur'an should be understood according to the interpretations of classical scholars only" (9.2%).

Concerning the variable of gender, it was observed that the responses of female and male converts to this question aligned fairly closely in most cases. Some differences were observed in relation to the statements "some verses of the Qur'an are specific to the Prophet Muhammad's time and circumstances while others are relevant to all times and places" and "the Qur'an allows for new interpretations in response to changing conditions and realities", with which a higher proportion of female converts agreed/strongly agreed. Overall, however, gender disparities in relation to this question were not found to be statistically significant and both female and male converts exhibited a predominantly contextual approach to interpreting the Quran, with minorities of both groups believing that "the Qur'an should be read and

interpreted literally" or that "the Qur'an should be understood according to the interpretations of classical scholars only."

Table 6.8. Interpreting the Quran (by Gender)*

Statement	Strongly Agree/Agree		Strongly Disagree/Disagree		Neither Agree nor Disagree and Unsure	
	F	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**
The Qur'an should be read and interpreted contextually in relation to historic and social contexts	75.0%	75.8%	7.0%	4.8%	18.0%	19.4%
	75.5%		**6.1%**		**18.4%**	
The Qur'an should be read and interpreted in relation to the principles (*maqasid*) of Islam	69.0%	74.2%	4.0%	3.2%	27.0%	22.6%
	71.2%		**3.7%**		**25.2%**	
Some verses of the Qur'an are specific to the Prophet Muhammad's time and circumstances while others are relevant to all times and places	79.0%	66.1%	12.0%	17.7%	9.0%	16.1%
	74.2%		**14.1%**		**11.7%**	
The Qur'an allows for new interpretations in response to changing conditions and realities	61.0%	50.0%	16.0%	30.6%	23.0%	19.4%
	57.1%		**21.5%**		**21.5%**	
All verses of the Qur'an apply to all time, place and circumstances	39.0%	41.9%	38.0%	40.3%	23.0%	17.8%
	39.9%		**39.3%**		**20.9%**	
The Qur'an should be understood according to the interpretations of classical and contemporary scholars	49.0%	50.0%	22.0%	16.1%	29.0%	33.9%
	49.1%		**19.6%**		**31.3%**	
The Qur'an should be read and interpreted literally	25.0%	30.7%	49.0%	41.9%	26.0%	27.4%
	27.0%		**46.6%**		**26.4%**	
The Qur'an should be understood according to the interpretations of classical scholars only	7.0%	12.9%	68.0%	45.2%	25.0%	41.9%
	9.2%		**59.5%**		**31.3%**	

**** Question: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the reading and interpreting of the Qur'an?"***

Some slight differences were also observed in relation to the variable of conversion status (see Table 6.9). Compared to their born Muslim counterparts, converts were somewhat more likely to agree with some contextual approaches to interpreting the Qur'an, and slightly less likely to embrace literalist interpretations. Regarding the latter, a slightly higher proportion of born Muslims than converts agreed that "the Quran should be read and interpreted literally" and that "all verses of the Quran apply to all time, place and circumstances." Converts were also more likely than born Muslims to agree that the Qur'an should be understood according to the interpretations of *both* classical and contemporary scholars, while a higher proportion of born Muslims believed that "the Quran should be understood according to the interpretations of classical scholars only." Overall, however, it is important to note that the differences observed here were largely minimal, and no statistically significant differences were observed in relation to conversion status. Amongst both converts and born Muslims, majorities supported contextual interpretations of the Quran which take into account social and historical contexts and emphasise the higher objectives of Islam (Kamali 2008, 123-140; Saeed 2006, 126-127).

Table 6.9. Interpreting the Quran by Conversion Status

Statement	Total Agree[37]		Total Disagree[38]	
	Converts	Born Muslims	Converts	Born Muslims
The Quran should be read and interpreted literally.	27.0%	30.3%	46.6%	43.4%
All verses of the Quran apply to all time, place and circumstances.	39.9%	50.2%	39.3%	31.6%
Some verses of the Quran are specific to the Prophet Muhammad's time and circumstances while others are relevant to all times and places.	74.2%	67.4%	14.1%	14.1%
The Quran should be read and interpreted contextually in relation to historic and social contexts.	75.5%	80.3%	6.1%	5.1%
The Quran should be read and interpreted in relation to the principles (*maqasid*) of Islam.	71.2%	76.7%	3.7%	2.4%
The Quran should be understood according to the interpretations of classical scholars only.	9.2%	17.3%	59.5%	50.4%
The Quran should be understood according to the interpretations of classical and contemporary scholars.	49.1%	47.2%	19.6%	18.4%
The Quran allows for new interpretations in response to changing conditions and realities.	57.1%	54.1%	21.5%	19.9%

Confidence in Knowledge

In addition to understanding respondents' sources of information and knowledge regarding Islam, the survey also sought to gain insight into respondents' confidence in that knowledge and their attitudes towards receiving new information regarding their faith. Survey respondents were presented with a list of five response options and asked 'which of the following best describes your confidence that what you have learnt about Islam is true and accurate?' Slightly

[37] Total includes respondents who "agreed" and "strongly agreed" with these statements.
[38] Total includes respondents who "disagreed" and "strongly disagreed" with these statements.

less than one-third (29.5%) of converts said that they were 'completely confident' in their knowledge about Islam, while the highest plurality (41.1%) said that they were 'very confident' in their knowledge. Approximately one-quarter (26.4%) said that they were 'somewhat confident', while smaller numbers were 'not very confident' (2.5%) or 'not at all confident' (0.6%). Comparatively, born Muslims were somewhat more likely than converts to say that they were 'completely confident' in their knowledge, while converts were somewhat more likely to be 'somewhat confident'.

In terms of gender, the responses of male and female converts to this question were largely similar, and no disparities were observed to be statistically significant. While female converts (at 31.0%) were somewhat more likely than males (27.4%) to be 'completely confident' in their knowledge, male converts (at 45.2%) were somewhat more likely than females (39.0%) to be 'very confident'. Similar proportions of male (25.8%) and female (26.0%) converts said that they were 'somewhat confident', while female converts were slightly more likely to be 'not very' or 'not at all' confident in their knowledge.[39]

Interestingly, gender differences regarding responses to this question were more pronounced amongst born Muslims, where males were more likely than females to report being 'completely' or 'very' confident in their knowledge. Female born Muslims were also more likely than their male counterparts to express that they were 'somewhat', 'not very' or 'not at all' confident in their knowledge about Islam. It could be theorised that this disparity is due in part to the specific experiences of converts, particularly the processes of research and learning which many converts, both male and female, undertake throughout their conversion journeys. For example, King's (2017) research on female converts in Australia identified that a common theme amongst all participants was a process of self-directed learning about Islam as they

[39] 3.0 percent of female converts and 1.6 percent of male converts were "not very confident" in their knowledge of Islam; 1.0 percent of female converts and 0.0 percent of male converts were "not at all confident" in their knowledge of Islam.

sought to construct their Muslim identities. Such findings have also been reflected in studies, such as those by Mitchell and Rane (2018) and Turner (2010).

While a clear majority of converts expressed a high level of confidence in their knowledge about Islam, they were also very open to receiving new knowledge about their faith. When survey participants were presented with a list of five response options and asked to identify "which of the following best describes your views on receiving new knowledge about Islam?", the largest plurality (46.6%) said that they were 'completely open to new knowledge', while a further 39.3 percent said that they were very open to new knowledge. Smaller numbers said that they were 'somewhat' (12.9%) or 'not very' (1.2%) open to new knowledge, while no participants (0.0%) said that they were 'not at all open to new knowledge'.

Comparatively, female converts (49.0%) were somewhat more likely than male converts (43.6%) to be 'completely open' to receiving new knowledge, while male converts (45.2%) were more likely than female converts (35.0%) to be 'very open' to receiving new knowledge. A slightly higher percentage of female (15.0%) than male converts (9.7%) said that they were 'somewhat open' to receiving new knowledge, while similar proportions of males (1.6%) and females (1.0%) were 'not very open' to new knowledge. These minor gender-based differences were not found to be statistically significant.

Compared to converts, born Muslims were slightly more open to receiving new knowledge, with a slight majority of 51.7 percent being 'completely open to new knowledge'.[40] A further 36.5 percent of born Muslims were 'very open' to new knowledge[41], with 9.9 percent being 'somewhat open' to new knowledge[42] and 1.2 percent being 'not very open' to new knowledge.[43] A small number of born Muslims (0.8%) said that they were 'not at all open' to

[40] This is compared to 46.6% of converts.
[41] This is compared to 39.3% of converts.
[42] This is compared to 12.9% of converts.
[43] This is compared to 1.2% of converts.

receiving new knowledge about Islam.[44] It is worth noting that, overall, the differences between the two groups were generally minimal and no statistically significant differences were found in relation to this question based on conversion status.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined key findings regarding Australian converts' Islamic identities, with a specific focus on levels of religiosity and ritual practice, the particular interpretations of Islam with which they identify and practice, their Islamic 'orientations' and views on various theological and ethical issues. These findings suggest that for Australian converts, religion is an important part of their lives and that they demonstrate a high level of religiosity and ritual practice. In terms of the particular interpretations of Islam or schools of thought with which participants identified, a significant level of diversity was observed. While a slight majority of converts identified with Sunni Islam, there was also a notable level of identification with interpretations which fall outside of 'mainstream' Sunnism, such as Sufism and Progressive Islam. While this trend was most evident amongst female converts, it is noteworthy that this was observed amongst converts more generally when compared with born Muslim participants. In regard to Muslim typologies, the highest proportions of converts identified with liberal, progressive and secular approaches to Islam. Similarly, perspectives on interpreting the Quran were predominantly contextual in nature, with only a minority of converts supporting literalist interpretations.

Regarding religious knowledge and literacy, a high proportion of converts are confident that what they know about Islam is true and accurate. In addition to this high level of confidence in religious knowledge, a majority of converts also expressed that they were completely open or very open to receiving new knowledge about Islam. The following chapter will continue to

[44] This is compared to 0.0% of converts.

explore the Islamic identities and understandings of Australian converts to Islam, with a specific focus on concepts and institutions relating to political Islam, including shariah, jihad and the caliphate.

CHAPTER 7: POLITICAL ISLAM

Overview

Emerging in the post-colonial period, the phenomenon of political Islam, or Islamism, has since become a dominant influence on how many Muslims and non-Muslims understand and perceive the religion of Islam and its adherents (Bokhari & Senzai 2013; Rane *et al*. 2020). Central to this political ideology are the concepts and institutions of the caliphate, shariah law and, in certain cases, jihad - commonly understood as meaning 'holy war' (Afsaruddin 2022; Al-Dawoody 2011, 58) among Western media and right-wing political discourses – but more broadly understood among Muslims to range in meaning from spiritual and other forms of struggle to defensive and offensive armed struggle (Al-Dawoody 2011; Rane 2009). In recent years, these concepts have come to be commonly associated with violent Islamist movements like Al Qaeda and ISIS, and have been framed by the far-right movement as examples of the 'threat' posed by Islam to Western societies (Abbas 2021; American Civil Liberties Union 2021; Wang 2017). In the context of this thesis, questions of political Islam and militancy are particularly relevant given the consistent assertions in both mass media and within academia that converts to Islam are more susceptible to extremist ideology and radicalisation than their born Muslim counterparts (Ozyurek 2009; Sealy 2017; Schuurman, Grol & Flower 2016). Despite such assertions, however, the existing scholarship has largely neglected to explore Western converts' understandings of, and perspectives on, political Islam and its associated concepts.

In order to address this deficit, this thesis sought to develop a nuanced examination of political Islam as understood by Australian converts to Islam. This chapter outlines participants' perspectives on a variety of topics, considering understandings of the nature of

the concepts of the caliphate, shariah and jihad, as well as the relationship between Islam and politics, law and conflict in a broader context. These findings build open those outlined in the previous chapter, regarding the Islamic identities and beliefs of Australian converts to Islam, addressing a key gap in the existing conversion scholarship by providing an in-depth examination of a generally overlooked aspect of Western converts' religious beliefs, and providing comparative analyses based on the variables of gender and conversion status.

Defining Political Islam

Before outlining the findings of this thesis relating to views on the relationship between Islam and politics, law and conflict, it is necessary to define political Islam and explain the ideological framework which underpins it. While different scholars have proposed and utilised different terms over the past several decades, such as Islamism, Islamic fundamentalism and Islamic totalism (which are often used interchangeably), for the purpose of clarity and consistency, this chapter primarily utilises the term 'political Islam'.

Within discussions of political Islam, it is important to be aware of the distinction between this phenomenon and the religion of Islam. Tibi explains that Islam and Islamism are not the same thing, that "there is a distinction between the faith of Islam and the religionized politics of Islamism, which employs religious symbols for political ends" (2012, vii). More specifically, the post-colonial phenomenon of political Islam has been described as a political ideology which "selectively uses the teachings of Islam to form the sets of ideas that comprise the ideology, which it reproduces as legitimate religious obligations" (Mozaffari 2007; Rane 2019, 6). In particular, these ideas revolve around political Islam's central goal of "the establishment of an Islamic state or caliphate based on the implementation of legal code called shariah" (Duderija and Rane 2019, 90). There is, however, no universally accepted definition

of political Islam/Islamism and different scholars describe this phenomenon in different ways (Martin & Barzegar 2009, 10). Shepard, for example, asserts that political Islam (or as he terms it, Islamic totalism) is "more than merely a 'religion' in the narrow sense of theological belief, private prayer and ritual worship, but also serves as a total way of life with guidance for political, economic and social behavior" (1987, 308). As the author elaborates, "commonly this takes the form of the claim that Muslims should have an "Islamic State," that is, a state in which all law is based on the Sharia" (Shepard 1987, 308). Piscatori defines Islamists as "Muslims who are committed to political action to implement what they regard as an Islamic agenda" (2002). Mozaffari's proposed definition describes political Islam (or as he deems it, Islamism) as "a religious ideology with a holistic interpretation of Islam whose final aim is the conquest of the world by all means" (2007, 21).

It should be noted that some definitions, such as that proposed by Mozaffari (2007), do appear to lack nuance in regard to the means by which political Islamists seek to achieve their objectives. For example, while Mozaffari's analysis does concede that the "use of violence is not systematic" and that "all Islamists do not use violence all the time", his core definition does not explicitly take this into account. This important distinction between violent and non-violent political Islamists will be further discussed later in this section. Overall, while there are numerous definitions of this phenomenon, political Islamists can be broadly "identified in relation to their pursuit of an Islam-based political agenda" (Rane 2019, 6).

Scholars such as Tibi (2012) have argued that through its 'invention of tradition', political Islam has centred its ideological focus on specific understandings of Islam and associated concepts which do not necessarily cohere with the foundational text of the Quran, nor the example and practice of the Prophet Muhammad. In particular, Tibi refers to political Islam's "call for a "return" to shari'a law" and the demand for a "state legal order based on shari'a" (2012, 24). Farooq and El-Ghattis (2018) assert that despite the central position which

‘shariah law’ maintains in contemporary political Islamist thought, nowhere in the Quran nor the hadith is the term ‘shariah’ mentioned in the context of a divine law or set of legal codes. Tibi explains that while *shariah* was developed by scholars and jurists as an “Islamic legal tradition” from the 8th century, this was primarily concerned with aspects of civil law and was neither a state law nor a “uniform legal code” (2012, 24). Political Islam’s contemporary fixation on the implementation of shariah as a comprehensive legal code is thus considered to be “an entirely new phenomenon within Islam, and the claim that it restores some historical institution is precisely an invention of tradition” (Tibi 2012, 25). This process of what Tibi (2012) deems the ‘Shari’atization of Islam’ was heavily influenced by Hassan al-Banna and Abu al-A`la al-Mawdudi, described as the “forefathers of contemporary political Islam”, who conceptualised shariah as an “an alternative unifying concept” for the *umma* following the collapse of the Ottoman caliphate in the early 20th century (Esposito & Shahin 2018, 5). In this context, al-Banna and Mawdudi were successful “in reproducing shari`a as a comprehensive body of laws, a way of life, guidelines for Muslims, divine legislation, a source of unity and stability for the Muslim community, and a shared worldview” (Esposito and Shahin 2018, 5).

Similar arguments have also been made in relation to the concept of the caliphate (*khilafah*) and the title of Caliph (or *khalifah*) regarding their usage and conceptualisation within the foundational text of Islam. While, over the centuries, the institution of the caliphate came to be viewed by many Muslims as the legitimate form of Islamic governance, such an institution is not mentioned within the Quran or hadith, nor was it implemented during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad or his immediate successors (Donner 2010; Rane 2019). Rane’s analysis found that “the Quran uses the term caliph not in reference to a political leader or institution but human beings in general as inheritors of, being entrusted with, the earth (Quran 6:165, 27:62 and 35:39) and to administer this trust with wisdom and justice (Quran 2:251 and 38:26) guided by revelation (Quran 2:2)” (2019, 13). Regarding the title of caliph in

the context of a political leader, there are differing perspectives on when this first came into usage. For example, Crone and Hinds (1986) assert that after the Prophet's death, his immediate successors took the title of '*khalifat rasul Allah'* – successor of the messenger of God. The authors suggest that over the following decades, this title was changed by the ruling Umayyads (r. 661-750) to become '*khalifat Allah*' (successor to God). Donner (2010), however, suggests that the title of 'caliph' did not come into usage until approximately fifty years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. According to Donner, Muhammad's immediate successors were known by the title *Amir al-Mu'mineen* (Commander of the Believers or Commander of the Faithful), with the title of caliph being applied to the early leaders retrospectively (Donner 2010). With regard to the caliphate, the notion of this political institution being "an "Islamic" religious requirement received endorsement from 11th-century scholars such as al-Marwardi" (Rane 2019), and during the post-colonial period, the notion of establishing a caliphate as a religious obligation amongst Muslims experienced a resurgence, becoming a central component of political Islamist ideology. Contrary to political Islamist thought, however, Rane suggests that, considering the available evidence, "the implication is that the idea of a caliphate as an "Islamic" political institution is an invention of Muslims after the Prophet Muhammad's time and therefore not an Islamic religious requirement" (2019, 13).

In a contemporary context, political Islam can be understood as a vast spectrum, and one which includes movements and individuals of both violent and non-violent persuasions. In this respect, Tibi (2012) identifies two broad groupings – *institutional* Islamists, and *jihadist* Islamists. As described by Tibi (2012), institutional Islamists are those who seek to achieve their objectives through democratic processes, rather than by violent means. Some examples of institutional Islamist movements include the AKP (Justice and Development Party) in Turkey, and the Ennahda Party, which became the governing party of Tunisia following the upheavals of the Arab Spring (Associated Press 2011; Rane 2019, 6). Conversely, *jihadist*

Islamists willingly utilise violence, including against civilians, in order to impose their vision of an 'Islamic state'. Examples of *jihadist* Islamists include Al Qaeda and Islamic State, and their various offshoots, who have employed "terrorism in the name of Islam to achieve their political goals" (Duderija and Rane 2019, 166). Despite the differences between institutional and jihadist Islamists in terms of the utilisation of violence, they both maintain a "radical agenda for remaking the existing political order" (Tibi 2012, 10). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a comprehensive overview of the history and complexities of political Islam and its associated concepts, it is hoped that this discussion provides sufficient context for the findings presented throughout this chapter.[45]

Converts and Political Islam

While this chapter will provide an in-depth examination of Australian converts' perspectives on key concepts associated with both political Islam and jihadism, it is worth first returning to key findings presented in the previous chapter. Through a series of questions concerned with Muslim typologies (or Islamic orientations), Chapter Six found that amongst survey participants, 17.2 percent of converts overall identified with the political Islamist typology. Identification with this typology was based upon the number of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I am a committed Muslim who believes politics is part of Islam and advocates for an Islamic state based on shariah laws". While male converts were more likely than female converts to identify with this typology, it was also found that a higher proportion of born Muslims (21.8%) than converts identified as such.

[45] More detailed analyses of the history and ideological framework of political Islam, and the concepts of the caliphate, caliph and shariah can be found in Crone and Hinds (1986); Esposito (2002); Martin and Barzegar (2010); Donner (2010); Esposito and Shahin (2018).

Relevant to the issues of Islamist extremism and jihadism, it was also found that a minority of converts (8.0 %) fell under the 'militant' typology. Identification with this typology was based upon the number of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I am a committed Muslim who believes an Islamic political order and shariah should be implemented by force if necessary." As highlighted in Chapter Six, a higher proportion of male converts than female converts fell into this category, while similar proportions of converts and born Muslims agreed/strongly agreed with this statement. While further research in this area is needed, these findings present an interesting contrast to broader assertions that Western converts to Islam are more susceptible to violence and extremism than their born Muslim counterparts (Kleinmann 2012; Schuurman, Grol and Flower 2016).

Unfortunately, there is no existing comparative data regarding the percentage of Western converts to Islam who may fall within these (or similar typologies), nor comparisons between converts and born Muslims. Goli and Rezaei's (2011) study of Muslims in Denmark does, however, provide some comparative data in the context of Western Muslims more broadly. Amongst participants in their survey, 27 percent were classified as fundamentalists, 18 percent were classified as radical Islamists, and 6 percent as militants. Beyond the context of Western nations, Achilov and Sen's (2017) survey of 53,800 Muslims in 13 Muslim-majority countries classified participants under two broad categories – those of 'politically moderate' Islamists and 'politically radical' Islamists. These categories were informed by factors such as attitudes toward political pluralism, perspectives on civil and political rights, views on shariah and secular law, and perspectives on political leadership. The authors found that amongst their participants, "75% of religious Muslims appear to support politically moderate Islam, while 25% show support for politically radical Islam" (Achilov & Sen 2017, 618).

Views on Islam, Politics and Democracy

In addition to identifying the proportion of converts who fell under the political Islamist typology, this thesis also sought to develop an in-depth understanding of converts' perspectives on various concepts, institutions and relationships associated with political Islam. A series of questions were included in the survey in order to gain insight into participants' understandings of the relationship between Islam and politics, as well as concerning the institution of the caliphate (see Table 7.1). Firstly, participants were asked if they believed that Islam advocates a particular political system. A slight majority of converts (54.6%) selected 'no', while approximately one-quarter (24.5%) said 'yes'. A further 20.9 percent selected 'don't know/unsure'. When the variable of gender was considered, it was found that male converts were more likely than females to agree with this proposition. This disparity was found to be statistically significant, with male converts being 3.829 (OR) times more likely than female converts to believe that Islam advocates a particular political system.[46] Similar gender disparities were also observed amongst born Muslims, with a higher proportion of males than females believing that Islam advocates a particular political system. These differences were, however, more pronounced amongst converts. When the responses of converts were compared to those of born Muslims, views on this issue aligned fairly closely between both groups. While a slightly higher proportion of converts than born Muslims disagreed with this proposition, this difference was not found to be statistically significant.

[46] 95% CIs, [1.813, 8.085], $p < 0.001$.

Table 7.1. Views on Islam and Politics

Statement	Female Converts	Male Converts	Total Converts	Total Born Muslims	Female Born Muslims	Male Born Muslims
"Do you believe that Islam advocates a particular political system?"						
Yes	15.0%	40.3%	24.5%	24.5%	18.6%	30.1%
No	57.0%	50.0%	54.6%	48.1%	46.6%	49.7%
Don't Know/Unsure	28.0%	9.7%	20.9%	27.4%	34.8%	20.2%
Is the caliphate (*khilafa*) a religious obligation?[47]						
Total Agree	13.0%	33.9%	20.9%	23.6%	15.8%	31.2%
Total Disagree	45.0%	38.7%	43.0%	37.5%	38.8%	36.2%
Neutral/Unsure	42.0%	27.4%	36.2%	38.9%	45.4%	32.6%

Survey participants who agreed that Islam does advocate a particular system were then presented with a follow-up question which asked about their views on the legitimacy of contemporary states which claim to be 'Islamic'. Participants were presented with a list of four options, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and asked "which of the following do you consider to be legitimate Islamic states?" Participants could also select the option of 'other' and provide a written response to this question. Response options were not mutually exclusive, and participants could select as many options as they chose. Among the forty participants who were presented with this follow-up question, small numbers believed that the states presented were "legitimately Islamic": Saudi Arabia (n=9), Iran (n=10), Pakistan (n=9), ISIS (n=9). Sixteen participants who selected the option of 'other' and provided a written

[47] Full question: "To what extent do you agree or disagree that the form of government referred to as a *khilafah*/caliphate is an Islamic religious obligation?"

response indicated that they did not believe any modern-day state was legitimately Islamic. Other countries identified in the written responses as being considered legitimately Islamic by participants included Indonesia (n=2), Malaysia (n=1), Jordan (n=1), Afghanistan (n=1), Oman (n=1), Yemen (n=1) and Mauritania (n=1).

Further considering the relationship between Islam and politics, participants were asked "to what extent do you agree or disagree that the form of government referred to as a *khilafah*/caliphate is an Islamic religious obligation?" Approximately one-fifth of converts (20.9%) strongly agreed/agreed with this statement, while approximately 40.0 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. A further 17.2 percent selected 'neither agree nor disagree', while 19.0 percent were unsure. As with the previous question, there was found to be a statistical significance in relation to gender, with male converts being 3.428 (OR) times more likely than female converts to believe that the caliphate was a religious obligation. Similarly, gender disparities were also observed amongst born Muslims, with males more likely than females to believe that the caliphate was a religious obligation.

When the variable of conversion status was taken into consideration, it was found that born Muslim survey respondents were slightly more likely to agree that the caliphate was a religious obligation (23.7%) and somewhat less likely to disagree (37.4%) with this proposition than were converts. These differences were minor, however, and were not found to be statistically significant.

Although little comparative data is currently available regarding contemporary Muslim views on this issue, limited existing research does suggest considerable support for the institution of the caliphate in some parts of the Muslim world. For example, a survey conducted by World Public Opinion in 2007 found that majorities in Pakistan (74%), Morocco (71%) and Egypt (67%) personally supported the notion of "unifying all Islamic countries into a single

Islamic state or Caliphate", while slightly less than half (49%) of respondents in Indonesia supported this goal (Kull 2007). In a Western context, a 2015 survey of British Muslims conducted by ICM for Channel 4 found that 7 percent of respondents supported the establishment of a "'Caliphate', or an Islamic state, led by a group of religious authorities under a supreme leader" (Ipsos MORI, 2018, 69). It is important to note, however, that the latter study has come under criticism regarding methodological limitations and the representativeness of the survey sample (Taylor, 2016). It should also be noted that the institution of the caliphate has been further discredited in recent years due to the conduct of ISIS (Akyol 2019).

Survey respondents were also asked for their opinion on the question "is Islam compatible with the principles of democracy?" The largest plurality (41.1%) answered "yes, completely", while a further 33.7 percent answered "mostly". Smaller numbers believed that Islam is "not very" (9.8%) or "not at all" (7.4%) compatible with democracy, with the remaining 8.0 percent being unsure. Overall, while a minority of participants expressed uncertainty, or indeed rejection, concerning the compatibility of Islam and democracy, it is important to highlight that a clear majority believe that Islam is either completely or mostly compatible with the principles of democracy.

Table 7.2 Islam and Democracy*

Are Islam and Democracy compatible?	Female Converts	Male Converts	Total Converts	Total Born Muslims
Yes, completely	44.0%	35.5%	41.1%	42.7%
Mostly	33.0%	35.5%	33.7%	39.4%
Not very	8.0%	12.9%	9.8%	5.1%
Not at all	6.0%	9.7%	7.4%	3.4%
Unsure	9.0%	6.5%	8.0%	9.4%

Question: Is Islam compatible with the principles of democracy?

Comparatively, the responses of female and male converts to these questions aligned fairly closely. While a smaller proportion of male than female converts believed that Islam and democracy were "completely" compatible (see Table 7.2), and a higher proportion of males believed that Islam was "not very" or "not at all" compatible with democracy, there was not found to be a statistically significant relationship between the variable of gender and responses to this question. When the variable of conversion status was taken into account, it was found that converts were slightly less likely than born Muslims to believe that Islam and democracy were completely or mostly compatible, though these differences were not found to be statistically significant.

Further considering perspectives on democracy, participants were asked to what extent they personally agreed or disagreed with various principles of democracy (see Table 7.3). Majorities of converts expressed agreement[48] with: freedom of religion (88.3%); equality of all people under the law (86.5%); human rights, civil liberties, and political freedoms (83.4%); the rule of law (77.9%); freedom of expression (77.9%); free and independent media (75.5%); independent judiciary (74.2%); elected political representatives (72.4%); and the separation of political and religious authorities (59.5%).

[48] Note: this includes participants who strongly agreed or agreed with the corresponding statements.

Table 7.3 Support for Democratic Principles*

Principle	Female Converts	Male Converts	Total Converts	Total Born Muslims
Freedom of Religion	86.0%	91.9%	88.3%	94.4%
Equality of all people under the law	88.0%	83.9%	86.5%	92.0%
Human rights, civil liberties, and political freedoms	84.0%	82.3%	83.4%	87.6%
The Rule of law	76.0%	80.7%	77.9%	83.4%
Freedom of expression	77.0%	79.0%	77.9%	81.2%
Free and independent media	70.0%	83.9%	75.5%	78.0%
Independent judiciary	71.0%	79.0%	74.2%	77.2%
Elected political representatives	72.0%	74.2%	72.4%	78.5%
Separation of political and religious authorities	63.0%	53.2%	59.5%	52.9%

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following principles of democracy?

With regard to gender, only minor differences were observed between the responses of female and male converts. While no statistically significant differences were found in relation to the variable of gender, it is noteworthy that of 6 out of 9 democratic principles listed, slightly higher proportions of male converts than female converts expressed agreement. This presents an interesting point of comparison with earlier findings of this thesis, which suggested that male converts were slightly less likely than females to believe that Islam and democracy were compatible, and significantly more likely to believe that Islam advocates a particular political system and that the caliphate represents a religious obligation. Future research may shed some light on gender based differences in relation to converts' perspectives on the relationship between Islam, politics and democracy.

When the variable of conversion status was considered, it was found that the responses of converts and born Muslims followed largely similar patterns, with generally minimal differences observed between the two groups. Interestingly, however, born Muslims were slightly more likely than converts to express agreement with almost all of the listed principles of democracy. The one exception here related to the separation of political and religious authorities, with which a higher proportion of converts than born Muslims expressed agreement.[49]

Shariah and Islamic Law

In addition to concepts such as the caliphate, the concept of '*shariah*' - commonly understood as Islamic law - has come to hold a dominant position within understandings of Islam in both the Muslim world and the West. Throughout the Western world, the political right has been particularly fixated on the 'threat' of *shariah* and the apparent desire of Western Muslims to enforce its implementation (Remeikis 2017; Wang 2017). It is important to note that while the term *shariah* has come to be synonymous with a concept of a divine Islamic law, the body of jurisprudence which comprises codified shariah is the result of the scholarly interpretations of Islamic jurists over the course of centuries following the death of the Prophet Muhammad (Kamali 2006, 5; El Fadl 2014). Furthermore, as Farooq and El-Ghattis (2018) observe, the term 'shariah' is not referred to within the Quran or the Prophetic traditions in the context of a divine law or legal code. Rather, references to this term are in the context of a 'path' or 'way'. Despite the man-made nature of *shariah* as a legal system, it has nevertheless come to be commonly understood by Muslims and non-Muslims as the divine or revealed law of Islam. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center found that among Muslims in 17 out of 23

[49] This disparity was not found to be statistically significant.

countries, majorities believed that shariah was the "revealed word of God", rather than being "developed by men, based on word of God" (2013). Today, a number of modern Muslim-majority nations have implemented various interpretations of 'shariah law' (Esposito & Shahin 2018; Wasti 2009), while numerous Islamist movements, of both violent and non-violent persuasions, have made the creation of an Islamic State under shariah law as one of their primary objectives (Gerges 2009, 43).

In light of these contexts, it was considered important to gain insight into the ways in which Australian converts to Islam understand and perceive the concept of shariah. In this context, the survey asked participants about their views on the nature of shariah and their desire to see the implementation or application of certain aspects of shariah law. Regarding the nature of shariah, participants were asked if they believed that this was a divine/revealed law/legal code, or the opinions and rulings of Islamic jurists. The findings here suggest that converts are divided in their understanding of this concept, with similar proportions viewing shariah as being either divine in nature (44.8%) or constructed by men (43.6%). Smaller numbers selected 'don't know/unsure' (8.6%) or 'other' (3.1%). Concerning the latter, participants who selected other were prompted to include a written response detailing their understanding of this term. Unfortunately, of the five written responses provided, none were considered sufficient for coding or analysis as they did not directly address the question.

When the variable of gender was considered, only minimal differences were observed between female and male converts. Amongst both groups, understandings of shariah were evenly divided between "divine/revealed law/legal code" and "Islamic jurists' opinions and interpretations based on the Quran and other sources". This finding represents an interesting contrast to other questions relating to political Islam and associated concepts and institutions. For example, while female and male converts displayed similar understandings of the nature of shariah, male converts were, overall, more likely to associate with politicized and legalistic

understandings of Islam in general. While it is difficult to theorise as to why this particular issue goes against broader trends, further research on this point may shed some light on how various elements of the conversion process and lived experiences, such as information seeking and learning, may shape converts understandings of various concepts associated with Islam.

Comparatively, whilst converts were evenly split on their understanding of the nature of shariah, born Muslims were more likely to understand shariah as being Islamic jurists' opinions and rulings, rather than a divine/revealed legal code. Amongst born Muslims, a slight majority (52.5%) viewed shariah as being a man-made construct, while a minority (34.8%) viewed this as a divine law. As with converts, smaller numbers selected the option of 'don't know/unsure' (9.1%) or 'other' (3.7%). For born Muslims who selected the option of 'other', 52 participants provided a written response. Among the themes that emerged from these responses, 8 understood shariah as being a combination of a divine law and the rulings/opinions of jurists, and 4 understood shariah as representing a 'way of life'. Several born Muslim participants were critical of the concept of *shariah*, with one suggesting that "there is no term in Islam called sharia law"[50] and another characterising shariah as "fairy tale laws from made-up stories in Hadith".[51]

In addition to examining participants' understandings of the nature of shariah, several survey questions were included in order to measure desire for specific aspects of classical shariah laws. These included family law, polygamy, and classical punishments (generally known as *hudud).*[52] Additionally, participants were asked about their views on their ability to practice Islam in Australia and their overall satisfaction with the Australian legal system (see Table 7.4).

[50] Survey Participant S1628
[51] Survey Participant S241
[52] Plural of '*hadd*'. This term means 'boundary/boundaries' or 'limit/limits' but is generally used in reference to offenses that have a fixed penalty in the Qur'an.

*Table 7.4. Views on Shariah by Gender**

Statement	Strongly Agree/Agree		Neither agree nor disagree/ Unsure		Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	
	Female Converts	*Male Converts*	*Female Converts*	*Male Converts*	*Female Converts*	*Male Converts*
I am content with the extent to which Muslims are currently able to practice Islam in Australia	71.0%	58.1%	13.0%	14.5%	16.0%	27.4%
	66.3%		**13.5%**		**20.2%**	
Australia's legal system upholds principles of justice and I am generally satisfied with it	63.0%	61.3%	15.0%	19.4%	22.0%	19.4%
	62.0%		**16.6%**		**21.5%**	
I would like classical shariah laws relating to family matters, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance, recognised in Australian law	29.0%	50.0%	32.0%	30.6%	39.0%	19.4%
	36.8%		**31.9%**		**31.3%**	
I would like to live in a country where polygamy (polygyny: a man marrying multiple women) is legal	11.0%	30.6%	28.0%	41.9%	61.0%	27.4%
	18.4%		**33.1%**		**48.5%**	
I would like to live in a country where classical shariah punishments are implemented	12.0%	29.0%	21.0%	22.6%	67.0%	48.4%
	18.4%		**21.5%**		**60.1%**	
Countries today that implement classical shariah laws are more just and fair than Australia	6.0%	17.7%	30.0%	25.8%	64.0%	56.5%
	10.4%		**28.2%**		**61.35%**	

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Islam and classical shariah laws in relation to Australian laws and legal system?

With respect to the last two questions, a majority of converts agreed or strongly agreed with the statements "I am content with the extent to which Muslims are currently able to practice Islam in Australia" (66.3%) and that "Australia's legal system upholds principles of justice and I am generally satisfied with it" (62.0%). Approximately one-fifth of converts disagreed or strongly disagreed with these statements, while smaller numbers were neutral or unsure.

With respect to family law, survey participants were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement "I would like classical shariah laws relating to family matters, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance, recognised in Australian law." A total of 36.8 percent of converts indicated agreement with this statement, with 31.3 percent disagreeing. A further 31.9 percent were either unsure or selected 'neither agree nor disagree'.

The topic of classical shariah punishments, or *hudud*, was also raised in this section. These punitive aspects of shariah refer to several crimes and their corresponding punishments which are referenced in the Quran and the hadith (Peters 2005). As Rane explains:

> In terms of classical Islamic thought, the six crimes for which there are specified punishments in the Quran or Prophetic traditions are: amputation of the hand of a thief (*sariqa*); death for armed or highway robbery (*hiraba*); stoning to death for adultery (*zina*); eighty lashes for slandering a woman (*qadhf*); eighty lashes for drinking alcohol (*shurb*) and death for apostasy (*irtidad*). The first four are said to be derived from the Quran and the last two from the Prophetic traditions. However, the Quran does not mention stoning as a punishment for *zina*, not does it mention a punishment for *shurb* or *irtidad* (2010, 86-87).

As Peters explains, the primary objective of the *hudud* is deterrence against "acts that are harmful to humanity" (2005, 53). Despite the harsh punishments prescribed for these offences, "a salient feature of the law of *hadd* crimes is that the doctrine has made it very difficult to obtain a conviction" (Peters 2005, 54). In a contemporary context, Rane explains that "for many Muslims, the hudud laws are an expression of God's will", and "when Muslims clamour for the implementation of shariah it is often the hudud laws to which they refer" (Rane 2010, 86).

In relation to this issue, participants were presented with the statement "I would like to live in a country where classical shariah punishments are implemented" and asked to rate their

level of agreement or disagreement. Less than one-fifth (18.4%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while a majority (60.1%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. A further 21.5 percent of participants were unsure or selected 'neither agree nor disagree'. These findings suggest that while there is a noteworthy level of uncertainty amongst converts regarding the desirability of *hudud* punishments, a clear majority of Australian converts do not wish to live in a country which implements such punishments.

Further considering views on the application of classical shariah laws, participants were presented with the statement "countries today that implement classical shariah laws are more just and fair than Australia". A clear majority of respondents rejected this statement, with 61.4 percent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Only 10.4 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while approximately 28.2% were unsure or selected to response option of 'neither agree nor disagree'.

As with other questions relating to political Islam, some noteworthy gender differences were observed concerning participants' views on shariah and its desirability. As noted earlier in this chapter, female and male converts displayed similar understandings of the nature of shariah, with both groups being evenly split on whether this construct was a divine law or the opinions and rulings of jurists. However, regarding desire for specific aspects of shariah law, male converts were more likely than females to express a desire for family-related laws to be recognised in Australia, or to live in a country where polygamy or classical shariah punishments were implemented. With respect to family law, half of male converts (50.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would like such aspects of shariah recognised in Australian law, compared to less than one-third (29.0%) of female converts. This gender disparity was found to be statistically significant, with male converts being 2.448 times (OR) more likely

than female converts to express a desire for family-related shariah laws in Australia.[53] Approximately one-third (30.6%) of male converts agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to live in a country where polygamy was legal, compared to 11.0 percent of female converts. Again, this gender disparity was found to be statistically significant, with male converts being 3.575 (OR) times more likely than female converts to express desire for polygamy.[54] A similar gender breakdown was observed concerning a desire for classical shariah punishments. In this regard, male converts were 3.000 (OR) times more likely than female converts to agree/strongly agree that they would like to live in a country which implemented classical shariah punishments.[55] These findings are reflective of a broader trend wherein male converts were more likely than females to exhibit legalistic approaches toward, and understandings of, Islam. With regard to questions about Australia's legal system and freedom to practice Islam in Australia, a higher proportion of female than male converts expressed that they were "content with the extent to which Muslims are currently able to practice Islam in Australia", while a slightly higher number of females agreed that "Australia's legal system upholds principles of justice and I am generally satisfied with it". While these differences were not found to be statistically significant, they again form part of a larger trend observed in the survey data in which male converts were more critical of Australian society and government, as well as concerning their freedom to practice Islam in Australia.

Considering the differences and commonalities between converts and born Muslim participants (see Table 7.5), the responses of both groups were observed to be fairly similar in a number of cases. For example, similar proportions of both converts and born Muslims expressed a desire to live in a country in which polygamy was legal or in which classical shariah punishments were implemented. Similar proportions also agreed or strongly agreed with the

[53] 95% CIs, [1.267, 4.733], p 0.007.
[54] 95% CIs, [1.564, 8.174], p 0.002.
[55] 95% CIs, [1.328, 6.779], p 0.007.

statement that "countries today that implement classical shariah laws are more just and fair than Australia."

Table 7.5. Views on Shariah and Australia by Conversion Status

Statement	Strongly Agree/Agree		Neither agree nor disagree/ Unsure		Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	
	Converts	***Born Muslims***	***Converts***	***Born Muslims***	***Converts***	***Born Muslims***
I am content with the extent to which Muslims are currently able to practice Islam in Australia	66.25%	75.31%	13.5%	13.3%	20.2%	11.4%
Australia's legal system upholds principles of justice and I am generally satisfied with it	62.0%	73.4%	16.6%	15.0%	21.5%	11.6%
I would like classical shariah laws relating to family matters, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance, recognised in Australian law	36.8%	54.4%	31.9%	26.9%	31.3%	18.7%
I would like to live in a country where polygamy (polygyny: a man marrying multiple women) is legal	18.4%	20.8%	33.1%	32.6%	48.5%	46.6%
I would like to live in a country where classical shariah punishments are implemented	18.4%	17.8%	21.5%	32.5%	60.1%	49.7%
Countries today that implement classical shariah laws are more just and fair than Australia	10.4%	9.4%	28.2%	30.8%	61.35%	59.8%

Some differences were, however, observed in relation to other questions. For example, a higher proportion of born Muslims (54.4%) than converts (36.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would like classical shariah laws relating to family matters to be recognised in Australian law. There was found to be a statistically significant difference in relation to this question, with born Muslims being 2.050 (OR) times more likely than converts to agree or strongly agree with this proposition.[56] It is also noteworthy that a higher proportion of born

[56] 95% CIs, [1.451, 2.894], $p < 0.001$.

Muslims than converts said that they were content with the extent to which they are able to practice Islam in Australia, or agreed with the proposition that "Australia's legal system upholds principles of justice and I am generally satisfied with it." As will be explored in further detail in later chapters, survey participants who self-identified as converts, particularly male converts, tended to be slightly more critical of Australian society and more concerned that their freedom to practice Islam in Australia was under threat. Although these differences were generally slight and were not found to be statistically significant, this trend was observed in relation to a number of questions on these issues. While further study on this topic is needed, it may be theorised that the double marginality of converts, and the potential social challenges which they face as a result, could make them feel less secure about their place in Australian society. Additional qualitative research on these issues may shed light on the complexities surrounding the relationship between conversion, religious identity and Australian national identity.

Jihad and Armed Conflict

In recent decades, the concept of jihad has become a key focus in understandings of Islam and Muslims, particularly in the context of militancy and extremism (Afsaruddin 2022; Esposito 2002). As explained by Rane, the Arabic term *jihad* means to "strive, struggle or make an effort in the broadest sense" and "refers to spiritual, charitable, intellectual, physical, humanitarian and armed struggles" (2010, 171-172). Within the Quran, the term jihad, in various grammatical forms, can be identified 35 times, with only four of these being "militant or combative" in nature (Rane 2010, 172). Contemporary analyses of the Quranic usage of the term jihad suggest that even amongst those verses which deal with armed conflict, "military jihad is prescribed only for self-defence and defence of the oppressed" (Abdel Haleem 2010, 163). Based upon his analysis of the Quran, Al-Dawoody concluded that "apart from defense

against military aggression, the religious persecution of Muslims and the need to secure freedom of religion, there is no text in the Qur'ān that supports force of arms, let alone for the purpose of compelling others to accept Islam" (2011, 68). Indeed, Qur'anic verses such as Q2:256 and Q10:99 expressly command there be no compulsion in religion. Over time, however, jihad has come to be understood in increasingly aggressive contexts, in some cases as a violent struggle to be waged in order to spread Islam and fight against non-Muslims (Rane 2019, 13-14).[57] In recent years, the concept of jihad as a 'holy war' has become prominent amongst both Muslims and non-Muslims, a development which has arguably been driven, to a certain extent, by terrorist movements such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State justifying their violent actions, including the attacking of civilians and non-combatants, as acts of 'jihad' (Gerges 2021; Roy 2017; Thayer & Hudson 2010, 42). In light of claims that converts to Islam are over-represented amongst Western jihadists, it was considered crucial to gain insight into how Australian converts understand this term.

Survey participants were asked several questions regarding their understanding of the term jihad (see Table 7.6), as well as concerning the use of violence and armed conflict within Islam more broadly. In respect to the concept of jihad, respondents were asked "what is your understanding of the term jihad according to how it is used in the Quran and in the example of the Prophet Muhammad?" A majority of converts (66.3%) understood this as "to strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including armed struggle in self-defence only", with a minority (22.7%) understanding this as "to strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including defensive and offensive armed struggle". A further 3.7 percent of participants were unsure. Participants were also able to select 'other' and provide a written response to this question. Twelve participants (7.4%) selected this option, with eleven

[57] A more detailed examination of the Quranic usage of the term 'jihad' can be found in Haleem (2010), while Esposito (2002) examines the utilisation of term in the context of contemporary Islamic extremism; a more detailed examination of the historical evolution of understandings of jihad can be found in Rane (2010).

providing a definition or understanding divergent from the definitions offered. Of the twelve respondents, eight participants (4.9% of all converts) expressed a belief that jihad referred to an internal or spiritual struggle only, while one participant defined the Quranic usage of jihad as "to strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including armed struggle in self-defence and to free others from invasion and oppression."[58]

Table 7.6. Understandings of Jihad*

Jihad means…	Female Converts	Male Converts	Total Converts	Total Born Muslims
…to strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including armed struggle in self-defence only	70.0%	59.7%	66.3%	68.7%
…to strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including defensive and offensive armed struggle	21.0%	25.8%	22.7%	18.0%
Unsure	4.0%	3.2%	3.7%	8.8%
Other	5.0%	11.3%	7.4%	4.5%

Question: What is your understanding of the term jihad according to how it is used in the Quran and in the example of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)?

Considering the variable of gender, a higher proportion of female (70.0%) than male (59.7%) converts believed jihad to include armed struggle in the context of self-defence only, while a slightly higher proportion of male converts believed that jihad included armed conflict in the context of both self-defence *and* offensive armed struggle. These differences were not found to be statistically significant.

Concerning the differences between converts and born Muslims, only minimal differences were observed in the responses to this question, with converts slightly less likely to view jihad as including armed struggle in self-defence only, and slightly more likely to view

[58] Survey Participant S545

jihad as including armed struggle in both defensive and offensive contexts. These differences were not found to be statistically significant.

It is worth noting that, as raised within one focus group, there may have been some confusion amongst respondents concerning the specific definitions of "offensive" armed struggle. For example, one focus group participant questioned if this may have been understood by some as involving armed struggle to overcome oppression – an element which is identified by some scholars as being one of the 'higher objectives' of jihad. Indeed, several born Muslim participants expressed such views within their survey responses, with one participant describing their understanding of jihad as being to "strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including armed struggle in self defence and stuggle (sic) against oppression of innocent people" (Participant S2792). Future research on this issue may thus benefit from the provision of explicit definitions of key terms in order to avoid potential confusion amongst participants and provide more clarity on the findings.

In addition to their understanding of the term jihad, survey respondents were also asked about their understanding of attitudes towards armed conflict within Islam, specifically in relation to civilians and non-combatants (Table 7.7). When asked "in relation to armed conflict, what is your understanding of how Islam regards civilians/non-combatants?, an overwhelming majority (81.6%) of converts believed that "Islam never permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants". A minority of respondents (6.8%) believed that "Islam sometimes permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants", while 3.1 percent believed that "Islam generally permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants". A further 8.6 percent of respondents were unsure or did not know.

Table 7.7. Views on Armed Conflict*

Statement	Female Converts	Male Converts	Total Converts	Born Muslims
Islam never permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants	81.0%	82.3%	81.6%	90.9%
Islam sometimes permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants	6.0%	8.1%	6.8%	3.4%
Islam generally permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants	4.0%	1.6%	3.1%	0.5%
Don't Know/Unsure	9.0%	8.1%	8.6%	5.2%

Question: In relation to armed conflict, what is your understanding of how Islam regards civilians/non-combatants?

In considering the variable of gender in responses to this question, only minimal differences were observed between male and female participants, none of which were found to be statistically significant. These results indicate that while there are some comparative gender differences in regard to certain concepts such as jihad, female and male converts hold largely similar views when it comes to the permissibility in Islam of armed conflict against civilians and non-combatants.

Considering the differences between converts and born Muslims, some slight variations were observed in participant understandings of this issue (see Table 7.7). Overall, born Muslim respondents were slightly more likely to express the view that Islam never permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants, while convert respondents were slightly more likely to believe that Islam "sometimes" or "generally" permits such tactics. Converts were also somewhat more likely than born Muslims to be unsure in their understanding of this issue. While the aforementioned disparities may warrant further investigation, these differences were not found to be statistically significant and, overall, these findings still suggest that Australian converts overwhelmingly reject the notion that violence against civilians is ever permissible within Islam.

Further considering perspectives on armed conflict, survey participants were asked about their views on martyrdom in relation to attacks on civilian targets. While the concepts of martyrdom and self-sacrifice within Islam are full of complexities and have historically manifested in different ways, contemporary jihadist groups have utilised tactics such as suicide bombings against civilians, in the name of jihad and in pursuit of martyrdom and its purported heavenly rewards (Maher 2016, 40; Thayer & Hudson 2010, 42).

In order to gain some insight into Australian converts' perspectives on these issues, survey participants were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement that "someone who dies attacking innocent civilians is *not* a martyr (*shaheed*)." An overwhelming majority of converts were in agreement with this statement, with 81.6 percent strongly agreeing and a further 11.0 percent agreeing. A small minority either disagreed (1.2%) or strongly disagreed (1.8%) with this statement. Convert responses to this question were largely consistent with those of born Muslims, although born Muslims were slightly more likely to agree with the statement and slightly less likely to disagree. However, these differences were not found to be statistically significant. Regarding the variable of gender, only minimal differences were observed between the perspectives of female and male converts. Female converts were slightly more likely to express agreement with this statement, while male converts were slightly more likely to express neutrality, uncertainty or disagreement. Once again, these differences were not found to be statistically significant.

While no direct comparative data is available regarding this question, research on Western Muslim communities has found widespread opposition to suicide bombing and violence against civilians in the name of Islam. For example, a study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2006) found that majorities believed such actions were never justified, including 83% in Germany, 70% in Britain, 69% in Spain and 64% in France. Additionally, a

2011 survey of Muslim Americans found that 81 percent of respondents believed that suicide bombing and other violence against civilians for the purpose of defending Islam was never justified (Pew Research Center 2011).

Overall, these findings suggest that despite some slight differences in relation to gender and conversion status, Muslim Australians overwhelmingly reject the notion that one who dies attacking civilians should be considered a martyr. This adds further support to other findings presented in this chapter which demonstrate that a majority of Muslim Australians (both converts and born Muslims) do not adhere to interpretations or understandings of Islam which support violence and the targeting of civilians in the name of their religion.

Engaging with Non-Muslims

In addition to examining participants' perspectives and understandings of the caliphate, shariah and jihad, the survey also sought to gain insight into participant views on other concepts linked to certain forms of political Islam, such as Salafism and Wahhabism. One of the key concepts considered here relates to contemporary Salafist perspectives on the permissibility of engagement with non-Muslims. As Shavit explains, the doctrine of *al-walāʾ wa-al-barā* (loyalty and disavowal) advocated by contemporary Salafists asserts that "God and His Prophet commanded the believers to reserve their love and friendship for Muslims and to disassociate themselves from infidels, despise them and avoid imitating their beliefs and customs" (2014, 67). Shavit further explains that "the concept has evolved to become a pillar of the salafī approach, justifying its call to minimize Muslim interactions with non-Muslims as well as to curtail the integration of Western norms into Muslim societies" (2014, 67). The concept has become problematic in the context of Muslim communities in Western societies, where the

notion of 'loyalty and disavowal' has "proliferated in Western mosques and on internet portals, promoting an anti-integration agenda" (Shavit 2014, 68). For Western converts who accept such a concept, the implication is that positive relations with non-Muslim family members and trends is forbidden. Despite suggestions that Salafism has become an increasingly popular form of Islam amongst Western converts (Duderija and Rane 2019, 157), only minimal research to date has sought to understand the ways in which this particular concept is perceived and accepted by converts. Shanneik's study of female converts in Ireland, however, did find that participants exhibited a "need to detach and separate themselves from the majority of society and from other Muslims with a different understanding of Islam" (2012, 177). While participants there did not explicitly mention the concept of *al-wala wa-al-bara*, this type of social behaviour appears consistent with the Salafist ideal of 'loyalty and disavowal'.

In order to gain insight into converts' perspectives on the permissibility of relations with non-Muslims, the survey presented participants with a series of statements and asked "which of the following statements is closest to what you think about engaging with non-Muslims as family, friends, colleagues and in general social interactions?" An overwhelming majority of converts (89.6%) said that engaging with non-Muslims is normal and good, while 9.2 percent believed that such interaction should be done primarily in the pursuit of da'wah (proselytizing). Only 2 converts (1.2%) believed that engagement with non-Muslims was discouraged in Islam, and no participants believed that such engagement was forbidden.

Table 7.8. Views on Engaging with Non-Muslims*

Statement	Female Converts	Male Converts	Total Converts	Total Born Muslims
Engaging with non-Muslims is normal and good	89.0%	90.3%	89.6%	92.7%
Engaging with non-Muslims should be primarily done for da'wah (to spread Islam)	10.0%	8.1%	9.2%	5.1%
Engaging with non-Muslims is discouraged in Islam and should be kept to a minimum	1.0%	1.6%	1.2%	0.8%
Engaging with non-Muslims is forbidden in Islam and should be avoided	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
Don't know/Unsure	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%

Question: Which of the following statements is closest to what you think about engaging with non-Muslims as family, friends, colleagues and in general social interactions?

When the variable of gender was considered, only minimal differences were observed between the responses of female and male converts, none of which were found to be statistically significant. Clear majorities of both female converts (89.0%) and male converts (90.3%) believed that engaging with non-Muslims was normal and good, while similarly small numbers believed that such engagement should be done primarily for proselytizing. Minimal numbers of both groups felt that engagement with non-Muslims was discouraged in Islam, while no female or male converts believed that this was forbidden.[59] Only minimal differences were observed in relation to conversion status, with similar proportions of converts and born Muslims viewing engagement with non-Muslims as normal and good.[60] Overall, these findings suggest that amongst all survey respondents, there is little support for doctrines like *al-walāʾ wa-al-barā* which seek to prohibit positive relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.

[59] These minor disparities were not found to be statistically significant.
[60] These minor disparities were not found to be statistically significant.

Views on Muslim-Majority Nations

In light of developments in recent decades which have witnessed some Muslim-majority nations jockeying for influence throughout the Muslim world, and the efforts of some nations to propagate specific interpretations of Islam (Rane 2019), the survey sought to gain insight into how participants viewed a number of such countries. Participants were presented with a list of eight (8) Muslim-majority nations, and asked to rate "in your opinion, what impact have the following countries had on the understanding and practice of Islam among Muslims in general over the past few decades?" As explained by Rane *et al.*, the eight countries selected for inclusion were chosen due to the fact that they "are active in education about Islam, with prominent Islamic educational institutions, and influential in respect to the global image of Islam" (2020). Amongst participants, the least favourably viewed countries were the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan, while the most favourably viewed countries were Malaysia, Turkey and Indonesia (see Table 7.9).

It is noteworthy that, of the countries listed, none were viewed in a 'positive' or 'very positive' light by a majority of converts overall, while notable pluralities described their views on these countries as 'neutral'. Additionally, a number of participants expressed uncertainty regarding these countries and their impact on Islam and Muslims. Among the eight countries listed, participants were most uncertain about Morocco. When the variable of conversion status was considered, it was found that the responses of converts and born Muslims aligned quite closely. Amongst both groups, Malaysia, Turkey and Indonesia were the most favourably viewed countries, with the least favourably viewed countries being Saudi Arabia and Iran. Some minor differences were observed, although these were not found to be statistically significant. For example, while no country was viewed positively by a majority of converts, slight majorities of born Muslims viewed Malaysia (53.9%) and Turkey (53.3%) positively.

Table 7.9. Views on Muslim-Majority Nations*[61]

Country	Total Positive		Total Negative		Neutral/ Unsure	
	Converts	***Born Muslims***	***Converts***	***Born Muslims***	***Converts***	***Born Muslims***
Egypt	12.9%	15.7%	39.3%	37.3%	44.2%	43.1%
Indonesia	30.1%	37.4%	24.5%	13.2%	41.7%	45.6%
Iran	9.8%	9.8%	55.8%	51.5%	30.1%	34.9%
Malaysia	44.2%	53.9%	13.5%	5.8%	38.7%	36.6%
Morocco	28.8%	25.5%	4.9%	6.5%	62.6%	64.2%
Pakistan	14.7%	18.3%	52.2%	37.3%	29.5%	40.5%
Qatar	19.6%	29.5%	21.5%	17.8%	55.2%	48.8%
Saudi Arabia	8.6%	13.8%	69.3%	61.8%	18.4%	18.3%
Turkey	42.3%	53.3%	17.8%	11.1%	36.2%	31.7%

Question: In your opinion, what impact have the following countries had on the understanding and practice of Islam among Muslims in general over the past few decades?

With respect to the variable of gender, the responses of female and male converts were also observed to follow similar patterns in most cases (see Table 7.10), although some noteworthy differences were observed. In particular, male converts exhibited comparatively higher positive views of the South East Asian nations of Indonesia and Malaysia, while female converts were more likely to be neutral or uncertain about these countries. These gender disparities were found to be statistically significant, with male converts being 2.143 (OR) times more likely than female converts to view Indonesia positively,[62] and 2.500 (OR) times more likely to view Malaysia positively.[63] While it is difficult to theorize the reasons behind such a disparity, it is worth considering research which has found that some male converts to Islam have identified travel to South East Asia, and marriage to local Muslim women, as contributing factors to their decision to convert to Islam (Mitchell and Rane 2018).

[61] As this question was classified as optional and not mandatory, a small number of participants did not provide a response. The 'no answer' responses are not included in this table.
[62] 95% CIs, [1.074, 4.275], p 0.029.
[63] 95% CIs, [1.290, 4.844], p 0.006.

Further considering the differences between female and male converts in this regard, it was also observed that male converts were more likely than female converts to hold negative views of the country of Egypt, while a higher proportion of female converts were neutral or unsure. Here, there was found to be a statistically significant difference in relation to the variable of gender, with male converts being 3.234 times (OR) more likely than female converts to view Egypt in a negative manner.[64] Similar patterns were also observed in relation to Morocco, Pakistan and Qatar, though to a lesser extent which was not found to be statistically significant. While this topic was not discussed within the focus groups, future research may shed some light on the factors which influence converts' perspectives on various Muslim-majority nations and their impact on Islam and Muslims.

Table 7.10. Converts' Views on Muslim-Majority Nations by Gender

Country	Total Positive		Total Negative		Neutral/ Unsure	
	Female Converts (n=96)[65]	***Male Converts (n=60)[66]***	***Female Converts***	***Male Converts***	***Female Converts***	***Male Converts***
Egypt	17.7%	5.0%	30.2%	58.3%	52.1%	38.3%
Indonesia	25.0%	41.7%	27.1%	21.7%	47.9%	38.3%
Iran	7.3%	15.0%	58.3%	58.3%	33.3%	26.7%
Malaysia	27.1%	60.0%	13.5%	13.3%	49.0%	26.7%
Morocco	26.0%	36.7%	4.2%	6.7%	69.8%	56.7%
Pakistan	13.5%	18.3%	54.2%	55.0%	32.3%	26.7%
Qatar	18.8%	23.3%	24.0%	40.0%	57.3%	56.7%
Saudi Arabia	9.4%	8.3%	63.0%	75.0%	20.8%	16.7%
Turkey	41.7%	48.3%	13.5%	26.7%	44.8%	25.0%

[64] 95% CIs, [1.650, 6.341], $p < 0.001$.
[65] A total of 96 out of 100 female converts provided a response to this question. Those participants who did not respond to the question have been excluded from this table.
[66] A total of 60 out of 62 male converts provided a response to this question. Those participants who did not respond to the question have been excluded from this table.

Overall, it is worth noting that nations which may be characterised as democratic to varying degrees tended to be viewed more favourably by participants, while authoritarian states espousing more 'extreme' interpretations of Islam were viewed less favourably. For example, the countries which were most positively viewed by converts – Turkey, Malaysia and Indonesia – are all considered to be at least partly democratic nations. According to the 2020 Democracy Index, Turkey is considered to be a 'hybrid regime',[67] while Malaysia and Indonesia are classified as flawed democracies.[68] Conversely, Saudi Arabia and Iran - the most negatively viewed countries – are both classified as authoritarian states[69] (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2021). Other factors may have also influenced participants' perceptions of some nations. For example, as Rane *et al.* suggest, Saudi Arabia's "role in promoting Islamist-jihadism and Wahhabism associated with groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS" (2020, 16), as well as Saudi involvement in the Yemeni civil war, which have led to allegations of war crimes (Human Rights Watch 2019), the highly publicised murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and the Kingdom's history of civil and human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch 2021) may have also contributed to the overwhelmingly negative perceptions of the country amongst participants (Rane *et al.* 2020).

[67] According to the Democracy Index, hybrid regimes are characterised as follows: "Elections have substantial irregularities that often prevent them from being both free and fair. Government pressure on opposition parties and candidates may be common. Serious weaknesses are more prevalent than in flawed democracies—in political culture, functioning of government and political participation. Corruption tends to be widespread and the rule of law is weak. Civil society is weak. Typically, there is harassment of and pressure on journalists, and the judiciary is not independent" (Economist Intelligence Unit 2021, 57).

[68] According to the Democracy Index, flawed democracies are characterised as follows: "These countries also have free and fair elections and, even if there are problems (such as infringements on media freedom), basic civil liberties are respected. However, there are significant weaknesses in other aspects of democracy, including problems in governance, an underdeveloped political culture and low levels of political participation" (Economist Intelligence Unit 2021, 57).

[69] According to the Democracy Index, authoritarian regimes are characterised as follows: "In these states, state political pluralism is absent or heavily circumscribed. Many countries in this category are outright dictatorships. Some formal institutions of democracy may exist, but these have little substance. Elections, if they do occur, are not free and fair. There is disregard for abuses and infringements of civil liberties. Media are typically state-owned or controlled by groups connected to the ruling regime. There is repression of criticism of the government and pervasive censorship. There is no independent judiciary" (Economist Intelligence Unit 2021, 57).

Conclusion

This chapter has examined participants' views and understandings of the relationship between Islam, politics, law, and conflict – complex and important issues often associated with the phenomenon of political Islam. Overall, it was found that only a minority of participants fell under the typology of political Islamist, while varying degrees of support were observed in relation to concepts and institutions associated with political Islam. In the context of politics, a majority of participants rejected the notions that Islam advocates a particular political system, and that the institution of the caliphate represents a religious obligation for Muslims. Furthermore, the findings suggest that a majority believe in the compatibility of Islam and democracy, and are supportive of many key democratic principles. Concerning the concept of shariah, commonly known as 'Islamic law', participants were divided on whether this was a divine legal code or a man-made construct. While there was no unanimity regarding the nature of shariah, a majority of participants nevertheless rejected the notion of living in a country where various aspects of such a system were implemented, nor expressed a desire for aspects of classical shariah laws to be implemented in Australia. Finally, in the context of jihad, a clear majority of participants understood this to involve armed struggle in the context of self-defence only, rather than offensive armed struggle. A majority of converts also rejected notions that Islam permits violence against civilians and that individuals who die while attacking civilians can be considered martyrs.

Regarding the variable of gender, a comparative analysis of female and male converts provides some further support for the notion that amongst Australian Muslim converts, males display a greater tendency than females to understand Islam in politicized and legalistic ways. This was particularly evident in relation to a belief that Islam advocates a specific political system, a belief that the institution of the caliphate represents a religious obligation for Muslims, and the desire for certain aspects of shariah law. These findings build upon those

outlined in previous chapters, which highlighted that male converts were more likely than females to fall under ‘legalist’, ‘political Islamist’ and ‘militant’ orientations or typologies. Considering the variable of conversion status, a comparative analysis of converts and born Muslims found generally minimal differences between these two groups. Overall, these findings suggest that while there is less agreement in some areas than in others, converts overwhelmingly understand Islam in ways that embrace or accept the principles of democracy and reject violence and armed conflict in the name of their religion.

CHAPTER 8: CONVERTS AND SOCIETY

Overview

When examining the phenomenon of religious conversion, it is essential to not only consider internal processes of change and identity construction, but also the ways in which conversion is influenced by, and impacts upon, broader social dynamics and relationships. As highlighted in Chapter Two, the decision to embrace Islam often results in significant changes to converts' social identities and existing relationships, while also leading to the construction and maintenance of new social connections and networks.

This chapter examines various aspects of the relationship between converts and society, considering converts' sense of social connection and belonging in a number of key social contexts, their perspectives on various social issues, and their levels of trust in social institutions. In doing so, this chapter provides a valuable contribution to the conversion scholarship by expanding upon existing knowledge of Australian converts to Islam and their social identities and experiences, and addressing key gaps in the literature through comparative analyses of male and female converts, as well as between converts and born Muslims.

Social Connection and Belonging

As Chapter Five highlighted, self-other relations represented the most difficult post-conversion challenges experienced by participants. While a number of qualitative studies have explored the various social obstacles and challenges associated with the conversion process (Woodlock 2010; Moosavi 2015), quantitative data regarding converts' social experiences remains limited. In order to address this gap in existing knowledge and to gain a more thorough understanding of participants' social identity and experience, a series of questions were included in the survey in which respondents were asked to rate their feelings of social connection and belonging in

relation to a range of social groups and contexts. This included the contexts of family, friends, the Muslim community and wider Australian society, among others. Participant responses are outlined in Table 8.1, which also includes a comparative breakdown based on gender.

Table 8.1. Converts' Social Connection by Gender[70]

Social Group/ Context	Very Strong/Strong		Moderate		Weak/Very Weak	
	Female Converts	***Male Converts***	***Female Converts***	***Male Converts***	***Female Converts***	***Male Converts***
Family and Friends	59.0%	74.2%	26.0%	17.7%	13.0%	6.5%
	65.0%		**22.7%**		**10.4%**	
Muslim Community	40.0%	43.6%	28.0%	41.9%	31.0%	14.5%
	41.1%		**33.7%**		**24.5%**	
School/University/ Workplace	31.0%	35.5%	25.0%	27.4%	17.0%	17.7%
	33.1%		**25.8%**		**17.2%**	
Local Mosque	22.0%	38.7%	24.0%	40.3%	44.0%	19.4%
	28.8%		**30.1%**		**34.4%**	
Wider Australian Society	28.0%	24.2%	37.0%	46.8%	31.0%	27.4%
	27.0%		**40.5%**		**29.5%**	
Neighbourhood	25.0%	27.4%	35.0%	38.7%	38.0%	27.4%
	26.4%		**36.2%**		**33.7%**	
Australian Political System	17.0%	11.3%	31.0%	29.0%	47.0%	54.8%
	14.7%		**30.1%**		**50.3%**	
Sporting/Social Clubs	11.0%	12.9%	14.0%	19.4%	36.0%	29.0%
	12.3%		**16.0%**		**33.1%**	

****Question: In relation to the following social groups/contexts, how strongly do you feel involved, connected and a sense of belonging?***

Overall, converts reported the highest levels of connection and belonging in the context of family and friends. In this context, 65.0 percent rated their level of connection as strong or very strong, while a further 22.7 percent rated their connection as moderate. A minority of 10.4 percent rated their sense of connection in this context as weak or very weak. Following friends and family, the highest proportion of converts reported strong or very strong levels of connection to the Muslim community (41.1%), school/university/workplace (33.1%) and the

[70] "Unsure" and "Not applicable" responses are not included in this table.

local mosque (28.8%). These were followed by wider Australian society (27.0%), their neighbourhood (26.4%) and the Australian political system (14.7%).

The lowest level connection was reported in relation to sporting/social clubs, where only 12.3 percent reported a strong or very strong connection. This low level of connection may be due to a limited number of participants being involved in such clubs, with the highest plurality of converts (38.7%) selecting the response options of 'unsure' or 'not applicable'.

When comparative analyses were conducted based on gender and conversion status, several interesting findings were revealed. In relation to gender (see Table 8.1), female converts were found to report weaker levels of social connection and belonging than their male counterparts in most contexts. This included family and friends, the Muslim community and the mosque. The two exceptions in this regard were wider Australian society and the Australian political system, where female converts reported minimally higher levels of connectivity compared to male converts. Gender differences in social connection and belonging will be explored in more detail throughout this chapter.

When the variable of conversion status was taken into account, converts were observed to report lower levels of social connection and belonging than born Muslims in almost all contexts, including family and friends (see Table 8.2). The only exceptions to this trend were observed in regard to wider Australian society, where a minimally higher proportion of converts rated their connection and strong/very strong, and in relation to the Australian political system, where similar proportions of both converts (14.7%) and born Muslims (14.7%) rated their connection as strong or very strong. In both cases, however, converts were also slightly more likely to rate their connection as being weak or very weak. These differences will be explored in more detail throughout this chapter.

Table 8.2. Social Connection by Conversion Status[71]

Social Group/ Context	Very Strong/Strong		Moderate		Weak/Very Weak	
	Converts	***Born Muslims***	***Converts***	***Born Muslims***	***Converts***	***Born Muslims***
Family and Friends	65.0%	83.4%	22.7%	13.1%	10.4%	2.5%
	80.4%		**14.6%**		**3.7%**	
Muslim Community	41.1%	47.4%	33.7%	34.9%	24.5%	16.5%
	46.3%		**34.7%**		**17.7%**	
School/University/ Workplace	33.1%	47.9%	25.8%	30.9%	17.2%	13.1%
	45.5%		**30.0%**		**13.6%**	
Local Mosque	28.8%	40.2%	30.1%	32.2%	34.4%	24.5%
	38.3%		**31.8%**		**25.9%**	
Wider Australian Society	27.0%	25.1%	40.5%	44.0%	29.5%	26.9%
	25.3%		**43.4%**		**27.2%**	
Neighbourhood	26.4%	29.2%	36.2%	40.4%	33.7%	28.9%
	28.6%		**39.7%**		**29.6%**	
Australian Political System	14.7%	14.7%	30.1%	31.9%	50.3%	45.7%
	14.7%		**31.6%**		**46.3%**	
Sporting/Social Clubs	12.3%	24.0%	16.0%	28.6%	33.1%	28.2%
	22.0%		**26.6%**		**28.9%**	

Family and Friends

As highlighted above, converts reported the highest level of connectivity and belonging in relation to family and friends. In this context, 65.0 percent reported having a strong or very strong sense of connection, 22.7 percent rated this as moderate and 3.7 percent rated this as weak or very weak. In terms of gender (see Table 8.1), male converts were somewhat more likely than female converts to say their connection to friends and family was strong or very strong and less likely to rate this as weak or very weak. For example, 59.0 percent of female converts rated their connection to family and friends as either strong or very strong, compared to 74.2 percent of male converts. Additionally, double the proportion of female (13.0%) than male (6.5%) converts rated their connection in this context as weak or very weak. While these differences were not found to be statistically significant, they were observed as part of a wider

[71] "Unsure" and "Not applicable" responses are not included in this table.

trend of female converts reporting weaker levels of connection and belonging than males in most social contexts. When this topic was raised within the focus groups, participants did not express surprise. Some felt that amongst non-Muslim Australians, the conversion of a male may be considered more socially acceptable than that of a female. The question of a convert's 'visibility' as a Muslim was also raised, particularly the gendered nature of clothing and appearance, and the ways in which this may be challenging for converts' family members and friends. In the words of one focus group participant (a born Muslim):

> I think for women in particular, it can be quite hard. Because if you are a male convert, not many people know unless you tell them you are unless you tell them you're a convert. But if you're female, and you decide to wear the hijab, you become more visible. And I think it makes it harder for you to reconnect with your friends and family members. And especially for family members, they are confronted by your physical appearance as well. (Canberra, Participant 4).

These views were also reinforced by another (born Muslim) focus group participant, who recounted discussions she had had with female friends who had converted to Islam. This participant suggested that the desire of some female converts to adopt forms of clothing such as the *niqab*[72] often led to difficulties with non-Muslim family members who disagreed with their choices. In the words of this participant:

> I think most of them (female converts) want to adopt…a lot of women wear niqab actually. And I used to wear niqab for seven years and I had a lot of female, white, Caucasian, blonde hair, blue eyed friends (converts) who a lot of them wore niqab. Yep. And that's going to really put a target on their back and that is totally going to antagonize their family. This female friend I was talking about earlier, she had such a huge fight with her family over Christmas times and birthdays and how you're raising your kids and changing your name. I feel that women are going to cop a lot of flak a lot more than…if a man converts to Islam. "Well done. You've stopped drinking alcohol. And you can pick up a couple more wives"…there's a few more advantages there. (Perth, Participant 1).

[72] A veil which covers the head and face, though not the eyes.

As existing research has found, while many converts face ongoing challenges from family members regarding their decision to embrace Islam, in some cases this decision can lead to permanent alienation from loved ones (Mitchell and Rane 2018). While these situations were not specifically raised by converts who participated in the survey or focus group sessions, one born Muslim focus group participant explained that they had observed this occurring a number of times:

> [Converts] often will have issues with their own families. So, they may find that their families disown them, and I've met in my lifetime, lots of people who, amazingly…wonderful women, and men…who basically said, "I'm going to convert" and you know, families just basically disown them. (Canberra, Participant 8).

When the variable of conversion status was taken into account, it was observed that born Muslims reported a higher level of social connection and belonging than did converts. Amongst born Muslims, 83.4 percent expressed a strong or very strong sense of connection to family and friends, compared to 65.0 percent of converts. Additionally, 2.5 percent of born Muslims rated their level of connection as weak or very weak, compared to 10.4 percent of converts. While these differences were not found to be statistically significant, they were observed to be part of a broader trend, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, wherein born Muslims tended to express higher levels of social connectivity than converts in almost all areas. Within the specific context of family and friends, it is worth reiterating earlier findings from Chapter Five of this thesis, where a large number of converts indicated that they had encountered challenges relating to the attitudes and reactions of family and friends during the post-conversion period. Due to these challenges regarding the reactions of loved ones to the conversion process, which have been well documented elsewhere (see, for example, Brice 2010; Mitchell and Rane 2018), it is perhaps unsurprising that some converts would report feeling less connected in this regard. These findings do, however, further highlight the potential

for converts to face increased risk of social marginalisation and isolation due to their decision to convert to Islam.

Australian Society

In addition to relations with family and friends, convert experiences with segments of wider society can often prove challenging to navigate, with existing studies highlighting the hostility and negativity which many converts encounter following their adoption of Islam (Alam 2018; Jensen 2008; Moosavi 2015). In the context of wider Australian society, slightly more than one-quarter (27.0%) of converts rated their sense of connection as strong or very strong, while a further 40.5 percent rated this as moderate. When the variable of conversion status was considered, it was observed that similar proportions of converts and born Muslims rated their sense of connection and belonging as strong or very strong, with similar findings also observed in the context of the Australian political system.

Interestingly, female converts reported slightly higher levels of social connection than males in the contexts of wider Australian society and the Australian political system, representing a shift from the broader trend in other social contexts wherein male converts were more likely to report higher levels of social connection and belonging. However, the differences observed here were minimal and not found to be statistically significant, indicating that despite the slightly higher proportion of female converts having experienced difficulties regarding the reactions of wider society, this does not appear to have had a significant impact on their perceived sense of connection and belonging to wider Australian society.

It is important to note, however, that slightly under one-third of converts overall (29.5%) rated their connection to wider Australian society as being weak or very weak. Additionally, as was highlighted in Chapter Five of this thesis, slightly under one-quarter (22.7%) of survey participants expressed that since converting to Islam, they had encountered

a great deal of difficulty regarding the reactions of the general Australian public, while a further 38.7 percent had experienced 'some difficulty'. These findings suggest that for a substantial number of converts, navigating relations with wider society is a particularly challenging aspect of the post-conversion period. When this topic was raised in the focus groups, one (born Muslim) participant recounted personal discussions with a female convert friend. In the words of this participant:

> And I have one particular friend, her voice jumped into my head, to answer your question…connection to wider Australian society. She says we're considered traitors. We're traitors to our own kind. (Perth, Participant 1).

Several studies have provided in-depth explorations of the complex dynamics and tensions between conversion and national/cultural identity. Scholars such as Soutar (2010) suggest that for some non-Muslim segments of Western societies, the act of conversion can be viewed as one of rebellion and rejection of the dominant, non-Muslim society. As such, Western converts to Islam may be viewed as 'traitors' to their countries due to a perceived incompatibility between 'Western' and Islamic values and identity. While both the present study and other research on the social dynamics of conversion to Islam provide key insight into certain aspects of this complex issue, further research on these experiences in a specifically Australian context may further develop understandings of not only the relationship between conversion and social identity, but also concerning the strategies implemented by converts to navigate the associated challenges.

In addition to asking participants about their sense of connection and belonging in the context of wider Australian society, the survey also included questions relating to participants' views on religious freedoms. Specifically, participants were asked if they believed that their freedom to practice Islam in Australia was currently under threat. Approximately one-third of converts (33.1%) either agreed or strongly agreed that it was, while 44.8 percent disagreed or

strongly disagreed. Comparatively, 26.5 percent of born Muslims agreed or strongly agreed with this notion, while 47.1 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. Overall, these disparities were minimal and no statistically significant differences were observed in relation to conversion status.

In order to gain insight into the reasoning behind participant responses to this question, those who agreed or strongly agreed were asked to provide a written response, explaining why they felt that their freedom to practice Islam in Australia was threatened. As Rane *et al.* (2020) observe, in most cases the specific concerns expressed by participants in relation to this question appear to relate more to general examples of perceived Islamophobia and discrimination, rather than a particular threat to freedom of religion. Additionally, a number of female converts pointed to hostility and abuse which they had experienced and felt was linked to their 'visibility' as Muslims. In the words of one female survey participant:

> To fully practice my faith I need to wear the hijab, however, Islam does make allowances for women over a certain age not to wear the Hijab. I feel society alienation and discrimination at taking such a visible sign of me faith (Participant S2721).

This sentiment was echoed by other female participants who outlined discrimination and abuse that they had encountered from segments of wider Australian society as a result of their decision to adopt forms of clothing such as the *hijab*, *abaya* and *niqab*. In some cases, experiences of discrimination and Islamophobia had led participants to conceal their religious identity. As explained by one female convert:

> I am afraid to admit to people that I am muslim. I wont be able to get a job if they know I am muslim. I am harrassed and abused if I make any positive comments about islam or muslims so I know I must keep my religious thoughts private. I don't want to be interrogated by co workers and strangers about my religion. I am afraid to wear hijab due to the reactions of non muslims (Participant S597).

Negative political rhetoric regarding Islam and Muslims, the rise of the far-right and the impact of negative media coverage were also identified by survey participants in relation to this question. In the words of one survey respondent:

> With leaders such as Pauline Hanson and Scott Morrison, the rise of hate and discrimination against immigrants and religions such as Hindu and Islam is constant. The media also plays a massive role in encouraging discrimination and racism against anything [sic] religion or culture that isn't "Christian" or "white". The impact of Donald Trump alone is also impacting the freedom to practise religion. In saying this Australians are genuinely awesome down to earth people (Participant S691).

With respect to gender, while notable pluralities of both male and female converts felt that their freedom to practice Islam in Australia was under threat, a slightly higher proportion of males (38.7%) than females (30.0%) agreed with this proposition, while a slightly higher proportion of female (47.0%) than male converts (41.2%) disagreed. Though these differences were not found to be statistically significant, they again contribute to a broader trend within the data in which male converts appear to be more critical of Australian society than their female counterparts. While time limitations prevented discussion of these issues within the focus groups, the relationship between gender, national identity and belonging amongst converts to Islam appears to be an area which would benefit from additional research.

The Muslim Community

As Köse observes, "the maintenance of a new identity requires a structure to make it workable" (1996, 132). Following the act of conversion, socialisation into existing Muslim communities is thus a particularly important part of a convert's journey, as they navigate and internalise their new faith and undergo processes of identity (re)construction. While many converts will report

positive experiences and relations with born Muslims, others may encounter considerable challenges in relation to acceptance and belonging. As with other social contexts, the survey asked participants about their sense of connection and belonging to the Muslim community. Amongst converts overall, 12.9 percent rated their connection to the Muslim community as 'very strong', 28.2 percent rated it as 'very strong' and 33.7 percent rated it as 'moderate'. Approximately 16.0 percent of converts rated their level of connection as 'weak', while a further 8.6 percent described this as very weak. When the variable of gender was taken into consideration, it was observed that female converts reported weaker levels of connection to the Muslim community compared to their male counterparts. For example, a slightly higher proportion of male than female converts rated their sense of connection in this context as strong or very strong, while more than double the proportion of female (31.0%) than male converts (14.5%) rated their sense of connection and belonging as weak or very weak. While these gender differences were not found to be statistically significant, they nevertheless align with the broader trend observed within the survey data which saw female converts consistently reporting weaker levels of connection in almost all contexts compared to male converts.

When the variable of conversion status was taken into account, it was observed that higher proportions of born Muslims (47.4%) than converts (41.1%) rated their sense of connection to the Muslim community as strong or very strong, while a higher proportion of converts (24.5%) than born Muslims (16.5%) rated this as weak or very weak. While these differences appear to be minimal and were not found to be statistically significant, they also cohere with a broader trend concerning weaker feelings of belonging amongst converts compared to those of born Muslims. In this regard, it is also worth reiterating findings highlighted in Chapter Six, in which 36.81 percent of converts reported experiencing 'a great deal of difficulty' or 'some difficulty' regarding acceptance from the local Muslim community during the post-conversion period.

When these issues were raised in the focus groups, both convert and born Muslim participants raised a number of potential explanations. One focus group participant expressed a view that while born Muslims were engaged and supportive of converts during the initial conversion period, this level of interest and support quickly waned:

> One perspective is that Muslims are very excited about people coming to the faith, and it's seen as a conquest, you know, it's amazing…they're celebrating someone becoming a Muslim. But then, once it's done, it's just over. 'Yeah alright. Beautiful. Come to the mosque'. That whole process of the profound change that a person goes through in accepting Islam…we expect a convert to become just like us…you know, overnight. (Canberra, Participant 1).

While some converts encounter judgement and criticism from born Muslims, the reverse may also occur. During this focus groups, several born Muslim participants commented on personal experiences with converts. In the words of one participant:

> Sometimes born Muslims feel judged by convert Muslims. Born Muslims like myself, feel that I'm not Muslim enough, by some Muslims who've just converted and are Salafi and have told me that I'm not Muslim enough. So then I innately shy away from some of these people, because…you know what I mean? So therefore I'm not connected to these people. So there's that flip slide" (Brisbane, Participant 4).

The question of judgement emanating from other Muslims was also raised within the survey, although no distinctions were made regarding the source of such judgement in terms of conversion status. Participants were asked "to what extent do you feel judged by other Muslims in relation to your understanding and practice of Islam?" (see Table 8.3). Almost one-third of converts said that they felt judged by other Muslims "all the time" (12.9%) or "a lot" (17.8%). A further third (33.7%) said they "sometimes" felt judged, while the remainder felt that they were "rarely" (24.5%) or "never" (11.0%) judged by other Muslims. Comparatively, a slightly higher proportion of converts than born Muslims said they felt judged by other Muslims "all

the time", with converts more likely to say that they "rarely" or "never" felt judged by other Muslims.

Table 8.3 Feelings of Judgement*

I feel judged by other Muslims…	Female Converts	Male Converts	Converts	Born Muslims
All the time	13.0%	12.9%	12.9%	10.3%
A lot	23.0%	9.7%	17.8%	18.4%
Sometimes	30.0%	38.7%	33.7%	40.9%
Rarely	23.0%	27.4%	24.5%	21.9%
Never	11.0%	11.3%	11.0%	8.5%

Question: To what extent do you feel judged by other Muslims in relation to your understanding and practice of Islam?

When the variable of gender was considered, it was observed that while similar proportions of male and female converts said that they felt judged by other Muslims "all the time", a higher proportion of female (23.0%) than male (9.7%) converts reported feeling such judgement "a lot." Lower proportions of female converts expressed that they felt judged by other Muslims "sometimes", "rarely" or "never", although in some cases, these differences were slight and there were was not found to be a statistically significant difference between the variable of gender and responses to this question. While further research may allow a more substantive understanding of this aspect of social relations, these findings indicate that for female converts, feelings of judgement and disapproval from fellow Muslims is somewhat more challenging than amongst male converts. Such a proposition is supported, to a degree, by other findings of this thesis which indicate female converts feel less connected to Muslim communities.

In addition to the aforementioned issues, cultural beliefs and practices amongst some born Muslims, which may be viewed by converts as lacking religious legitimacy or foundation, can also complicate relations between the two groups. As previously mentioned in Chapter

Five's discussion of participants' post-conversion challenges, Muslim cultural beliefs and practices ranked as one of the most common obstacles encountered by respondents.[73] This issue was highlighted in a written response from one survey participant, who reported that such issues had proven problematic in their quest for religious knowledge:

> I'm still trying to distinguish the difference between cultural boundary's [sic] and religious boundary's [sic]. Many people mix them up so the correct information is sometimes hard to attain (Participant S1854)

Another survey respondent explained the challenges they had faced as a result of pressures from members of the Muslim community to conform to cultural expectations:

> I had people from the Muslim community putting me on a pedestal and telling me what we need to do to be "Muslim". It was often superficial and upon discussing with more learned people would find they were cultural. (Participant S581).

While time limitations prevented discussion of this issue within the focus groups, such challenges regarding converts' views on Muslim cultural beliefs and attitudes have been highlighted in other studies (Al-Qwidi 2002; Vroon-Najem 2019). For example, Al-Qwidi's (2002) study on British converts found that amongst participants, cultural views and attitudes prevalent in some born Muslim communities posed considerable challenges in the context of socialisation and acceptance. The author found that "in general, the converts felt that many Muslim families, by tradition, had confused culture with their religion" (Al-Qwidi, 230). Such cultural traditions generally related to factors such as dress, marriage arrangements and social status, which were often presented as religious obligations and imposed upon recent converts regardless of their divergent social backgrounds (Al-Qwidi, 220-221). Tensions between converts and born Muslims over cultural issues may also extend beyond perceived religious

[73] Amongst survey participants, 14.7% had experienced "a great deal of difficulty" and 35.0% had experienced "some difficulty" in this regard

obligations. For example, research conducted by Vroon-Najem on conversion to Islam in the Netherlands, found that some participants had experienced cultural tensions, "not directly tied to Islam but rather to social mores" and particularly in familial contexts (2019, 43).

While further research on this issue is needed in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of what these specific 'cultural views' are, and how these particular challenges are navigated by converts in an Australian context, the findings of this thesis do highlight the complex nature of converts' socialisation processes into existing Muslim communities. This topic is also worthy of additional exploration considering assertions that converts' understandings of Islam, which tend to exclude cultural baggage, may contribute to the construction of an 'Western' Islam (Duderija and Rane 2019).

Further considering factors which may impact upon relations between converts and born Muslims, one focus group participant (a born Muslim), suggested that relations between these groups may be complicated by suspicions concerning the motivations and authenticity of some conversions. In the words of this participant:

> A lot of people from intelligence services, from the security agencies around the world, they pretend they are convert (sic). They pretend they are Muslim. They are fluent in Arabic. They have trained well to penetrate the Muslim community and spy on them. So, it's since…. that guy in England from 1917. Lawrence of Arabia. So there's very bad experience. That's why the Muslim community are…scared of converts. They welcome them, but they are cautious about them. 'Ok, if you are genuine, you are welcome'. But they don't let them in their families or communities or mosques. And in any argument, any fight, you hear the people say 'ahh, he's just a spy, it's alright'. So that's my opinion. (Canberra, Participant 2).

This participant also suggested that some converts may be afflicted by mental illness, which in his view, made born Muslims wary of converts in general:

> The other thing is unfortunately…mentally ill people…a lot of them convert to Islam. And they bring a bad image, or bad reputation for Islam. And as you have seen in Europe, most of the suicide…most of the people, attacks, stabbings, especially in England – they're converts. So if you go back to their background, they are mentally ill, you know? And they see Islam as a way of showing strengths, or rebellion or revenge from the society…and they commit, you know, crime. We call it crime, you know? It's not…they're not martyrs. So there are two points. A lot of them- mentally ill. And a lot of them are spies. Therefore, I keep away from them. (Canberra, Participant 2).

While these views were not supported by other participants in this focus group, nor were they raised by any participants in other sessions, the existence of such attitudes or opinions amongst some born Muslims is a topic which would certainly benefit from further research. Regarding concerns over the sincerity of some conversions, the fact that such suspicions may be held by some Muslim Australians is perhaps unsurprising, particularly given the increased surveillance and securitisation of Muslim communities over the past several decades (Pilkington 2018; Spalek and Lambert 2007). Cases such as that involving FBI agent Craig Monteilh, have further contributed to suspicion of converts from born-Muslims in a broader Western context (Harris 2012; Rafei 2021). In this case, Monteilh faked his conversion to Islam and attempted to infiltrate the Muslim community in Orange County, California. Monteilh was directed by his FBI handlers to monitor members of the community, and "to act like a radical himself to lure out Islamist sympathizers" (Harris 2012). Other similar cases have utilised entrapment tactics, providing financial incentives or other tactics to coerce Muslim Americans into planning or committing terror attacks (Harris 2012).

Furthermore, regarding the mental health and radicalisation of some Western converts, such cases have indeed occurred (Copeland and Marsden 2020). It is important to note however, that such cases have also occurred amongst born Muslims and that no conclusive evidence to date broadly supports the notion that converts are more susceptible to radicalisation or extremism, nor that they are more prone to mental health issues.

The Mosque

For converts to Islam, and for Muslims more generally, the mosque represents an important locus in relation to socialisation, religious knowledge and ritual practice (Ghafournia 2020). However, existing research on Western converts has highlighted challenges faced by some individuals regarding access to mosques and negative experiences with fellow Muslims in this setting, often in the context of gender. When survey participants were asked about their sense of belonging and connection to their local mosque, 10.4 percent rated this as 'very strong', 18.4 percent rated this as 'strong', and 30.1 percent rated this as 'moderate'. Conversely, slightly more than one-third of converts rated their sense of connection to the mosque as 'weak' (21.5%) or 'very weak' (12.9%). A further 6.8 percent selected the option of 'unsure/not applicable' in response to this question. While it was not possible to obtain clarification from participants, these responses may indicate that some of these respondents had no connection to their local mosque.

Comparatively, converts appear to hold weaker levels of connection to their local mosque than their born Muslim counterparts. A comparative analysis of this question revealed that born Muslims were more likely than converts to describe this sense of connection as being 'very strong', 'strong' or 'moderate', while a higher proportion of converts described it as being 'weak' or 'very weak'. This trend is perhaps unsurprising in light of other studies which have examined the challenges faced by Western converts regarding socialisation and acceptance within mosques. When this topic was raised in the focus groups, several possible explanations were raised by participants. One participant suggested that ethnic and cultural elements may prove challenging for converts in the context of engagement and acceptance within mosques. In the words of one (born Muslim) focus group participant:

> In Melbourne and Sydney where every mosque will have their own ethnic group. You've got your Turkish mosque, the Lebanese mosque and this mosque…and where do the white Australians go really? (Adelaide, Participant 1).

This theme of ethnic divisions in mosques was also raised within other focus group sessions. In the words of another (born Muslim) participant:

> The thing is it doesn't surprise me that there's a weak sense of connection with…local mosques; one, it's where men, it's classed for men more so but also there's a very ethnic division, so if you come in there as a white Australian you're going to stick out like a sore thumb. People notice, they ask you for the millionth time how'd you convert so forth, so they do feel ostracized to a large degree. Probably because the Muslim community is very ethnically connected. It's based on ethnicity. So, all of a sudden, they become a minority within the Muslim community. I think that's a huge shock for them. If they're from a white Australian background to come from being a majority to becoming a minority. And I've heard some reverts, some converts, talk about it that way. (Melbourne, Participant 9).

Notable differences were also observed among participants in the context of gender. As with the Muslim community in a more general sense, female converts expressed notably weaker levels of connection to their local mosque than did their male counterparts. Amongst female converts, a significant plurality (44.0%) reported a weak or very weak sense of connection and belonging to their local mosque. Comparatively, only 19.4 percent of male converts described their sense of connection to their local mosque in this way. In this context, there was found to be a statistically significant difference in relation to gender, with female converts being 3.274 (OR) times more likely than male converts to express a weak/very weak sense of connection to their local mosque.[74] It is noteworthy that while gender disparities in this regard were also observed in the context of born Muslims, these were more pronounced amongst converts.[75]

[74] 95% CIs, [1.558, 5.794], $p < 0.001$.
[75] Amongst born Muslim respondents, 28.23% of females and 20.9% of males rated their connection to the local mosque as weak/very weak.

One focus group participant, a male born Muslim, expressed a view that this finding could be explained by gender-based barriers regarding access and socialisation within mosques, which may be further exacerbated by conversion status. As he explained:

> Access to the mosque. As a male revert, can come into the congregation, can quickly be a part of the things that are happening in the mosque, access to the imam *etcetera*. Much more easily done than a female Muslim revert would. So, it's very natural for a female revert to not really feel connected to the mosque or the Muslim community at a level that the male does. (Canberra, Participant 1).

Similar views were also observed amongst female converts and born Muslims in Ghafournia's (2020) study of Australian Muslim women and their experiences with mosques. One participant in that study explained that while she had not "experienced any direct discrimination…I have wanted to talk with the Imam and felt that I couldn't as he was surrounded by men in a men's space" (Ghafournia 2020, 10). Within the present study, another focus group participant, who was a convert to Islam, explained that she was hesitant to attend mosque on a Friday due to concerns of being judged or questioned by other Muslims in attendance:

> I haven't gone on a Friday, because I don't know, it just feels too ... I feel as if I'm going stand out like a sore thumb and be questioned. (Sydney, Participant 7).

Overall, the findings outlined above suggest that in the context of local mosques, converts face unique challenges regarding connection and belonging. For female converts, their non-Muslim background may compound the challenges faced by Muslim women more broadly, particularly in relation to mosque access.

Views on Social Issues

As this thesis was concerned with gaining insight into aspects of participants' identities and experiences which moved beyond a sole focus on their conversion trajectories and processes, it also sought to consider their broader perspectives and concerns as Muslim Australians. In this context, respondents were presented with a list of 14 social issues and asked to rate how concerned they were about each of these. The issues presented covered a variety of themes, ranging from climate change and domestic violence, to terrorism and anti-Islam sentiment.

Table 8.4 Concern over Social Issues* (Very Concerned)

Issue	Total Converts	Female Converts	Male Converts	Total Born Muslims
Media reporting on Islam and Muslims	73.6%	71.0%	77.4%	76.6%
Treatment of asylum seekers	69.3%	70.0%	67.7%	57.4%
Terrorism by right-wing extremists	68.1%	68.0%	67.7%	74.4%
Domestic violence	67.5%	70.0%	62.9%	68.1%
Mental health	65.6%	73.0%	53.2%	66.1%
Terrorism by Muslim extremists	63.8%	68.0%	56.5%	68.8%
Anti-Islam sentiments	62.0%	63.0%	59.7%	73.3%
Discrimination against Muslims	58.3%	60.0%	54.8%	71.3%
Affordable housing	57.7%	61.0%	51.6%	64.0%
Climate Change	55.8%	52.0%	61.3%	53.5%
Australian military intervention in Muslim-majority countries	55.8%	53.0%	59.7%	53.9%
Reconciliation with indigenous Australians	50.9%	52.0%	48.4%	44.5%
Economic inequality	48.5%	49.0%	46.8%	49.5%
Unemployment	40.5%	41.0%	38.7%	48.1%
Affordable higher education	39.9%	39.0%	40.3%	55.3%

****Question: How concerned are you about the following issues?***

Overall, the issues which participants were most concerned about included media reporting on Islam and Muslims, the treatment of asylum seekers, terrorism by far-right extremists and domestic violence (see Table 8.4). Regarding the issue of most concern to

participants, the manner and impact of representations of Islam and Muslims in the mass media has posed a major challenge for Muslims globally for many decades, and in particular since the turn of the century. Research conducted by Shaheen (2001), Ahmed and Matthes (2017) and Powell (2018), amongst others, has demonstrated the consistently negative and dehumanising ways in which Muslims have been portrayed in Western media, with news media stories tending to overwhelmingly conflate Islam and Muslims with violence, extremism and terrorism (Rane, Ewart and Martinkus 2014). Media representation is also a specific concern for converts in particular, with research finding that Western converts to Islam are overwhelmingly represented in relation to terrorism, violence and criminality, and portrayed as representing both security and cultural threats (Sealy 2017). Overall, such issues are a major concern in light of research which has found that the news media tends to be the primary source of information on Islam and Muslims in the Western world. In this context, 73.6 percent of converts reported that they were 'very concerned' about media reporting of Islam and Muslims, while a further 20.9 percent were 'concerned'. While majorities of both male and female converts were very concerned about media reporting on Islam and Muslims, a slightly higher proportion of male (77.4%) than female (71.0%) converts were very concerned about this issue. When the variable of conversion status was taken into account, converts were slightly less likely to be very concerned, though no statistically significant difference was found in relation to this question. Overall, this issue represented the greatest area of concern for both converts and born Muslims out of fourteen different issues highlighted in the survey.

The second-most concerning issue for participants was that of the treatment of asylum seekers. This issue is one which has become prominent in Australian political discourse over the past two decades, particularly since the 'Tampa incident' of 2000 (Doherty 2021). During this time, successive Australian governments have focused on the issue of border security and implemented targeted policies which prohibit citizenship for asylum seekers arriving in

Australia by boat (Minns *et al.* 2018). The utilisation of offshore detention and processing of asylum seekers, as well as the harsh and inhumane conditions of these procedures has drawn criticism from national and international human rights organisations, including the United Nations Human Rights Council (Doherty 2018). Interestingly, converts more somewhat more likely than born Muslims to say that they were concerned about this issue, with 69.3 percent of converts being 'very concerned', compared to 57.4 percent of born Muslims. It is difficult to theorize the reasons for such a disparity on this issue, although it must be noted that there was not found to be a statistically significant difference in responses to this question based on conversion status.

The third-most concerning issue for survey participants was terrorism by right-wing extremists, about which 68.1 percent reported being very concerned. The rise of far-right extremism has become an increasing challenge in Australia in recent years, with the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) reporting in 2020 that right-wing extremists account for approximately 40 percent of the organisation's cases (Karp 2020). For Muslim communities, the rise of the far-right in both Australian and broader Western contexts represents a considerable concern, with such ideologies often involving anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiment (Fangen & Nilsen 2021; Hutchinson 2021). For the present study, it is also important to take into account the concept of time-period effects (Rane *et al.* 2020). The period of data collection for the Islam in Australia survey (September-October 2019) began approximately six months after the Christchurch mosque shootings, in which Australian citizen Brenton Tarrant murdered 51 Muslims and injured a further forty (Ford and Miller 2020). It is likely that the timing and proximity of this incident, which was identified by the New Zealand government as a terrorist attack, had some impact on participant responses in regard to this question. This theory is further supported in other sections of the survey by participants identifying mosque shootings and other attacks as reasons for feeling that their freedom to

practice Islam in Australia was currently under threat. Future research on this issue may help identify to what extent Muslim Australians remain concerned over the threat of far-right extremism.

Domestic violence (67.5%) and mental health (65.6%) were the next most concerning issues for converts, followed by terrorism by Muslim extremists (63.8%). Regarding issues which specifically affect Muslim Australians, majorities said that they were very concerned about anti-Islam sentiment (62.0%) and discrimination against Muslims (58.3%). Interestingly, the latter two issues posed more of a concern for born Muslims, of whom higher proportions were very concerned. While it is difficult to theorise the reasons for such a disparity, it must be noted that these differences were not found to be statistically significant.

Slightly over half of participants (55.8%) were very concerned about Australian military intervention in Muslim-majority countries. The recent history of Western intervention in Muslim-majority countries, which has often included Australian involvement, has largely led to highly detrimental impacts on local populations. Recent cases of such actions, including the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan under the leadership of the United States have led to mass civilian casualties (Watson Institute 2021) and cases of human rights violations and unlawful killings perpetrated by the occupying forces (Hilal 2017; Knaus 2020). Furthermore, the social and political consequences of these actions have proven to be highly problematic, particularly in the context of Iraq where Coalition Provisional Authority policies fuelled sectarian tensions and violence (Saikal 2014; Sissons & Al-Saiedi 2013). When these factors are taken into consideration, it is perhaps unsurprising that a majority of participants would identify a high level of concern over this issue.

For converts overall, the issues of least concern included economic inequality, unemployment and affordable higher education. However, despite being the areas of least concern, substantial minorities still reported being very concerned about these issues.

When the variable of gender was considered, it was observed that a higher proportion of female converts than male converts were very concerned about almost all social issues presented – a trend which was also observed amongst respondents who self-identified as born Muslims. Such a trend aligns with thinking that female Australians more broadly tend to be more concerned than men about most social issues (Crabb 2019; Mitchell, Mamone and Rane 2021). In most cases, these gender-based differences were not observed to be statistically significant. One exception, however, was that of mental health, where it was observed that female converts were 2.704 (OR) times more likely than male converts to be very concerned about issues concerning mental health.[76] When this overall trend was raised in the focus groups, some participants suggested that these findings were likely emblematic of a greater tendency among women in general to be 'nurturers', while others cautioned against essentialising gender in such a way. Further research may shed some further light on the potential causal factors in relation to these findings.

Overall, responses to this question suggest that Australian converts are not an inward-looking community which is solely concerned about issues directly and exclusively facing them. Rather, while issues relating to anti-Muslim sentiment and media coverage of Islam continue to pose a major concern, there is also a broad awareness of, and concern over, broader social issues which affect wider Australian society.

Trust in Social Institutions and Policies

Another series of questions were included in order to gauge participants' levels of trust in various social institutions and government policies, including state and federal public institutions and Islamic institutions/organisations. Responses regarding public institutions (State and Federal), broken down by gender and conversion status, are outlined in Tables 8.5

[76] 95% CIs, [1.390, 5.259], p = 0.003.

and 8.6. Responses concerning Australian Islamic institutions, broken down by gender and conversion status, are outlined in Tables 8.7 and 8.8.

Table 8.5. Trust in Public Institutions (State and Federal) by Conversion Status*

Institution	Very Trustworthy/ Trustworthy		Not Very/Not at all Trustworthy		Unsure	
	Converts	***Born Muslims***	***Converts***	***Born Muslims***	***Converts***	***Born Muslims***
Parliament	17.8%	30.8%	75.5%	58.8%	6.8%	10.5%
Judiciary (courts)	60.7%	65.6%	35.0%	25.1%	4.3%	9.3%
Defence Forces (Military)	35.6%	36.7%	51.5%	44.6%	12.9%	18.7%
Security/Intelligence Agencies	33.1%	31.9%	54.0%	50.9%	12.9%	17.2%
Law Enforcement Agencies (Police)	57.1%	59.0%	36.8%	31.0%	6.1%	10.0%
Public Schools	66.3%	64.3%	23.3%	20.6%	10.4%	15.2%

Question: How trustworthy do you consider the following social institutions and policies in performing their functions effectively, fairly and honestly?

In the context of public institutions, participants were asked to rate how effective and trustworthy they perceived these institutions, which ranged from parliament to public schools, to be. Overall, participants expressed the highest levels of trust in public schools, the judiciary and law enforcement agencies (police). These three were the only institutions in which a majority of participants rated them to be either 'trustworthy' or 'very trustworthy'. Participants expressed the highest levels of trust in relation to public schools, with 66.3 percent of converts rating these as trustworthy or very trustworthy. This was followed by the judiciary (courts), of which 60.7 percent of converts rated as trustworthy or very trustworthy.

A majority of converts (57.1%) also viewed law enforcement agencies (police) as being trustworthy or very trustworthy, while 36.8 percent viewed the police as not very or not at all trustworthy and 6.1 percent were unsure. While a considerable plurality did not view the police as being trustworthy, it is noteworthy that the proportion of converts who did was significantly higher than the defence forces or the security/intelligence services. A number of factors may account for these differences in trust amongst respondents. As Rane *et al.* suggest, "the

relatively high level of trust in the law-enforcement agencies may be due to the significant engagement of police services with Muslim communities over the past two decades" (2020, 15). Perceptions of secrecy and targeted surveillance of Muslim communities by the intelligence services, as well as allegations of war crimes committed by Australian Defence personnel in Afghanistan (Greene 2019) may also account for lower levels of trust in these institutions when compared to police.

Table 8.6. Converts' Trust in Public Institutions (State and Federal) by Gender.

Institution	Very Trustworthy/ Trustworthy		Not Very/Not at all Trustworthy		Unsure	
	Female Converts	***Male Converts***	***Female Converts***	***Male Converts***	***Female Converts***	***Male Converts***
Parliament	22.0%	11.3%	71.0%	82.3%	7.0%	6.5%
Judiciary (courts)	63.0%	58.1%	34.0%	35.5%	3.0%	6.5%
Defence Forces (Military)	33.0%	40.3%	53.0%	48.4%	14.0%	11.3%
Security/Intelligence Agencies	38.0%	25.8%	47.0%	64.5%	15.0%	9.7%
Law Enforcement Agencies (Police)	67.0%	40.3%	28.0%	51.6%	5.0%	8.1%
Public Schools	72.0%	56.5%	17.0%	33.9%	11.0%	9.7%

Survey respondents expressed the lowest level of trust in Parliament, of which a minority (17.8%) viewed as 'trustworthy' or 'very trustworthy', while a clear majority of more than three-quarters (75.5%) viewed Parliament as being 'not very' or 'not at all' trustworthy'. The lack of trust in Parliament should be considered in the broader context of both a declining trust in government (Evans, Stoker & Halupka 2018), allegations of government corruption and misconduct (Doran 2021; Kennedy & Nguyen 2019; Shepherd 2022) and internal instability (Norman & Healy 2018). Numerous studies and public surveys in recent years have identified low levels of trust in government and politics amongst the general population. For example, a 2018 study conducted by the Social Research Institute found that amongst Australians, less than 41 percent were happy with the way democracy worked in the country,

while less than a third (31%) said that they trusted the national government (Evans, Stoker & Halupka 2018). Furthermore, anti-Muslim rhetoric emanating from members of Parliament has received widespread media coverage over the past two decades (Henderson & Conifer 2015; ABC News 2016; Baker 2019) – something which has likely contributed in some part to these low levels of trust in the context of Muslim Australians.

Table 8.7. Trust in Muslim Australian Institutions by Conversion Status*

Institution	Very Trustworthy/ Trustworthy		Not Very/Not at all Trustworthy		Unsure	
	Converts	***Born Muslims***	***Converts***	***Born Muslims***	***Converts***	***Born Muslims***
Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)	47.2%	41.3%	30.1%	33.5%	22.7%	25.1%
State Islamic Council	48.5%	45.7%	21.5%	22.3%	30.1%	32.0%
State board of Imams	47.9%	49.7%	21.5%	21.2%	30.7%	29.1%
National board of Imams	45.4%	49.6%	20.9%	19.9%	33.7%	30.2%
Islamic schools/colleges	50.9%	52.6%	19.6%	26.1%	29.5%	21.4%

Question: How trustworthy do you consider the following social institutions and policies in performing their functions effectively, fairly and honestly?

Low levels of trust were not only reported public institutions, but also in relation to state and national Islamic organisations. For example, amongst a list of five Muslim organisations and institutions (see Table 8.6), only one (Islamic schools/colleges) was rated as being trustworthy or very trustworthy by a majority of participants. Even in the case of Islamic schools, only a bare majority of 50.9 percent viewed these as trustworthy.

In the case of the national umbrella organisation the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, which is "made up of nine state and territory Islamic councils including Christmas Island, controls six Islamic schools, administers halal certification" (Olding 2017), the highest plurality (47.2%) rated this as being trustworthy/very trustworthy, while slightly under one-third (30.8%) rated this as being not very trustworthy or not at all trustworthy. It could be

theorized that the high level of mistrust associated with AFIC may be due to allegations in national media regarding "years of mismanagement, nepotism and financial impropriety", as well as chaotic internal developments concerning the Council board (Olding 2017).

Considering other institutions, similar proportions of converts viewed other national and state councils and boards as being trustworthy or very trustworthy, including their state Islamic council (48.5%), their state board of Imams (47.9%) and the national board of Imams (45.4%). Similar proportions also viewed these organisations as being not very or not at all trustworthy (see Table 8.7). In the context of these particular institutions, perceptions of trustworthiness may have been influenced by factors such as the relationship between AFIC and state Islamic Councils.

It is also noteworthy that a substantial minority of participants indicated uncertainty about the trustworthiness of the institutions/organisations in question. The percentage of participants who selected 'unsure' in response to this question ranged from around one-fifth (22.8%) in relation to AFIC, to one-third (33.7%) in relation to the National Board of Imams. Similar proportions of respondents also expressed uncertainty in relation to the trustworthiness of their state Islamic council (21.5%) and their state board of Imams (21.5%). The high rate of 'unsure' responses in some of these contexts may be reflective of a lack of engagement with, or lack of knowledge about the organisations in question.

However, for those who did have knowledge of these organisations, some participants were critical of what they perceived to be dishonest conduct and ineffective leadership. In the words of one focus group participant:

> Lack of honesty, lack of integrity, lack of leadership, lack of adding value to community, ego. It's all about them. (Perth, Participant 1).

Other focus group participants also identified a "lack of transparency"[77] and a lack of availability to members of the community[78] as potential reasons for low levels of trust in these institutions. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, this topic was the subject of minimal discussion within the focus groups, and may benefit from further attention and exploration in future research.

Table 8.8. Converts' Trust in Australian Islamic Institutions by Gender

Institution	Very Trustworthy/ Trustworthy		Not Very/Not at all Trustworthy		Unsure	
	Female Converts	***Male Converts***	***Female Converts***	***Male Converts***	***Female Converts***	***Male Converts***
Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)	52.0%	40.3%	26.0%	37.1%	22.0%	22.6%
State Islamic Council	51.0%	43.6%	20.0%	24.2%	28.0%	32.3%
State board of Imams	52.0%	40.3%	19.0%	25.8%	29.0%	33.9%
National board of Imams	47.0%	43.6%	19.0%	24.2%	34.0%	32.3%
Islamic schools/colleges	50.0%	51.6%	20.0%	19.4%	30.0%	29.0%

When the variables of gender and conversion status were taken into account, some interesting findings were observed. In relation to gender, female converts reported consistently higher levels of trust in all Australian Islamic institutions than males. This finding mirrored those of trust in Australian public institutions, in which males consistently reported lower levels of trust. These disparities were most pronounced in the context of Australian public institutions, particularly in the cases of the police, security/intelligence agencies and public schools. the One exception to this trend was the Australian military, of which a slightly higher proportion of male converts felt was trustworthy/very trustworthy. In regard to police, the gender differences observed were found to be statistically significant, with female converts being

[77] Perth, Participant 13
[78] Perth, Participant 14

3.004 (OR) times more likely than male converts to view the police as being trustworthy.[79] Other gender disparities observed in relation to these questions were not found to be statistically significant. While some research suggests that in general, gender does appear to influence levels of political trust (McDermott & Jones 2022), the particular causal factors behind these specific findings in relation to Muslim Australians are difficult to theorize. Further research may help to gain further insight into this aspect of the relationship between gender and conversion.

In relation to conversion status, only minimal differences were observed between the responses of converts and born Muslims. One exception in this regard is the case of Parliament, where converts expressed lower levels of trust than did born Muslims. The disparity observed here, which was found to be statistically significant, with born Muslims being 2.054 (OR) times more likely than converts to say that Parliament was trustworthy/very trustworthy.[80] While other findings highlighted in this thesis have indicated that converts are somewhat more critical of Australian society and government than their born Muslim counterparts, further research is needed in order to understand the factors which may influence this trend.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined key findings relating to the social identities and experiences of Australian converts to Islam. It has considered their sense of social connection and belonging in a wide range of social contexts, ranging from family and friends and the workplace, to the Muslim community and wider Australian society. It has also explored participants' views on numerous contemporary social issues, as well as considering their attitudes and levels of trust in various social institutions and government policies.

[79] 95% CIs, [1.558, 5.794], $p < 0.001$.
[80] 95% CIs, [1.341, 3.146], $p < 0.001$.

It was found that converts expressed the highest levels of social belonging and connectivity in the context of family and friends, and the weakest levels of connection in relation to sporting/social clubs and the Australian political system. When the variables of conversion status and gender were taken into account, it was found that female converts tended to express the weakest levels of connection and belonging in almost all areas, including Muslim and non-Muslim contexts. In relation to a variety of contemporary social issues, converts reported high levels of concern on issues ranging from violent extremism and domestic violence, to climate change and affordable housing, with the issue of most concern being media reporting on Islam and Muslims.

Finally, with regard to trust in public and religious institutions, it was found that participants reported the highest levels of trust in the judiciary, public schools and law enforcement, with low levels of trust reported in regards to Parliament. With respect to the variables of gender and conversion status, it was observed that females converts were more likely than male converts to view law enforcement as trustworthy or very trustworthy, while born Muslims were more likely than converts to report having trust in Parliament.

The following chapter will provide an in-depth discussion of the key themes and findings identified throughout this thesis, as well as identifying directions for future research in this area.

CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION

Overview

Over the past five chapters, this thesis has outlined key findings on Australian converts to Islam, relating to demographics, conversions pathways and processes, Islamic identity and interpretation, as well as various social aspects and dimensions of the conversion process. This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of some of the key findings presented throughout this thesis, considering their significance to understandings of the conversion phenomenon and their contribution to the existing body of scholarship. Finally, this chapter will conclude with recommendations for future research in the field of conversion studies, in both a specifically Australian context and a broader Western context.

Who are Australian converts to Islam?

Representing the first wide-ranging, quantitative study of Australian converts, this thesis has sought to provide key insights into convert demographics, motivations for embracing Islam, as well as various aspects of Islamic identity and practice. The findings of this study support assertions that converts are a diverse group, who embrace Islam for a multitude of reasons and construct and express their Muslim identities in different ways. As will be discussed later in this chapter, it also identified key differences and commonalities regarding the experiences and beliefs of (1) female and male converts and (2) Australian converts to Islam and born Muslims.

Regarding demographics, one of the key preliminary findings of this study relates to the overall percentage of converts amongst the broader Muslim Australian population. As highlighted in Chapter Three, empirically-based estimates of convert numbers throughout the Western world remain scarce, and are often constrained by barriers and obstacles such as the lack of questions regarding religious affiliation and religious change in many national censuses. Within the Australian context, despite some conjecture (Zammit 2011), no previous empirical

attempts have been made to ascertain the overall number or percentage of converts amongst the broader Muslim population. Among the total survey sample, those who self-identified as converts accounted for approximately 15.8 percent of respondents. While constituting a minority of participants, this finding suggests that a considerable number of Muslim Australians are converts to Islam. When applied to data collected in the 2021 Australian census, which found that there were 813,400 Muslim Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022), the number of Australian converts to Islam may potentially be as high as approximately 128,000. While further data is arguably needed to assess the validity and accuracy of this figure, it nevertheless represents a critical first step in this area and represents the first empirically grounded estimate of Australian Muslim converts. This finding also reinforces the importance of academic research on the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in contemporary Australian society.

Further considering participant demographics, there was found to be a higher representation of female than male converts in the survey sample, with a breakdown of 61.4 percent to 38 percent. Once again, while further research is needed to ascertain if this gender breakdown is truly representative of the broader convert population in Australia, these early findings appear to support claims that female converts do outnumber males (Brice 2010; Van Nieuwkerk 2006). As with overall convert estimates, as discussed above, ascertaining the validity and representativeness of the gender breakdown amongst converts is, to a certain extent, constrained by a lack of any existing quantitative or demographic data of this group. As such, these findings, while providing much-needed data and insight, should nevertheless be approached with caution. Future quantitative research on the Muslim Australian population could assist in verifying the gender breakdown amongst Australian converts.

Moving beyond demographics, the findings of this thesis provide considerable insight into the identities and experiences of Australian converts to Islam in a number of areas.

Regarding the pathways which led participants to embrace Islam, the findings of this thesis suggest that conversion is both diverse and often multi-casual in nature. In terms of specific motivational factors, it was found that the most commonly reported factors were 'intellectual' or 'rational' in nature – for example, the message of the Quran -, although interpersonal or 'relational' factors, such as marriage or personal relationships with Muslims were also influential for many. Overall, a majority of converts (67.5%) identified multiple factors which contributed to their decision to embrace Islam, highlighting the complex nature of conversion and the variety of multifaceted pathways which can lead individuals to embracing Islam.

Regarding the time period in which survey participants converted to Islam, it was found that a clear majority had converted to Islam since the turn of the century, with approximately 79 percent having converted in the year 2001 or later, and a minority of approximately 21 percent having converted prior to the year 2000.

As with other conversion studies, this thesis also considered the various challenges and obstacles associated with converting to Islam in Western societies. As has been found in other research, the most challenging aspects of the conversion process amongst survey participants were concerned with self-other relations. In particular, the reactions and attitudes of friends and family, and wider Australian society represented the most challenging aspects of the post-conversion period.

In terms of the specific interpretations or Islamic traditions with which converts identify, a majority of Australian converts adhere to Sunni Islam. Significantly, however, interpretations which fall outside the 'mainstream' of Sunnism also hold a strong appeal for many Australian converts, who identify with Sufism, Salafism and progressive Islam at a higher rate than their born Muslim counterparts. In this regard, there were also some notable differences between female and male converts, which will be considered again later in this chapter. While the survey did not directly inquire about the particular experiences or factors

which led participants to these specific interpretations of Islam, focus group participants raised a number of potential explanatory theories. These included a higher degree of mobility and freedom in choosing the 'type' of Islam which best fit their needs and beliefs, as well as the support offered by Muslim organisations of particular ideological orientations.

Regarding their perspectives on interpreting Islam, the majority of Australian converts accept the validity of multiple interpretations of Islam and believe that the Qur'an should be interpreted in contextual ways which prioritise the higher objectives of Islam. This suggests that despite the diversity in belief, practice and the particular interpretations of Islam or schools of thought with which participants identified, exclusivist approaches to Islam which disregard alternate interpretations of the faith do not appear to be widespread amongst Australian converts.

Regarding their place in Australian society, a substantial plurality of converts expressed concern regarding the notion that their freedom to practice Islam in Australia was under threat. While the written responses of participants suggested that this fear was related more to general Islamophobia and negative rhetoric in the mass media and political sphere than a specific threat to their freedom of religion, it would be premature to dismiss these concerns. Such fears were also evident in the high number of participants who were very concerned about anti-Islam sentiment and discrimination against Muslims in Australian society.

Comparing Converts and Born Muslims

In considering the differences and commonalities between converts and born Muslims, this thesis has sought to address another key gap within the conversion literature. The dearth of comparative analyses in this regard, which is somewhat surprising in light of widespread assertions that Western converts are more likely to radicalise than born Muslims, has thus far precluded broader understandings of the potential differences and commonalities between

these groups regarding identity, belief and behaviour. The findings of this study provide some insight into this issue, in relation to the specific 'types' of Islam with which Muslim Australians identify and practice, their views on various theological and social issues, as well as with respect to their sense of social connection and belonging.

Demographically speaking, some key differences were observed between survey participants who self-identified as converts and born Muslims. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, there was a higher proportion of women amongst converts compared to born Muslims – a difference which may be the result of reportedly higher rates of conversion to Islam amongst Western women than men. Additionally, converts were more likely than born Muslims to have been born in Australia rather than overseas. While both converts and born Muslims possessed a high level of educational attainment, this was observed to be slightly higher amongst born Muslims, of whom a greater proportion had completed tertiary studies.

In the context of identification with particular Islamic traditions and groups, converts were found to exhibit lower levels of identification with Sunni Islam, and higher levels of identification with less mainstream groupings, such as Sufism, Salafism and Progressive Islam. Additionally, a higher proportion of converts than born Muslims identified as being 'just Muslim.' As raised by focus group participants, such a trend may potentially be explained by a number of factors. For example, a convert's exploration of Islam and its various traditions is, unlike born Muslims, less restricted by existing cultural and family influence and expectation. As converts are not born into the faith were considered to have more freedom and flexibility in exploring Islamic interpretations and movements, and resultingly, adhering to the traditions which most resonate with them. Other factors may also influence the 'types' of Islam with which converts identify, with some focus group participants suggesting that the level of pre- and post-conversion support offered to converts by specific organisations who could be classified as either conservative or progressive in nature.

In response to broader suggestions both in academia and the mass media that converts are particularly susceptible to radicalisation and extremism, this thesis sought to understand the differences and commonalities between the Islamic orientations and theological views of converts and born Muslims. In the context of Muslim typologies (or Islamic orientations), it was observed that similar proportions of both converts and born Muslims identified with the typologies of 'political Islamist' and 'militant'. In both cases, where minorities of each group indicated agreement with the typology statements, no statistically significant difference was found in relation to conversion status.

In addition to these findings, the estimate that converts represent 15.8 percent of Muslim Australians does not support assertions of converts being overrepresented amongst militants or jihadists within the Australian context. While some data in other Western nations, namely the United States does appear to suggest an overrepresentation of converts among Muslim extremists, a comparison of the findings of this thesis with research conducted by the Lowy Institute (2021), indicates Australian converts may in fact be *under*-represented amongst militants.

Other key findings in this area relate to questions of belonging and social connectivity. Through examining participants' feelings of social connection and belonging, it was found that in almost all contexts, converts expressed a weaker sense of connection than their born Muslim counterparts. This trend was evident in relation to family and friends, neighbourhood, workplace and the Muslim community. When the variable of gender was also taken into account, it was found that female converts in particular generally expressed the weakest levels of social connection. While this finding will be considered in more detail in the following section, the findings of this thesis suggest that intersection of gender and conversion status

Regarding views on broader social issues, participants demonstrated a high degree of concern over key social issues ranging from climate to reconciliation with Indigenous

Australians. Overall, however, the greatest points of concern related to discrimination, media coverage, anti-Muslim sentiments and terrorism by right-wing extremists. These issues affecting Muslim communities have long been a considerable concern for Muslim Australians, with the threat of far-right extremism becoming more pronounced in recent years.

Media coverage of Islam and Muslims has been a major point of concern amongst Muslim communities in the West for well over a decade now (Rane, Nathie, Isakhan and Abdalla 2010; Rane *et al.* 2020), and continues to pose a high level of concern for Muslim Australians. Clear majorities of both converts and born Muslims expressed that they were very concerned about this issue, with media coverage ranking as the most concerning issue for both groups.

Amongst both groups, anti-Islam sentiment and discrimination against Muslims presented a high degree of concern for a majority of participants. It is noteworthy, however, that slightly lower proportions of converts were concerned or very concerned about either anti-Islam sentiment or discrimination against Muslims in Australian society. While the differences observed pertaining to this issue were not found to be statistically significant, the disparity here appears to be at odds with other findings which suggest that converts are more likely than born Muslims to perceive that their freedom to practice Islam in Australia is under threat. Future research may help to shed further light on the complexities of convert identities and how these individual see themselves and their religious community in relation to wider Australian society.

The threat of extremism, in the context of both Muslim and far-right extremists represented another area of major concern. As highlighted in Chapter Eight, the high level of concern regarding right-wing extremism should also be understood in the context of the time-period of data collection, which occurred only months after a terrorist attack in neighbouring New Zealand, in which 51 Muslims were killed by a far-right extremist of Australian birth.

Overall, these findings provide valuable insights into the complexities surrounding the differences and commonalities between Muslim Australians who were born into the faith and those who willingly converted to Islam.

The Gendered Experience of Conversion to Islam

The findings of this thesis also shed considerable light on gender differences among male and female converts – a subject which has been largely overlooked within the existing literature (Mitchell and Rane 2018). As highlighted earlier in this chapter, the Islam in Australia survey provides the first empirically grounded demographic profile of Australian converts to Islam. One of the key findings in this regard was a higher representation of female (61%) than male (38%) converts. It is possible that this finding could be explained by the method of data collection, as gender is repeatedly flagged as one of the more prominent factors in survey non response, with males being less likely to participate (Curtin *et al*. 2000; Groves and Couper 1996; Moore and Tarnai 2002). Regarding web surveys specifically, Roster, Rogers, Albaum, & Klein (2004) determined that as many as two-thirds of respondents are expected to be female. It is, however, noteworthy that amongst born Muslims who completed this survey, males slightly outnumbered females. The latter factor may support the validity of this gender disparity amongst converts, although further research is undoubtedly needed in this area.

Considering participants' pathways to Islam, it was found that more than double the proportion of female than male converts had experienced reservations or concerns about particular Islamic teachings or issues commonly associated with Islam during the pre-conversion period. This gender disparity is somewhat unsurprising and aligns with the thinking that Australian females are generally more concerned than males on most issues. This is demonstrated by the 'Australia Talks' survey, an initiative of the ABC, Vox Pop Labs and the University of Melbourne (Crabb 2019), which found that women outranked their male

counterparts in their level of concern in 25 out of 26 issues, including gender equality and terrorism, with the one exception being a concern for 'loss of traditional values'. While several qualitative studies have explored ways in which converts critically engage with, and in some cases question or challenge specific Islamic teachings or views within Islam (for example, relating to homosexuality), an absence of prior quantitative data on this issue has thus far limited understandings of broader gender-based trends relating to these concepts (King 2017; Mitchell and Rane 2018). While the findings of this study do appear to suggest that compared to females, male converts are more likely to uncritically accept religious teachings and beliefs, again, further research on this issue is needed before any conclusions can be drawn.

Gender differences were also observed regarding participants' interpretations of Islam and their Islamic orientations (or typologies). For example, female converts appeared slightly less likely than males to identify with Sunni Islam and slightly more likely to identify as being 'Just Muslim' or with other interpretations of Islam - a trend that was not observed amongst born Muslim participants. While these differences between female and male converts were not found to be statistically significant, a broader trend was observed in which greater proportions of females than males identified with interpretations of Islam which all outside mainstream Sunnism – Sufism being the exception.

Additionally, while majorities of both genders identified with liberal and progressive typologies, females were more likely to identify with progressive, ethical and Sufi orientations, while males were more inclined to identify with legalist, political Islamist and militant typologies. This greater tendency towards legalistic and politicized approaches to Islam exhibited by male converts was further supported by their greater likelihood of believing that Islam advocates a specific political system, that the form of governance known as the caliphate is a 'religious obligation', as well as a greater desire for certain aspects of Islamic law (or shariah). It is noteworthy that while some of these trends were observed amongst born Muslims

(such as gender differences regarding agreement with political Islamist and militant typologies), others were not. For example, while similar proportions of male and female born Muslims identified with progressive and ethical-*maqasidi* typologies, female converts were more inclined than their male counterparts to identify as such. Regarding gender differences amongst identification with the aforementioned typologies, it could be theorised that these trends are emblematic of broader research which suggests males to be more religiously dogmatic and more politically inclined than females (Schnabel 2019). Further research on these issues may help to more fully understand the nature of the relationship between conversion and gender and how these factors intersect and influence Islamic identity and belief.

Other key findings were also identified in the context of social identity and connectivity. More broadly, it was found that female converts reported weaker levels of connection and belonging in almost all contexts compared to their male counterparts. This gender disparity was most pronounced in the contexts of local mosques and Muslim communities, where more than double the number of female converts rated their sense of connection and belonging as weak or very weak. Regarding connection to mosques, these results are perhaps unsurprising. The challenges faced by female converts regarding access and acceptance at mosques have been documented by scholars such as Woodlock (2010) and Ghafournia (2020), as well as posing a challenge for Muslim women more broadly. However, the intersection of gender and conversion status appears to predict lower levels of social connectivity and belonging amongst female converts in almost all areas, including family and friends. These findings are of interest not only to academics, but also to Muslim community organisations who may need to develop more targeted support services towards female converts in order to address their susceptibility to social exclusion and marginalisation.

Overall, while the findings presented throughout this thesis provide valuable and much needed insight into comparative gender experiences of conversion, and the seemingly complex

relationship between conversion, gender and identity, it is clear that further research into various aspects of this topic is needed. In particular, qualitative analyses of converts' conceptions of gender, masculinity and femininity, may assist in providing a more comprehensive understanding of the various questions which some of these findings have raised.

Directions for Future Research

While this thesis has sought to address several gaps in the existing scholarship, as outlined above, a number of other key gaps nevertheless remain. As highlighted earlier, additional quantitative data is needed to ascertain the validity of overall convert numbers/percentages, as well as key demographic data. As discussed above, the fact that this study represents the first attempt to gather quantitative data on Australian converts to Islam posed several challenges regarding the representativeness of the sample. While broader issues, such as the fact that the Australian census does not include questions relating to religious change or conversion poses a challenge in this regard, further quantitative research may shed further light into the demographic profile of Australian converts.

While this thesis has provided much needed insight into the particular Islamic traditions and movements with which Australian converts identify and practice, further research on this issue would be beneficial. In particular, additional information regarding the pathways and processes which lead converts to specific Islamic traditions and communities would help to provide a more nuanced understanding of converts' identities and their diverse conversion trajectories and processes. Additionally, future research on this question in a broader Western context could enable comparative insight regarding converts' Islamic identities and interpretations in a cross-national context.

Other research opportunities also remain regarding the particular Islamic traditions or interpretations with which converts identify and practice. While this study sought to gain insight into the overall percentage of Australian converts who identify with specific sectarian branches, traditions or movements and the factors which may lead them there, more research is needed into various aspects this topic. More specifically, greater understanding is needed regarding converts' processes of gaining religious knowledge, including practices of information seeking, the ways in which they evaluate the information they encounter, as well as other factors and influences which may lead them to identify with a specific interpretation or movement.

Converts' social identities and experiences, particularly in the context of gender, represent other areas which would also benefit from further study. As this thesis has outlined, when the variables of gender and conversion status are taken into account, female converts stand out as being the most at-risk group for social isolation and exclusion. This was particularly evident in the context of the Muslim community, the mosque, and family and friends, where female converts were more than twice as likely as their male counterparts to express a weak or very weak level of connection and belonging. While gender-based issues surrounding belonging and mosque access were not confined to converts, female converts did report the weakest sense of connection in the contexts of mosques and their local Muslim community. These findings are of particular interest and concern for Muslim community organisations and convert support networks, and suggest that there is a need for community-based strategies to address these issues.

Further considering gender-related aspects of conversion, additional research is recommended regarding questions of national identity and belonging amongst male and female converts. As was highlighted in Chapter Eight of this thesis, male converts displayed lower levels of connection to Australian society and the Australian political system than female

converts. Males were also more likely to be critical of certain aspects of Australian society, including issues surrounding their freedom to practice Islam in Australia. Further qualitative research on this issue may shed light on the ways in which male and female converts view Australian society and their role in it.

One key area which this thesis was unable to address relates to the contributions of Australian converts to their local Islamic communities, and more broadly, to Islam in Australia. Further research on Australian converts intellectual contributions and the role which they may play in the creation of an 'Australian' Islam would also prove beneficial in understanding the evolution and current realities of Islamic thought and practice in contemporary Australian society. As the findings of this thesis highlight, despite the social obstacles which they may encounter, a notable minority of Australian converts are actively engaged with Muslim groups and organisations. Converts' unique perspectives from their groundings in both Muslim and non-Muslim society, their attraction to non-mainstream movements and interpretations of Islam, as well as their resistance to Muslim cultural practices (Al-Qwidi 2002; Vroon-Najem 2019), may contribute to the development of an 'Australian' Islam (Duderija and Rane 2019), while also allowing them to act as a 'bridge' between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. In light of the substantial number of Australians who hold negative views of Islam and Muslims (Markus 2018), there may be considerable potential for converts to assist in addressing the lack of understanding and acceptance concerning Islam which is prevalent in some segments of Australian society.

Finally, another key area which remains largely unexplored in both an Australian and a broader Western context is that of the differences and commonalities between converts to Islam and born Muslims. As has been outlined in this thesis, while there are many points of commonality between these groups, there are also some key differences. These differences primarily relate to demographics, interpretations of Islam and levels of social connection and

belonging. Considering the significant emphasis placed on the notion that converts are more susceptible to radicalisation than their born Muslim counterparts, further quantitative research on the number of converts to Islam throughout Western nations, as well as comparative analyses between these groups which focus on various aspects of Islamic religious thought, particularly issues associated with political Islam, may enable a more thorough understanding of the supposed overrepresentation of converts among Western jihadists and the differences and commonalities in belief between converts and born Muslims.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the key themes and findings which emerged from the research upon which this thesis is based. In particular, it has focused on three main areas – the question of who are, demographically speaking, those individuals who convert to Islam in Australia; what are the differences and commonalities between Australian converts and born Muslims; and what are the differences and commonalities between female and male converts.

Through outlining these findings, some of which address key gaps in the existing conversion scholarship, it has sought to convey the complexities of the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in contemporary Australian society. While many questions have been raised both throughout this thesis and within this particular chapter, it is hoped that future research may build upon this study and be able to provide a more thorough understanding of the complex relationships between religion, identity, gender, belief and conversion.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of conversion to Islam in non-Muslim societies has occurred in a range of settings and socio-political contexts for over a thousand years. In some cases this occurred in the wake of conflict and conquest, in others it occurred as the result of trade, diplomacy and peaceful proselytization. In the early 21st century, conversion occurs in a complex environment which has been shaped to a large degree by the actions of Muslim extremists, the so-called War on Terror and pervasive anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiment throughout the Western world.

In the context of Australia, despite over a century of Muslim settlement and peaceful coexistence, the aforementioned time-period factors have created an environment in which converts to Islam face substantial social challenges and obstacles as a result of their decision to embrace the religion of Islam. These challenges may emanate from family members, friends and segments of wider Australian society. Additionally, socialisation and acceptance within existing Muslim communities can prove challenging for many, further complicating the precarious social situations faced by some converts. Despite the potential for hostility and negativity surrounding their choice to convert, and in some cases, challenges regarding acceptance from other members of their new faith, it appears that a substantial minority (15.8%) of Muslim Australians are converts to the faith.

In an effort to address key gaps within the existing scholarship, this thesis has provided new insights into the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in contemporary Australian society. More specifically, this thesis has been concerned with developing a demographic profile of Australian converts to Islam and identifying broader trends relating to religious identity and belief, Islamic orientations and the relationship between converts and various segments of Australian society. Despite limitations associated with the methods of data collection, outlined in Chapter 3 of this thesis, this research provides perhaps the most comprehensive and large-

scale study which has been conducted on Australian converts to Islam to date. Furthermore, the exploration of comparative analyses of (1) male and female converts and (2) converts and born Muslims, provides valuable insight into key areas which have largely been neglected within the broader scholarship on conversion to Islam.

While this thesis has provided much-needed data and insight, it has also raised a number of additional questions. It is hoped that this research will help to provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in contemporary Australian society, as well as the lives, beliefs and experiences of Australian converts, while providing a strong foundation for future research in this area. As this thesis has demonstrated, Australian converts to Islam appear to represent a substantial minority of Muslim Australians today. They are individuals who have embraced Islam for a variety of reasons, and for whom their faith is a very important part of their lives. Australian converts adhere to a diverse range of Islamic traditions and schools of thought, yet overwhelmingly demonstrate an acceptance of interpretations of Islam other than their own. They do not embrace views which prohibit or discourage engagement with non-Muslims, and view such engagement as being normal and good.

In considering the relationship between gender and conversion to Islam, this thesis outlined a number of key findings. These included a higher proportion of females than males amongst converts, higher levels of identification with legalistic and politicised understandings of Islam amongst male converts, as well as lower levels of social connectivity and belonging amongst female converts. Through highlighting and analysing these findings, this thesis has shed considerable light on the seemingly complex interaction between gender and religious conversion and the ways in which this interaction may influence and shape religious identity, belief and social relations.

It is hoped that future research on this topic will help to enable a more comprehensive understanding of the questions and themes raised within this thesis, particularly regarding the differences and commonalities between converts to Islam and born Muslims, as well as the seemingly complex relationship between conversion and gender and the comparative experiences of female and male converts. As the findings of this thesis suggest, conversion to Islam appears to be a substantial and growing phenomenon. The large number of converts to Islam, both in Australia and throughout the Western world, and their potential to not only contribute to a 'Western' Islam but also to facilitate intercultural and interfaith dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the nations in which they reside, make this phenomenon increasingly important to the study of Islam and Muslims in the world today.

APPENDIX A

Islam in Australia Survey

Researcher

Associate Professor Halim Rane

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PhD Candidate Researchers

Shane Satterley

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Paul Mitchell

Email: paul.mitchell@griffith.edu.au

Why is the research being conducted?

This research is being conducted to examine the views of Muslims concerning Islam and relations with wider society. Much has been written and published about Islam over the past two decades. However, this body of research/knowledge does not give adequate voice to Muslims. This study aims to advance studies on Islam and Muslims in Australia by understanding what Muslims say about Islam. The research is being conducted as a part of a thesis for a Doctor of Philosophy by the above-named candidates.

What you will be asked to do

If you consent to participate, you will be required to provide some basic information about yourself, which will remain anonymous. You will then be asked to complete the questionnaire, which contains 45 questions. These questions ask about your understanding, opinions and beliefs concerning Islam and society. It is expected that this will take approximately 30 minutes or less.

Selection of potential participants

This survey is intended for participants who identify as Muslim and are citizens or permanent residents of Australia.

Consent to Participate

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate. If you choose to take part you may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty and without providing an explanation. We hope that you will consider participating in this study because the information you provide through participation in the survey with help to develop greater understanding about Islam in Australia as understood by Muslim Australians which could help to inform future research. For those under the age

of 18 consent to participate must be approved by a parent or guardian whose approval must be indicated by selecting the check-box at the end of this information page.

Expected benefits of the research

The data collected will be used to generate a better understanding of Islam in Australia as expressed by Muslim Australians. It will be analysed in order to test other research findings in the academic literature to determine relevance and prevalence in relation to the Australian social context.

Risks of the research

Although foreseeable risks to you as a result of participating in this research is very unlikely to happen, and this level of risk if any should not cause harm, this research involves thinking about issues of faith, religion, identity and social relations. Should you experience any distress, you may find it useful to contact one of the following agencies:

Lifeline
Counselling services for anyone at anytime.
Phone 13 11 14

beyondblue
Information and referral for depression and anxiety.
Phone 1300 224 636

Parentline
Support, counselling and education for parents.
Phone 1300 301 300

Diverse Voices
Peer counselling service for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people and their families and friends.
Phone 1800 184 527 (3pm to midnight)

Harmony Place
Mental health services for culturally and linguistically diverse people and communities.
Phone (07) 3848 1600

Men's Line
Telephone and online support, information and referral service to help men with relationship and other problems.
Phone 1300 789 978

Mental Health Association of Queensland
Access to support, information and referral to mental health-related services in your area, 9am to 7pm Monday to Friday.
Phone 1300 729 686

MiNetworks
Connects you to an experienced mental health worker to find information and support.
Phone 1800 985 944 or go online.

Confidentiality

You will not be asked to supply any identified personal information. We guarantee that all the information you provide will be anonymous and will be kept confidential. There will be no identifying information obtained during this research project. Your responses will be anonymous, and only identified with a code number.

Identification by the researcher

The researchers will not be able to identify any participants in this research.

Storage of data

All data collected will be kept secure and anonymous using the GU Research Storage. All research data (survey responses and analysis) will be retained in a password protected electronic file for a period of five years before being destroyed.

Reporting of results

Research results will be reported in an academic thesis, and may also be disseminated via journal articles and/or conference presentations. When the results are reported or published, individual participants will not be identifiable, we will have no way to ascertain which data belongs to you.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in the research is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw your consent to participate at any time during the survey without explanation. However, due to anonymity, it is impossible to exclude your data should you withdraw consent after completing the surveys.

Further Questions

If you have any further questions about the research, please contact the researchers whose details are listed above.

Independent Contact for Concerns

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of this research, please contact the Manager of Research Ethics at the Office for Research, Bray Centre, Nathan Campus, Griffith University. Phone 07 3735 4375 or email research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

Feedback

If you wish to access the results of this research, please contact the researchers. A copy of the results can be provided once they have been analysed and appropriately collated. You are encouraged to keep a copy of this information sheet.

NOTE: For participants over 18 years of age, please check the box below to indicate your consent to participate. For participants under 18 years of age, you and your parent or guardian will need to check the relevant boxes below to participate.

Expression of consent

I have read the information on the consent form or someone has read it to me. I agree to take part in this study and give my consent freely. I understand that the survey or follow-up discussion will be carried out as described in the information statement, a copy of which I have kept. I understand that whether or not I decide to participate is my decision. I understand that I can withdraw from the survey or discussion at any time and that I do not have to give any reasons for doing this. All questions I have asked about this research have been answered to my satisfaction.

- I understand the risks involved.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without explanation or penalty.

- I understand that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team.
- I understand that my name and other personal information that could identify me will be removed or de-identified in publications or presentations resulting from this research.
- I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me from my participation in this research.
- I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 3735 4375 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project.

☐ I agree to participate in the survey.

☐ If applicable, I agree as a parent or guardian for my dependant to participate.

APPENDIX B

Islam in Australia Survey – Focus Groups

Researcher

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PhD Candidate Researchers

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Why is the research being conducted?

This research is being conducted to examine the views of Muslims concerning Islam and relations with wider society. Much has been written and published about Islam over the past two decades. However, this body of research/knowledge does not give adequate voice to Muslims. This study aims to advance studies on Islam and Muslims in Australia by understanding what Muslims say about Islam. The research is being conducted as a part of a thesis for a Doctor of Philosophy by the above-named candidates.

What you will be asked to do

If you consent to participate, you will be required to provide some basic information about yourself, which will remain anonymous. You will be asked to view a presentation by the research team in which the findings of a recent survey on Islam in Australia will be outlined. You will then be asked to complete a short questionnaire and take part in a discussion with the research team and other focus group participants regarding the survey findings. It is expected that the focus group will take approximately 90 - 120 minutes in total. Focus groups will be recorded in their entirety, and transcribed and analyzed at a later date. This will include audio and/or visual recordings.

Selection of potential participants

These focus groups are intended for participants who identify as Muslim and are citizens or permanent residents of Australia.

Consent to Participate

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate. If you choose to take part you may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty and without providing an explanation. We hope that you will consider participating in this study because the information you provide through participation in the survey with help to develop greater understanding about Islam in Australia as understood by Muslim Australians which could help to inform future research.

Expected benefits of the research

The data collected will be used to generate a better understanding of Islam in Australia as expressed by Muslim Australians. It will be analysed in order to test other research findings in the academic literature to determine relevance and prevalence in relation to the Australian social context.

Risks of the research

Although foreseeable risks to you as a result of participating in this research is very unlikely to happen, and this level of risk if any should not cause harm, this research involves thinking about issues of faith, religion, identity and social relations. Should you experience any distress, you may find it useful to contact one of the following agencies:

Lifeline
Counselling services for anyone at anytime.
Phone 13 11 14

beyondblue
Information and referral for depression and anxiety.
Phone 1300 224 636

Parentline
Support, counselling and education for parents.
Phone 1300 301 300

Diverse Voices
Peer counselling service for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people and their families and friends.
Phone 1800 184 527 (3pm to midnight)

Harmony Place
Mental health services for culturally and linguistically diverse people and communities.
Phone (07) 3848 1600

Men's Line
Telephone and online support, information and referral service to help men with relationship and other problems.
Phone 1300 789 978

Mental Health Association of Queensland
Access to support, information and referral to mental health-related services in your area, 9am to 7pm Monday to Friday.
Phone 1300 729 686

MiNetworks
Connects you to an experienced mental health worker to find information and support.
Phone 1800 985 944 or go online.

Confidentiality

You will not be asked to supply any identified personal information. We guarantee that all the information you provide will be anonymous and will be kept confidential. There will be no identifying information obtained during this research project. Your responses will be anonymous, and only identified with a code number.

Storage of data

All data collected will be kept secure and anonymous using the GU Research Storage. All research data (survey responses and analysis) will be retained in a password protected electronic file for a period of five years before being destroyed.

Reporting of results

Research results will be reported in academic theses, and may also be disseminated via journal articles and/or conference presentations. When the results are reported or published, individual participants will not be identifiable.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in the research is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw your consent to participate at any time during the survey without explanation. However, due to anonymity, it is impossible to exclude your data should you withdraw consent after completing the surveys.

Further Questions

If you have any further questions about the research, please contact the researchers whose details are listed above.

Independent Contact for Concerns

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical

conduct of this research, please contact the Manager of Research Ethics at the Office for Research, Bray Centre, Nathan Campus, Griffith University. Phone 07 3735 4375 or email research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

Feedback

If you wish to access the results of this research, please contact the researchers. A copy of the results can be provided once they have been analysed and appropriately collated. You are encouraged to keep a copy of this information sheet.

Expression of consent

I have read the information on the consent form or someone has read it to me. I agree to take part in this study and give my consent freely. I understand that the focus group will be carried out as described in the information statement, a copy of which I have kept. I understand that whether or not I decide to participate is my decision. I understand that I can withdraw from the focus group at any time and that I do not have to give any reasons for doing this. All questions I have asked about this research have been answered to my satisfaction.

- I understand the risks involved.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without explanation or penalty.
- I understand that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team.
- I understand that my name and other personal information that could identify me will be removed or de-identified in publications or presentations resulting from this research.
- I understand that the focus groups will be recorded in its entirety. This may include audio and/or visual recordings.
- I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me from my participation in this research.
- I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 3735 4375 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project.

☐ **I agree to take part in this focus group.**

Date:

Signature:

APPENDIX C

Appendix A: Islam in Australia Survey Questions

Section A: Preliminary

This survey is intended for Muslim participants who are either Australian citizens or permanent residents.

A1. For participants over 18 years of age, please check the box below to indicate your consent to participate.

For participants under 18 years of age, you and your parent or guardian will need to check the relevant boxes below to participate.

Expression of consent

I have read the information on the consent form or someone has read it to me. I agree to take part in this survey and give my consent freely. I understand that whether or not I decide to participate is my decision. I understand that I can withdraw from the survey at any time and that I do not have to give any reasons for doing this.

I understand the risks involved; I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without explanation or penalty; I understand that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team; I understand that my name and other personal information that could identify me will be removed or de-identified in publications or presentations resulting from this research; I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me from my participation in this research; I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 3735 4375 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research (Ethics Reference Number: 2019/042).

I agree to participate in the survey

If applicable, I agree as a parent or guardian for my dependant to participate

A2. Do you identify as a Muslim?

Yes/No

A3. Are you an Australian citizen or permanent resident?

Yes/No

Section B: Demographic

These questions will allow us to check that this survey is representative of the Australian Muslim population in regards to age, gender, geographical location, country of origin, education level and employment status of participants.

B1. What is your current age?

B2. What is your gender?

Female /Male /Other

B3. What is your postcode?

B4. In which country or countries were you raised?

B5. Were you born in Australia or overseas?

Born in Australia / Born overseas

B6. When did your first family members arrive in Australia?

- After the year 2000
- 1980s-1990s
- 1960s-1970s
- 1940s-1950s
- Before the 1940s
- Unsure

B7. When did you arrive in Australia?

- After the year 2000
- 1980s-1990s
- 1960s-1970s
- 1940s-1950s
- Before the 1940s

B8. What ethnicity, nationality or cultural group do you most identify with?

B9. What is your highest level of education?

- In High School
- High School Graduate
- At TAFE

- TAFE Graduate
- Started Apprenticeship
- Finished Apprenticeship
- In University
- University Graduate
- In Post-Graduate Study
- Post-Graduate
- In a PhD Program
- PhD Graduate

B10. As a high school student, which of the following fields of education are/were you most interested in?

- Fine Art (music, painting, drama, etc.)
- Arts and Humanities (philosophy, history, literature, communications, languages, etc.)
- Islamic Studies
- Social Science (anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc.)
- Law/Legal studies
- Education/Teaching
- Business/Economics (commerce, accounting, etc.)
- Engineering
- Health/Medicine
- Science (astronomy, biology, chemistry, physics, etc.)
- Mathematics
- Information Technology (IT)
- Other

B11. If you have a TAFE diploma, in what field did you receive your diploma?

B12. If you have an apprenticeship or trade, what are you currently in training for or qualified in?

B13. If you are currently at university or completed a university degree, in what field of study are you currently enrolled or have completed a degree?

- Fine Art (music, painting, drama etc.)
- Arts and Humanities (philosophy, history, literature, communications, languages, etc.)
- Islamic Studies
- Social Science (anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc.)
- Law/Legal studies

- Education/Teaching
- Business/Economics (commerce, accounting, etc.)
- Engineering
- Health/Medicine
- Science (astronomy, biology, chemistry, physics, etc.)
- Mathematics
- Information Technology (IT)
- Other

B14. Which of the following best describes your current employment status?

- Full-time
- Part-time
- Casual
- Student
- Self-employed
- Volunteer
- Not currently employed
- Retired
- Other

Section C: Conversion

These questions will allow us to have a better understanding of the number of participants who are born Muslims and those who have converted/reverted to Islam.

C1. Were you born/raised a Muslim or did you convert/revert to Islam?

- Born/Raised Muslim
- Converted/Reverted to Islam

C2. At what age did you become Muslim?

C3. What were the most important factors in your life, or aspects of Islam, that led you to convert/revert to Islam?

- Personal hardship
- Death of a relative or friend
- Spiritual awakening
- Answers to questions concerning the purpose of life
- Message of the Qur'an
- Example of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)

- Personal connection with a Muslim
- Marriage to a Muslim
- Disaffection or disillusion with a previous faith
- Sense of community/belonging
- Other

C4. When you were considering converting/reverting, which teachings or aspects of Islam, if any, did you have reservations about or find problematic?

- No issues or problems
- Views about non-Muslims
- Views about women
- Views about homosexuals
- Views about violent jihad
- Mixing religion with politics
- Terrorism in the name of Islam
- Gender segregation
- Dietary requirements
- Other

C5. Which Islamic tradition, school of thought or group, if any, did you most identify with when you first converted/reverted to Islam?

C6. How has your understanding or practice of Islam evolved since you converted/ reverted?

C7. Since converting/reverting to Islam, to what extent have you experienced difficulties with the following?

[A great deal of difficulty /Some difficulty /Very little /No difficulty / Not applicable]

- Gaining authentic knowledge about Islam
- Reactions or attitudes of family and friends
- Reactions from the general Australian public
- Making Muslim friends
- Acceptance from the local Muslim community
- Locating support networks for converts/reverts
- Attitudes towards the opposite sex
- Gender segregation

- Understanding the Qur'an
- Understanding the hadith
- Learning how to perform acts of worship
- Muslim cultural beliefs or practices
- Dietary requirements

Section D: Identity

These questions are about your identity as a Muslim.

D1. How important is Islam to your identity?

- Very important
- Important
- Not very important
- Not at all important

D2. With which Islamic tradition, school of thought or group do you most identify?

- Just Muslim
- Sunni
- Ahl Sunnah wal Jamaa
- Shia/Shiite
- Ibadi
- Sufi
- Hanafi
- Maliki
- Shafi'i
- Hanbali
- Ja'fari
- Ismaili
- Zaydi
- Ahl-Qur'an
- Ahl-Hadith
- Salafi
- Muwahhidun (Wahhabi)
- Tabligh Jamaat
- Hizb ut-Tahrir
- Progressive
- Other

D3. Which of the following best describes how you identify as a Muslim?

- I publicly/openly identify as a Muslim
- I identify as Muslim within Muslim communities only
- I share my identity as Muslim with friends/family only
- I consider my identity as a Muslim to be a private, personal matter

D4. How frequently do you pray (perform *salat/namaz*)?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Only on occasions
- Never

D5. Please rate the following statements according to how well they describe you as a Muslim.

[Strongly agree /Agree /Neither agree nor disagree/ Disagree /Strongly disagree /Unsure]

- I am a cultural Muslim for whom Islam is based on my family background rather than my practice
- For me Islam is a matter of personal faith rather than a public identity
- I believe Islam aligns with human rights, civil liberties and democracy
- I am a devout Muslim who follows a more spiritual path rather than formal legal rules
- I am a committed, reform-minded Muslim who emphasizes the spirit and ethical principles of Islam over literal interpretations
- I am a committed Muslim who believes in the rational, cosmopolitan nature of the Islamic tradition based on principles of social justice, gender justice and religious pluralism
- I am a devout Muslim who follows a traditional understanding of Islam
- I am a strict Muslim who follows Islam according to the laws of shariah
- I am a committed Muslim who believes politics is part of Islam and advocates for an Islamic state based on shariah laws
- I am a committed Muslim who believes an Islamic political order and shariah should be implemented by force if necessary

D6. To what extent do you feel judged by other Muslims in relation to your understanding and practice of Islam?

- All the time
- A lot
- Sometimes

- Rarely
- Never

Section E: Information

These questions are about your sources of information for understanding Islam.

E1. How influential are the following sources for your current understanding of Islam?

[Very influential /Somewhat influential/ Not very influential /Not at all influential/ N/A]

- Family
- Friends
- Imams/Sheikhs/Ulema
- Mosque/Madrassa classes
- School
- University
- Academic scholars
- The Qur'an
- Hadith
- Scholarly books
- Internet (websites, forums, YouTube, etc.)
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)

E2. If you were to recommend one source of information to someone wanting to understand Islam, what would that be? For example, a person, group, book, or website, etc.

E3. Which of the following best describes your confidence that what you have learnt about Islam is true and accurate?

- Completely confident
- Very confident
- Somewhat confident
- Not very confident
- Not at all confident

E4. Which of the following best describes your views on receiving new knowledge about Islam?

- Completely open to new knowledge
- Very open to new knowledge
- Somewhat open to new knowledge
- Not very open to new knowledge
- Not at all open to new knowledge

Section F: Understanding and Interpreting

These questions concern your views on how Islam should be understood and interpreted.

F1. In general, when you have a question that relates to Islam, which of the following sources are you most likely to consult for guidance?

The Qur'an

Hadith

Qur'an and Hadith

Classical Islamic schools of thought (madhahib) (eg. Hanafi, Hanbali, Jafari, Maliki, Shafi'i, Zaydi, etc.)

Contemporary traditional Islamic scholars (eg. Hamza Yusuf, Nasir al-Albani, Taqi Uthmani, Yusuf Qaradawi, etc.)

Contemporary progressive Islamic scholars (eg. Abdullah Saeed, Amina Wadud, Khaled Abou El-Fadl, Mohammad Hashim Kamali, etc.)

Unsure

Other

F2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

[Strongly Agree /Agree /Neither Agree nor Disagree /Disagree/ Strongly Disagree/ Unsure]

Women should be given the same rights and opportunities as men

Marriage should be based on mutual respect rather than the subservience of one spouse to the other

People of all religions and no religion should be treated equally

Abiding by Australian laws does not equate to disobedience to Allah

Taking the citizenship pledge (in the name of God) equates to a religiously-binding oath

Indigenous people should be recognized in Australia's constitution

Environmental sustainability should be given higher priority in Islamic discourse

Halal certifiers should assess the ethical treatment of animals as part of the halal certification process

There needs to be more emphasis on Islamic ethics rather than jurisprudence when teaching Islam

Someone who dies attacking innocent civilians is not a martyr (*shaheed*)

F3. Which of the following best describes your view on how Islam should be understood?

There is only one valid interpretation

There are few valid interpretations

There are many valid interpretations

There are potentially as many valid interpretations as there are Muslims

Unsure

F4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the reading and interpreting of the Qur'an?

[Strongly Agree /Agree /Neither Agree nor Disagree /Disagree/ Strongly Disagree/ Unsure]

The Qur'an should be read and interpreted literally

All verses of the Qur'an apply to all time, place and circumstances

Some verses of the Qur'an are specific to the Prophet Muhammad's time and circumstances while others are relevant to all times and places

The Qur'an should be read and interpreted contextually in relation to historic and social contexts

The Qur'an should be read and interpreted in relation to the principles (*maqasid*) of Islam

The Qur'an should be understood according to the interpretations of classical scholars only

The Qur'an should be understood according to the interpretations of classical and contemporary scholars

The Qur'an allows for new interpretations in response to changing conditions and realities

Section G: Issues

These questions concern your views on legal and political issues in relation to Islam.

G1. What is your understanding of the term *jihad* according to how it is used in the Qur'an and in the example of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)?

To strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including armed struggle in self-defence only

To strive/struggle through spiritual, charitable or good deeds, including defensive and offensive armed struggle

Don't know/Unsure

Other

G2. In relation to armed conflict, what is your understanding of how Islam regards civilians/non-combatants?

Islam never permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants

Islam sometimes permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants

Islam generally permits armed conflict against civilians/non-combatants

Don't know/Unsure

G3. Do you believe that Islam advocates a particular political system?

Yes/No

Don't know/Unsure

G4. Which of the following do you consider to be legitimate Islamic states? You may also give another example of a state or political system you consider to be legitimately Islamic.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Islamic Republic of Iran

Islamic Republic of Pakistan

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, ISIL, Daesh)

Other

G5. Is Islam compatible with the principles of democracy?

Yes, completely

Mostly

Not very

No, not at all

Don't know/unsure

G6. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following principles of democracy?

[Strongly Agree /Agree /Neither Agree nor Disagree /Disagree/ Strongly Disagree/ Unsure]

The rule of law

Equality of all people under the law

Elected political representatives

Independent judiciary

Separation of political and religious authorities

Human rights, civil liberties, and political freedoms

Freedom of religion

Freedom of expression

Free and independent media

G7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the form of government referred to as a *khilafah/*caliphate is an Islamic religious obligation?

[Strongly Agree /Agree /Neither Agree nor Disagree /Disagree/ Strongly Disagree/ Unsure]

G8. Which of the following is closest to your understanding of the

term *shariah*?

The divine/revealed law/legal code

Islamic jurists' opinions and interpretations based on the Qur'an and other sources

Don't know/unsure

Other

Other

G9. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Islam and classical *shariah* laws in relation to Australian laws and legal system?

[Strongly Agree /Agree /Neither Agree nor Disagree /Disagree/ Strongly Disagree/ Unsure]

I am content with the extent to which Muslims are currently able to practice Islam in Australia

Australia's legal system upholds principles of justice and I am generally satisfied with it

I would like classical shariah laws relating to family matters, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance, recognised in Australian law

I would like to live in a country where polygamy (polygyny: a man marrying multiple women) is legal

I would like to live in a country where classical shariah punishments are implemented

Countries today that implement classical shariah laws are more just and fair than Australia

Section H: Social connection

These questions ask about your feelings of acceptance, sense of belonging and social connections.

H1. In relation to the following social groups/contexts, how strongly do you feel involved, connected and a sense of belonging?

[Very strong/ Strong /Moderate /Weak/ Very weak/ Unsure/Not applicable]

Family and friends

Neighborhood

Local mosque

Muslim community

School, university or workplace

Sports, recreation or other clubs

Wider Australian society

Australian political system

H2. Are you affiliated with any Islamic/Muslim organisation such as an association, council, committee, federation, group, movement, society, etc?

Yes/No

H3. With which Islamic/Muslim organisation, association, council, committee, federation, group, movement or society are you affiliated?

H4. Which of the following statements is closest to what you think about engaging with non-Muslims as family, friends, colleagues and in general social interactions?

Engaging with non-Muslims is normal and good

Engaging with non-Muslims should be primarily done for da'wah (to spread Islam)

Engaging with non-Muslims is discouraged in Islam and should be kept to a minimum

Engaging with non-Muslims is forbidden in Islam and should be avoided

Don't know/unsure

H5. To what extent do you agree that your freedom to practice Islam is threatened in Australia?

[Strongly Agree /Agree /Neither Agree nor Disagree /Disagree/ Strongly Disagree/]

H6. If you think your freedom to practice Islam is threatened in Australia, please specify why you think so:

H7. How concerned are you about the following issues?

[Very concerned /Concerned / Not very concerned /Not at all concerned /Unsure]

Climate change

Reconciliation with indigenous Australians

Treatment of asylum seekers

Economic inequality

Unemployment

Affordable higher education

Affordable housing

Domestic violence

Mental health

Anti-Islam sentiments

Discrimination against Muslims

Media reporting on Islam and Muslims

Terrorism by right-wing extremists

Terrorism by Muslim extremists

Australian military intervention in Muslim-majority countries

H8. How trustworthy do you consider the following social institutions and policies in performing their functions effectively, fairly and honestly?

[Very trustworthy /Somewhat Trustworthy/ Not very trustworthy /Not at all Trustworthy/ Unsure]

Parliament

Judiciary (courts)

Defence forces (military)

Security/Intelligence agencies

Law-enforcement agencies (police)

Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)

State Islamic Council

State board of Imams

National board of Imams

Islamic schools/colleges

Public schools

Multicultural policy

Counter-terrorism policy

Countering violent extremism policy (CVE)

Border protection policy

Section I: Representation

These questions concern your views about how Islam is represented.

I1. In your opinion, what impact have the following countries had on the understanding and practice of Islam among Muslims in general over the past few decades?

[Very Positive/ Positive/ Neutral /Negative /Very Negative/ Unsure]

Egypt

Indonesia

Iran

Malaysia

Morocco

Pakistan

Qatar

Saudi Arabia

Turkey

I2. Among the various countries, groups and individuals in the world, which/who do you think best upholds the values of Islam as you understand them?

Country

Group

Individual (person)

I3. Briefly, in your own words, which verse of the Qur'an, Hadith or story from Islamic tradition best represents your understanding of what it means to be a Muslim?

I4. How would you describe the main teachings of Islam to a non- Muslim?

I5. Do you have any additional comments or feedback about this survey?

APPENDIX D

Islam in Australia Survey

Focus Group Questionnaire

The purpose of this questionnaire is not to identify you personally but to track the diversity of focus group participants and assist in reporting a representative cross-section of views. Please answer each of the following questions.

Session ID:

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: _____
3. Ethnic background: _____
4. Highest level of education: _____
5. Field of study of highest degree (if applicable): _____
6. Employment status: _____
7. Occupation (if applicable): _____
8. Were you raised Muslim or did you convert to Islam? Raised Muslim / Converted
9. Did you complete the Islam in Australia survey: Yes / No
10. Which of the survey results did you find most surprising and why?

_____

_____

_____

_____

11. Which of the survey results did you find concerning and why?

_____

_____

_____

_____

12. Which of the survey results did you find most encouraging and why?

13. What question would recommend we ask on the next survey?

Thank you!

APPENDIX E

Focus Group Participant Demographics

City	Date	Participant Number	Gender	Age	Conversion Status	Completed 'Islam in Australia' Survey
Adelaide	10/02/2020	1	Female	46	Born Muslim	No
Adelaide	10/02/2020	2	Female	Not Provided	Born Muslim	Yes
Adelaide	10/02/2020	3	Male	41	Born Muslim	No
Adelaide	10/02/2020	4	Male	34	Born Muslim	Yes
Adelaide	10/02/2020	5	Female	47	Born Muslim	Yes
Brisbane	23/01/2020	1	Female	36	Born Muslim	Yes
Brisbane	23/01/2020	2	Male	45	Born Muslim	Yes
Brisbane	23/01/2020	3	Female	41	Born Muslim	Yes
Brisbane	23/01/2020	4	Female	43	Born Muslim	Yes
Brisbane	23/01/2020	5	Female	38	Convert	Yes
Brisbane	23/01/2020	6	Male	59	Born Muslim	No
Brisbane	23/01/2020	7	Male	58	Born Muslim	Yes
Brisbane	23/01/2020	8	Male	69	Born Muslim	Yes
Brisbane	23/01/2020	9	Female	17	Born Muslim	Not provided
Brisbane	23/01/2020	10	Male	37	Not provided	Not provided
Canberra	06/02/2020	1	Male	38	Born Muslim	No
Canberra	06/02/2020	2	Male	69	Born Muslim	No
Canberra	06/02/2020	3	Female	45	Born Muslim	No
Canberra	06/02/2020	4	Female	38	Born Muslim	Not provided
Canberra	06/02/2020	5	Male	50	Born Muslim	No

Canberra	06/02/2020	6	Female	49	Born Muslim	No
Canberra	06/02/2020	7	Female	28	Born Muslim	Yes
Canberra	06/02/2020	8	Female	59	Born Muslim	Yes
Logan (Brisbane)	29/01/2020	1	Male	65	Born Muslim	Yes
Logan (Brisbane)	29/01/2020	2	Female	35	Born Muslim	No
Logan (Brisbane)	29/01/2020	3	Female	65	Born Muslim	Yes
Logan (Brisbane)	29/01/2020	4	Female	26	Born Muslim	Yes
Logan (Brisbane)	29/01/2020	5	Female	44	Born Muslim	Yes
Logan (Brisbane)	29/01/2020	6	Female	48	Born Muslim	No
Logan (Brisbane)	29/01/2020	7	Male	47	Not Provided	Not Provided
Logan (Brisbane)	29/01/2020	8	Female	31	Born Muslim	Yes
Melbourne	04/02/2020	1	Female	49	Born Muslim	Not Provided
Melbourne	04/02/2020	2	Female	15	Born Muslim	No
Melbourne	04/02/2020	3	Female	28	Born Muslim	No
Melbourne	04/02/2020	4	Female	44	Born Muslim	Yes
Melbourne	04/02/2020	5	Female	35	Born Muslim	No
Melbourne	04/02/2020	6	Female	63	Born Muslim	No
Melbourne	04/02/2020	7	Male	69	Born Muslim	No
Melbourne	04/02/2020	8	Female	26	Born Muslim	No
Melbourne	04/02/2020	9	Female	44	Born Muslim	Yes
Sydney	05/02/2020	1	Male	43	Born Muslim	No
Sydney	05/02/2020	2	Female	48	Convert	No
Sydney	05/02/2020	3	Male	31	Born Muslim	Yes
Sydney	05/02/2020	4	Male	53	Born Muslim	No
Sydney	05/02/2020	5	Male	45	Born Muslim	Yes

Sydney	05/02/2020	6	Male	50	Born Muslim	No
Sydney	05/02/2020	7	Female	66	Convert	Yes
Sydney	05/02/2020	8	Female	48	Born Muslim	Yes
Sydney	05/02/2020	9	Female	43	Not Provided	Yes
Sydney	05/02/2020	10	Female	32	Born Muslim	Yes
Sydney	05/02/2020	12	Female	37	Born Muslim	Yes
Sydney	05/02/2020	13	Female	44	Born Muslim	No
Sydney	05/02/2020	14	Male	52	Born Muslim	Yes
Perth	11/02/2020	1	Female	36	Born Muslim	No
Perth	11/02/2020	2	Male	51	Born Muslim	No
Perth	11/02/2020	3	Male	40	Born Muslim	No
Perth	11/02/2020	4	Male	34	Born Muslim	No
Perth	11/02/2020	5	Female	58	Born Muslim	Not Provided
Perth	11/02/2020	6	Female	46	Born Muslim	No
Perth	11/02/2020	7	Female	60	Born Muslim	Yes
Perth	11/02/2020	8	Male	71	Convert	Yes
Perth	11/02/2020	9	Female	24	Born Muslim	Yes
Perth	11/02/2020	10	Male	56	Born Muslim	Yes
Perth	11/02/2020	11	Male	63	Born Muslim	Yes
Perth	11/02/2020	12	Male	32	Born Muslim	No
Perth	11/02/2020	13	Male	50	Born Muslim	Yes

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