Working with Muslim Converts

BBSI Guidance for working with new Muslims
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The British Board of Scholars & Imams (BBSI)

The BBSI is an apolitical national assembly of imams, traditional scholars and islamically literate academics formed to facilitate scholarly intra-Muslim research and dialogue, and to provide authoritative ethico-theological guidance and leadership on matters relevant to Muslims, whilst promoting wider community welfare.

Vision

Empower Imams & Scholars in order that they might contribute to equity, social cohesion, and the common good in the UK.

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Introduction

The BBSI is an apolitical national assembly of imams, traditional scholars and Islamically- literate Muslim academics formed to facilitate scholarly intra-Muslim research and dialogue. Our aim is to provide authoritative ethico-theological guidance and leadership on matters relevant to Muslims, whilst promoting wider community welfare. It primarily seeks to do this by developing theological leadership that can authentically represent the rich scholarly inheritance of Islam, whilst responding flexibly to the context of modern times. Its ultimate aim is to both serve and represent the Muslim community in an ethical, inclusive, professional and scholar-led way. The BBSI especially takes seriously the responsibility to provide theologically grounded, practically focussed, holistic and – above all – cool-headed and far-sighted guidance to the community in times of generalised anxiety and panic.

This guidance aims to provide practical advice and support for mosques and Muslim community organisations as well as imams and scholars in the UK in how to better care for and support new converts to Islam. The document will draw on the experiences and insights of both converts and established members of the Muslim community, as well as Islamic teachings and principles.

The guidance will cover a range of topics, including the importance of creating welcoming and inclusive environments for converts, addressing common challenges and difficulties that converts may face, and providing ongoing support and guidance as they navigate their new faith and identity. It will also explore the responsibilities of the wider Muslim community in supporting converts and the potential benefits that can be gained from greater engagement with this group.

The BBSI hopes that this guidance (non-exhaustive) will contribute to the ongoing efforts to promote greater understanding and inclusivity within the Muslim community in the UK, and to support the spiritual and emotional well-being of new converts.

Responsibility of Muslims

Muslims have a duty (fard) to share the message of Islam with non-Muslims, and invite them to embrace this beautiful faith. This responsibility, known as da'wah, is rooted in the teachings of the Quran and the example set by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The Quran commands Muslims to invite people to the path of Allah with wisdom and good manners. In Surah An-Nahl, Allah says, "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best" (Quran 16:125). This verse highlights the importance of using kind and respectful communication when sharing the message of Islam.

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is also a role model for Muslims to follow when it comes to da'wah. He dedicated his life to spreading the message of Islam, and many people accepted Islam through his teachings. He used various approaches to invite people to Islam, including personal interactions, public speeches, and even sending letters to leaders of other nations.

Furthermore, inviting people to Islam is a means of gaining reward from Allah. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "Whoever guides someone to goodness will have a reward like the one who did it" (Sahih Muslim). Thus, Muslims living in the UK have an opportunity to earn rewards by sharing the message of Islam with others.

Finally, da'wah is essential for building strong and cohesive communities. By inviting non-Muslims to Islam, Muslims can foster mutual understanding and respect, as well as contribute to the social and cultural fabric of the UK.

Working with Muslim Converts

Converts[1] to Islam in Britain have been around in significant numbers and communities since at least the end of the 19th century. It is well known that converts established the first mosque in Britain[2] and that the Victorian generation have left a lasting legacy; the details of which are still being unearthed in our time. Every generation since then has had its own outliers that have made significant contributions to the landscape of Islam in Britain, although it is beyond the scope of this article to honour them all.

Just as there is still much to learn with respect to the pioneering British Muslim converts of our past, there is also much we still need to learn about the convert population today. Take for example the size of this population. Putting a sound number on this and the rate of conversion to Islam - is difficult due to the absence of up to date data, and the need for anonymity that is sometimes required of converts by necessity. Based upon previous reports[3] a conservative estimate of the current convert population in the UK would be between 150-200K, with at least 5K new converts annually. With two-thirds or more of them being women[4]. There is significant enough demand for services for converts that some 30-40 voluntary associations and charities have been established over the last 30 years to service the needs of this growing population. From the anecdotal testimony of these associations, (largely due to the proselytising and welcoming nature of Islam) the number of people converting to Islam in the UK is increasing and many of us in the Muslim community bear regular witness to this, on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

Our congregations are, naturally, overwhelmed with joy and elation at seeing a new brother or sister embracing Islam and "take" their "shahadah[5]", but we must remember; the shahadah is simply a one-off event, and conversion itself is a process and very personal journey, that is measured in years, not moments.

One of the growing challenges for our congregations is how to offer the correct support and guidance to newly converted Muslims, and facilitate their integration into the wider Muslim community. A 2018 report states: "There is a need to consider the spiritual, intellectual, financial, social, and psychological dimensions and needs of Muslim converts during their journey of belonging to Islam. Mosques and Islamic centres need to improve their services and staff training to cater for the demands of their community. They have the potential to play a positive role towards meeting the needs of converts."[6]

But how do our imams and congregations play this role? What follows are some useful guidelines that can be utilised by the Muslim community when dealing with converts to Islam.

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1 For this article we will use the term 'converts' rather than reverts or new Muslims, please see converts and conversion for part of the rationale behind this choice.

2 This is a reference to the adaptation of Brougham Terrace in Liverpool, not Shah Jahan which is the first purpose built mosque. Please see Islam in Victorian Liverpool, Yusuf Samih Asmay (Claritas Books, 2021).

3 A minority within a minority: A report on converts to Islam in the United Kingdom. https://www.faith-matters.org/report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk-a-minority-within-a-minority/

4 The Guardian, 2013

5 Testifying,"I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." By doing this, a person formally becomes a Muslim.

6 Muslim Converts: A Lens to Focus on Integration Complexities (Dr Fella Lahmar, Bridge Institute for Research and Policy, 2018).

Before the shahadah[1]

Increasing numbers of people in the UK are expressing a desire to convert to Islam, the way that we approach people with an interest in converting is of paramount importance and perhaps the most sensitive time of the convert's journey.

1 **The spirit of the call.** The majority (not all) of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ were also themselves converts to Islam and would have dealt with several people converting to Islam. A pertinent prophetic command that we should all keep in mind as a basis for dealing with those new to Islam is the occasion when the Messenger of Allah ﷺ sent Mu'adh bin Jabal and Abu Musa to Yemen to oversee the care of some newly converted Muslims. The very first command that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ gave was, "Make things easy, do not make things difficult, make people happy, do not frighten people away"[2]. This is a foundational principle that we hope to expand on in future articles.

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1 Once you believe that Islam and the Quran are the truth, the only step is to declare that belief by stating, "I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." This is called the "Testification of Faith (shahadah)" and is the first pillar of Islam.

2 Al-Bukhari, (3038) and Muslim, (1733).

2 **Safeguarding.** People that express a desire to convert to Islam come from a range of backgrounds. Some of them are vulnerable, young, and at risk. It's extremely important for us to notice any signs of vulnerability. If you are part of an institution that regularly facilitates conversion, protect yourself and your institution with the correct safeguarding training and DBS checks. Parents or guardians must be involved when dealing with young people. If a legal minor or vulnerable adult approaches the mosque with a non-coerced and active interest in Islam, we recommend the mosque endeavours to make contact with the parents and or guardian, establish a rapport, and makes them aware of the visit.

3 **Make people comfortable.** It's important to make people feel comfortable and relaxed. Most people will not feel comfortable walking into a mosque for the first time or declaring their faith in front of dozens of people. Keep the environment private and neutral; two witnesses are enough (although also see point 8 below) . Offer food and refreshments if the meeting is in-person.

4 **Invite without pressure.** It's important not to be hasty with the process and allow the individual to make up their own mind and carry out the shahadah when they are fully ready to do so. This does not mean that you shouldn't invite, but rather invite in a gentle, non-pressurising manner. Don't make statements like, "you could die at any moment, so don't delay!"

5 **The reason is irrelevant.** People come to Islam for all sorts of reasons, and yes, marriage is one of them. It's okay to verify that someone understands the doctrine of Islam (going over the 6/7 articles/pillars of faith is sufficient), but no-one should be treated with suspicion or disallowed to say the shahadah.[3] A newcomers level of faith may be very high, but they may also need time to come to a fuller understanding.

3 Insincere conversions are part and parcel of dealing with conversion to Islam. The Prophet ﷺ was always accommodating and had a good opinion of people despite even knowing the names of the hypocrites in Medina. We judge by the outward and accept the testimony of anyone that comes to us. It was narrated that Usamah bin Zayd, a young companion and son of the adopted son of the Prophet ﷺ, overpowered a polytheist in battle at Al-Mifa'ah. When he saw that he was about to be killed, he uttered the declaration of faith to enter Islam. Another companion immediately left the man, but Usamah thought that he said it to get out of the situation and killed him with his spear. When the Muslims returned to Medina, the Prophet ﷺ was informed of what happened and called Usamah and said, "Oh Usamah, did you kill him after he had testified, 'There is none worthy of worship except Allah?' Usamah replied, "Oh Messenger of Allah, he did it to save himself." The Prophet ﷺ said "Would you not have opened his heart to know if he said it sincerely or not? Did you kill him after he had testified, 'There is none worthy of worship except Allah?'" The Prophet ﷺ continued repeating this to Usamah until he wished that he had not been a Muslim before that day. The Prophet ﷺ even ordered Usamah to free a slave as an expiation for manslaughter. [Al-Bukhari (4269) and Muslim (96)]

During the shahadah

6 **Language of the shahadah.** The wording of the shahadah (testimony of faith) should be pronounced in English or the individual's native language and they may be asked if they prefer to recite it in Arabic also, however, this is not necessary according to the consensus of Muslim scholars[1] . Demanding the person to say Arabic words that they struggle to pronounce may make the person feel awkward or embarrassed. In fact, some legal texts have mentioned the following:

If a disbeliever prays in congregation or calls the adhan in the mosque or says, "I'm a believer of the reality of the prayer in congregation", they are a Muslim[2 3].

7 **Recording and photos.** Some will also be hiding their faith out of necessity and face challenges in sharing their conversion at home. Sharing conversion with an unsympathetic family can sometimes have serious consequences. Recording should be avoided unless the person is 100% comfortable with it, anyone in the audience/mosque should be asked to refrain from recording or taking pictures. Think, is it being recorded to be shared to benefit the individual, yourself, or a wider audience? Do not cajole an individual into this, and respect their privacy. Institutions should know their GDPR guidelines.

1 Hidayah al-Murid, Al-Laqqani.

2 Al-Mukhtar, Chapter of Military Expeditions.

3 Commentating on this Al-Mawsili mentions:

The basis of this is that if a disbeliever affirms the opposite of what he believes, he is judged to be a Muslim, so anyone who negates divine oneness like pagans, polytheists, idol-worshippers, and Mennonites, when they say, "There is no god except Allah" or "I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah" or "I became a Muslim" or "I believe in Allah" or "I am on the religion of Islam" or "I'm on the upright monotheism", all of this is a conversion to Islam

Al-Ikhtiyar, Chapter of Military Expeditions.

After the shahadah

This is perhaps the most important and critical stage of the conversion process from our perspective. It's also the stage that requires the most effort, care, and wisdom.

8 **Momentum.** The new convert may be eager to learn anything and everything they can access and try to implement it. It's essential to allow them to grow at their own pace without any external pressure. Remind them that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said that the most beloved actions to Allah are those that are consistent, even if they are small[1]. Also, remind them not to take too much on all at once and that perfection is only for the prophets and messengers, may Allah grant them peace. Too much pressure and drastic change can break them and be a cause of renouncing the faith. Focus on things that will strengthen the faith of the new believer and avoid getting into the nitty-gritty of the dos and don'ts. The call of the Prophet ﷺ during the Meccan period was primarily focused on solidifying faith and character.

9 **Keeping a connection.** It's important that the new convert feels part of something. We've found that the best and most fruitful approach is connecting them to other converts, particularly organisations and individuals that specialise in dealing with new converts.

Ideally, these organisations will be able to arrange for a trained mentor to provide 1:1 support for the new convert. Mentors are ideally more experienced converts themselves who can support the new brother or sister when they face the typical challenges conversion brings. It can be a lonely and difficult process and quite often, the convert is faced with disappointment or negative reactions from families and friends who find it difficult to understand. Mentors can provide a link to the wider Muslim community, help the convert understand the community's culture and etiquette, accompany them to the mosque the first few times, and be there as a supportive listening ear when needed. An extremely important task for mentors is ensuring that converts are not left out of community celebrations such as Eid! Mentors should ideally be trained in empathetic listening skills, basic mental health first aid, and safeguarding for vulnerable adults. It should be stressed that mentors are NOT there to provide Islamic rulings or to teach fiqh or doctrine, but they can advise the new convert on how to navigate the overflow of information.

10 **Be aware of sensitivities.** Start with a no-knowledge assumption, many things that we take for granted due to our long exposure to Islam will not easily be understood immediately by a new convert e.g. using Arabic phrases or religious nomenclature when speaking or various etiquettes associated with Islam. This could be something as simple as "insha'Allah" or "sunnah". At the same time, there are converts that may have learned some of the basics before taking shahadah, and the older the convert is the more sensitivity there should be around assuming complete ignorance!

11 **Marriage.** Do not speak about marriage or make any suggestions unless asked. All too often converts are rushed into marriage. Particular care should be taken with female converts, who may not be aware of their right to a guardian, a prenuptial agreement or a mahr. This makes them more susceptible to abuse than men. Many people converting will already be in a relationship, quite often with another Muslim, this is something that we will have to accept and manage whilst taking into account the sensitive nature of the situation. Be wary and avoid making religious judgements regarding the individual's personal marriage situation and always refer them to qualified scholars.

12 **Name-changing.** There is no requirement in Islam for a new convert to change their name. Suggesting it should be avoided, even before the conversion ceremony .

13 **Cultural changes.** Be sensitive to culture. Islam comes to refine culture and not obliterate it. This is extremely important when dealing with new converts, for example, we have limits of sartorial modesty in Islam but a person is free to choose what style of clothing to wear as is reflected in the varying styles of dress throughout the Muslim world. Drawing the line between what is a cultural practice and what is a religious practice is a tricky task for many of us, we need to be extra cautious so that we don't blur the lines for the new convert too.

14 **Overexpectations.** Expecting a convert to be perfect within a few months or even years after their conversion is unrealistic. No-one besides the prophets will ever be perfect. Conversion is a process and a journey which takes study, reflection, and most importantly, time. They may never become a fully-practicing Muslim, that's something we have to accept, we don't expect perfection from every non-convert so it would be unfair to expect it from converts to Islam.

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1 Al-Bukhari, (6465).

Conclusion

The Muslim community must realise the huge responsibility and sensitive approach needed around the conversion process. The shahadah is simply a one-off event, but conversion is a process and a journey. There are many great organisations that are fulfilling the communal obligation of providing services for those interested in and/or new to Islam, the Muslim community in the UK should attempt to reach out to them and lend them support in whichever ways are possible. Wider discussions and frameworks need to be put in place in mosques and Islamic institutions that take the needs and sensitivities of new converts into account and we should avoid making assumptions when it comes to conversion.

We pray that Allah ﷻ allows us to serve our new brothers and sisters in the religion in the best way possible and He accepts our paltry efforts.

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